COMPETING VALUES, COMPETING NARRATIVES:
RURAL EDUCATION POLITICS IN DUAL ARENAS

A Dissertation in
Educational Leadership
by
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Abstract

The harmonious coexistence of rural schools and their communities is a common perception that pervades the American mindset. However, many rural communities and their schools experience factionalization. Mountainville School District provides an exemplary case for studying rural school-community fragmentation and discord. Mountainville experienced its first teacher strike in district history during a contentious collective bargaining process that spanned from 2005 to 2009. Using Mountainville as a revelatory case, this grounded theory study explores the origins of school-community conflict, the processes through which it is exacerbated and resolved, and the effects of conflict on school-community relations.

The grounded theory resulting from this study explains how macro and micro social and economic contexts contribute to community fragmentation and competing values and interests regarding education at the local level. The theory also shows the ways in which opposing political coalitions vie for values legitimacy and power over educational decision-making, including negotiations in the formal policy arena and political power struggles in the informal arena. In the informal arena, coalitions consolidate political power around competing hegemonic narratives of the rural community.

The centrality of competing narratives in this grounded theory is more appropriate for the study of rural school-community engagement than traditional notions of micropolitics because in rural communities, community identity is tied to the local school. Furthermore, because of the importance of community identity to rural populations, the politicization of this identity through the propagation of competing hegemonic narratives can result in social exclusion of community members and have lasting negative effects on rural communities and schools.
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Chapter 1

Community in Conflict: The Reality of Local Educational Politics

Ideally, education is about teaching and learning. It is about children and their development into productive, self-supporting, decent adults... Educators always make decisions with the good of students in mind, and the community supports these decisions philosophically and financially. The school and community fit like a hand in a glove. Although this scenario is pleasant to contemplate, it describes a utopia that probably never existed and most certainly does not today.

--Jane Owen (2006, p.3)

Over a century ago Tonnies (1887/2002) developed a complex sociological theory to explain the changing nature of community in the context of an increasingly urbanizing society, and introduced the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as two ideal-types of community. Gemeinschaft described a “folk culture” (p. 225), a natural community marked by kinship and based on “common being, living, and working” (p. 258). In contrast Gesellschaft referred to a bureaucratic and self-interested society, in which capital and economic gain drove individualistic goals, and the impersonalization of mass “capitalistic society” (p. 258) replaced traditional and familial community bonds. A romantic Gemeinschaft view of rural America persists in rural education literature (e.g. Theobald, 1997) and the American mindset (Wilkinson, 1991). By continuing to view rural places through a Gemeinschaft lens, we fail to see the conflictual, fractured, and political nature of many rural communities and their schools. A study of rural education and the deep connections that exist between rural schools and communities must, therefore, include an examination of the inherent tensions that tend to characterize relationships in a Gesellschaft community, in which individuals hold different, and at times, competing values and interests, and act to promote those values and interests.
Research Problem

This research builds a substantive grounded theory that attempts to explain rural school and community conflict through an investigation of a rural Pennsylvania school district and community during a contentious collective bargaining process from 2005 to 2009.

Examination of the following questions regarding this specific case of school-community conflict can provide theoretical insight into more broadly the conflictual nature of rural school politics and policy-making: How can we understand the origins of conflict within this case and the processes through which it was exacerbated and resolved? How does an understanding of the origins and resolutions, in turn, help to generate insights into the nature of conflict in similar types of communities? In what context(s) is conflict likely to begin? Why and how does conflict escalate? Why and how is conflict resolved? What are the effects of the conflict on the school district and community? Finally, what are the practical implications of this knowledge for educators and district leaders?

The Mountainville School District\(^1\) and community, located in Pennsylvania’s anthracite region, provides an exemplar case for exploring the conflictual relationships that permeate many rural communities and their educational institutions. This region has experienced over half a century of continuous economic decline\(^2\), a graying population, and loss of rural farm lands (Alter, et al., 2007), coupled with state educational mandates and initiatives that disregard the issues faced by its rural places, and an increasingly powerful professional teachers union that threatens traditional community power structures. Each of these issues will be explained in greater detail throughout Chapter 1.

\(^1\) Pseudonyms have been given to place and people names associated with the case.

\(^2\) The recent interest in Marcellus Shale extraction has provided some communities in the Mountainville School District with new hope for economic boom, though this potential point of economic opportunity appears to have come with a price, as complaints about water contamination spread throughout the northeastern part of the state, followed by lawsuits (Bateman, 2010; Rose, 2010).
Chapter 1 provides the reader with the study’s orienting framework and significance. The chapter traces the history of conflict between rural schools and communities beginning with the early 1900s. The focus then turns to origins of such conflict, including broad economic and social changes, transformations in educational institutions, and the metamorphosis of the teaching profession, with particular attention given to how these changes have affected Pennsylvania and, more specifically, the anthracite region. The chapter concludes with an overview of the Mountainville case.

Chapter 2 consists of a comprehensive review of the literature, with attention given to rural communities and schools of the 21st century and local educational politics, as well as the roles of school boards, superintendents, and teachers unions in the micropolitical arena. A description of literature devoted to collective bargaining and strikes follows. The chapter concludes with a discussion of anti-union movements and their influence on the power of teachers unions.

Chapter 3 explains the early years of the Mountainville case. The analysis takes the reader through the formal negotiations process until the point at which formal negotiations ceased and the formal arena collapsed. The chapter shows the powerful players in the formal negotiations arena and provides causes for the deterioration of formal negotiations, including weak leadership, mistrust, and personal animosity. The chapter also explains the effects of a perceived majority of public support resulting from power struggles in the informal arena on the formal policy/negotiation space.

Chapter 4 analyzes the conflict following the collapse of formal negotiations. The focus of this chapter is on the practice of othering used by both sides to consolidate community support and political power through the propagation of competing hegemonic narratives of the
Mountainville community in the informal arena. Through othering, both sides engaged in personal vilification of other, and the conflict became a win-lose battle, in which the school board and its coalition successfully excluded Mountainville’s teachers from the rest of the community and garnered a solid majority of support and political power. This power was evidenced by the school board election results in 2009. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the decision to settle, and a discussion of the conflict’s tenuous resolution and aftermath.

Chapter 5 presents conclusions about the case, including a substantive grounded theory that explains the interrelationships between the macro and micro context, competing values systems, the formal policy/negotiation space, and the power of the propagation of competing hegemonic narratives of community by opposing political coalitions. This final chapter also discusses implications for the practice of district leaders based on the Mountainville case, as well as implications for future rural education research.

Orienting Framework

I use a micropolitical framework to conceptualize the evolving conflict that consumed this school district and community during the collective bargaining process. In broad terms, micropolitics is defined as the study of local educational politics (Bjork, 2008; Owen, 2006). Micropolitics is useful for tracing the dynamics of contentious relationships in the local educational arena and understanding how they evolve throughout a given conflict. Micropolitics revolves around three matters: “people, values, and resources” (Owen, 2006, p. 7), and centers on the processes through which groups gain and exercise power to further their particular interests (Malen, 1995). In a battle for scarce resources (a fight most commonly found in economically distressed schools and communities), “power is the currency” through which these
resources are procured, and the “degree of conflict determines the price that the currency must satisfy” (Owen, 2006, p. 7).

As a broad, orienting framework, a micropolitical lens enabled me to view the process of collective bargaining as occurring within local and broad contexts, which affect its outcomes, as well as the influence of the professional teachers union, administrators, and school board members on the negotiations process. This activity takes place inside a particular community context, with its own set of issues that impact the process, including: access to resources, power structures, and values that are either reinforced or made unstable through economic and social changes.

In their foundational work on local educational politics, McGivney and Moynihan (1972) argued that an understanding of the “predominate value orientations and resources” of schools and their local communities, and the connections between these two systems to each other and to broader spheres of influence are necessary for creating an effective framework for understanding educational politics (p. 224). This research explores these changing spheres of influence in one school district during a period of sustained conflict in order to gain in-depth knowledge about the causes and processes through which school-community conflict begins, escalates, and is resolved at the local level.

Significance of Study

This study explores the conflict and politics that surround arguably the most contentious of all types of school-community conflict—teacher contract negotiations. Because collective bargaining is such a divisive issue, a plethora of nonscholarly writing on the topic exists, but most of it is polarized, resulting in scant research and data analysis (Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006a; Loveless, 2000). Of the limited research literature that does exist on collective
bargaining, recent research has been devoted to a new style of bargaining—collaborative, or reform, bargaining (Kerchner & Koppich, 2000)—that is only occurring in a handful of very large urban districts across the country. The majority of collective bargaining literature, however, does not focus on any particular cases of teacher contract negotiations, instead relying on broader policy systems to study this uniquely local phenomenon (Hartney, 2009; West & Mykerezi, 2009). This research contributes to the literature on collective bargaining through an in-depth investigation of this place- and community-specific process, and the community and school district politics and conflict that influence the process and are further affected by the process’s outcome.

Furthermore, this study provides an in-depth exploration of school-community conflict. This research investigates the structural issues that contribute to school-community conflict, as well as deeper subsurface issues, including community power dynamics, group and individual tensions that exist over class differences, the purpose of schooling, and what constitutes real and valued work. Additionally, the study explores the discourse that surrounds conflict and the influence of historical context, as well as social and economic change on school-community discord.

Perhaps most importantly, this research investigates the phenomenon of collective bargaining in a rural school district and community, a highly understudied, and potentially explosive issue for members of economically distressed rural communities and their schools. When rural education researchers assume the existence of a consensual, or Gemeinschaft rural community, in which community members share compatible values and ideologies regarding their communities and schools, they fail to consider the inherent tensions that exist within rural places. The research focus is on positive studies of success (i.e. Barley & Beesley, 2007;
Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) as opposed to critical examinations of school-community conflicts arising from class, religious, political, and other differences. This consensus-based perception of rural communities creates the tendency for many studies of rural education and communities to focus on best classroom practices disconnected from place (see, for example, Budge, 2006) and practical advice for superintendents to build positive relationships with their constituents. The focus of challenges to rural schools and communities is on outside policies (see, for example, Eppley, 2009; Theobald & Rochon, 2006), and the inmigration of outsiders into a once harmonious community (see, for example Bushnell, 1999; Howley, et al., 2005).

While these studies make important contributions to the studies of rural schools and communities, they leave a gap in our understanding of school-community conflict in rural communities. Woodrum (2004), Corbett (2007), and Groenke and Nespor (2010) provide notable examples of recent studies that explore the dynamic forces of conflict stemming from competing and conflicting values and interests within rural communities. Rural schools and communities are in a continual state of flux, continuously adapting to changing economic and social conditions, policies frequently externally initiated without local input, and the ever-changing roles of educational institutions and professionals. Rural communities are fractured and inherently political, made up of groups with competing values and interests vying for value legitimacy and power over local educational policies. These politics take on specific forms in economically distressed rural communities where politics becomes personal, a consequence of limited resources and class disparities between middle-class teachers and working class community members. More work needs to be done to gain a comprehensive understanding of the origins, processes, and outcomes of rural school-community conflict. Rural communities and their schools have a long history of conflict (Tyack, 1972), and it is only through the in-depth
study of this discord that we can truly understand better and more appropriate ways for rural schools and their communities to interact with one another in a spirit of mutual benefit and partnership. This research contributes to our knowledge of rural school-community conflict through in-depth exploration of the macro and micro conditions that contribute to the factionalization of communities, as well as the processes through which groups with competing values and interests vie for political power to influence the outcome of school-community conflict.

A History of Conflict through the 1900s

Many pictures of early American country schools paint a picture of a true community school. Erected by church congregations or community members, the rural school was where children acquired the knowledge and values deemed important by their community through the hard work of a local teacher. The school was the center of the community, and in many cases, acted as an appendage of the local church (Crowson, 1992). But, even in its early days, tensions existed between rural places and their schools. Identifying rural education as “inferior” to urban education, late-19th century reformers pushed for the consolidation of small community schools into larger institutions, led by bureaucratic managers and staffed with professional educators (Cubberley, 1922; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). By the mid-1900s, state policies mandating consolidation swept the country, and one-room schools resembling country churches in both appearance and social cohesiveness gave way to bigger schools more akin to the impersonal, production-oriented character of the American factory (Crowson, 1992).

The 1960s and 1970s were turbulent times for America’s changing communities and their schools. As many rural communities faced economic decline, and consolidated districts faced a scarcity of resources and declining enrollments, tensions ensued between school boards and local
communities (e.g., Boyd, 1976, 1978; Kerr, 1964; McGivney & Moynihan, 1972; Minar, 1966; Peshkin, 1978; Vidich & Bensman, 1968). Discord was especially apparent in communities with conservative views on education and the financing of schools, and in higher status districts, which were less used to adversity and more concerned with educational programming than blue-collar districts (Boyd, 1976, 1978). Suburbanization shifted power structures within communities, resulting in electoral conflict\(^3\), and an ultimate shift in educational policy making more commensurate with changing community demands (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970).

Additionally, the increasingly intrusive state and federal mandates imposed upon local schools contributed to a host of requirements on local school districts, forcing compliance, regardless of local wants and needs (Boyd, 1979a) and devoid of local input (Vidich & Bensman, 1968). These mandates included controversial schemes to secularize the curriculum, which created conflict in more conservative and religious communities (Boyd, 1979b). Generally, as schools moved from traditional community values towards cosmopolitan norms, including adherence to state initiatives, court decisions, and professional standards, the likelihood of school-community conflict increased (McGivney & Moynihan, 1972).

A number of foundational studies devoted to local educational politics were published in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Boyd, 1976; Minar, 1966; Iannacone & Lutz, 1970), but these studies focused mainly on suburban and urban districts, largely ignoring rural school-community conflict. Furthermore, these studies used electoral conflict as their measure of conflict. An exclusive focus on electoral conflict reduces our ability to see the complex and multifaceted ways conflict manifests itself in rural communities. Beyond electoral activity, these studies offer

\(^3\) Electoral conflict, as defined by Iannacone and Lutz (1970), included division at the polls concerning school board candidates resulting from a conflict of educational values held by community members.
few insights into other arenas in which rural people come into conflict, and thus miss the personal dynamics and local coalitions that can dominate school-community relations.

In sum, local districts were increasingly burdened with declining enrollments, new state and federal mandates, and the growing power of teachers unions over the first half of the 20th century, which made it progressively difficult for school boards to respond to community demands. These trends would have lasting and troubling consequences for local schools and their communities, leaving Boyd to ask, as the 1970s came to a close, “What ultimately will be left to be managed at the school board and school site levels? One thing, at least, that will be left to manage is conflict” (1979a, p. 282).

Origins of Conflict

**Economic and social change in rural America.** Rural communities of the 21st century look and feel much different than they did in the mid 1900s. Over the past several decades, rural and other working-class communities have been affected by economic decline, including those located in the Rust Belt region (Mitra, Movit, & Frick, 2008). Opportunities for employment in resource extractive industries, manufacture, and agriculture—traditional occupations for rural populations—are declining (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Budge, 2006; McGranahan, 2003; Miller, 1995). This trend is compounded in rural communities that lack the ability to attract new industries (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Many rural communities faced with economic distress find it difficult to retain their youth or to attract new young people. In short, these rural communities are losing the outmigration battle, and in particular, are losing their brightest youth. Those left behind in economically depressed places have lower educational attainment levels than the national average and decreased income and job security (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Carr & Kefalas, 2009).
These conditions—loss of traditional employment sources, youth outmigration, the inability to attract new industry, and chronic underemployment—lead to persistent rural poverty (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Brown & Schafft, 2011).

**Pennsylvania.** Pennsylvania’s communities are no exception. After decades of industrial decline in the state’s urban centers, Pennsylvania became a full member of the Rust Belt by the 1970s, “characterized by decayed factories and mills surrounded by the remains of communities . . . which had been called into existence to supply labor for those plants and thus lost their reason to exist” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 322). Under these conditions, the state experienced brain drain throughout the twentieth century, and now boasts the second largest elderly population in the country (Hobbs, forthcoming; McLaughlin, Demi, & Snyder, 2010).

The recent economic recession made scarce resources even sparser in many of Pennsylvania’s communities, leading to high unemployment numbers and wide decreases in health care benefits for many American workers. Pennsylvania did not fare well during this period, with increases in poverty rates across the state—12.5% in 2009 compared to 10.5% in 2000, an increase of 276,848 people—as well as increases in numbers of uninsured adults and children, particularly in rural areas, where 8.6% of children live without health insurance, despite the availability of public health plans. Unemployment rates have also increased across the state (Keystone Research Center, 2010).

These economic problems cause tensions for school districts and their communities in Pennsylvania, which relies more on local property taxes to fund its public schools than all but

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4At the same time, some rural communities are experiencing population growth as a result of the immigration of foreign-born people. Over the past two decades, increasing numbers of immigrants have settled in rural communities, particularly in the South and Midwest. Rural communities with labor demands in the agricultural and meat-processing sectors have experienced large influxes of Mexican immigrants, in particular, placing demands on these rural communities for increased social services (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Durand & Massey, 2004). Other rural communities are attempting to rejuvenate their struggling economies through tourism and the immigration of retirement populations (Brown & Schafft, 2011).
four other states, with 57% of education costs shouldered by local taxpayers (The Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, 2009). In 2006, Pennsylvania passed Act 1, Taxpayer Relief Act of 2006, which relies on gaming revenues to offset reliance on local property taxes to pay for Pennsylvania’s schools. Act 1 places a limit on how much local school boards are allowed to raise property taxes in a given year without approval by local referendum. If local boards agree to a teacher contract that forces them to raise taxes above this limit, and the referendum fails, they must appeal to the state for approval to raise taxes above this limit. Act 1, then, forces community members in poorer districts to vote directly in favor of or in opposition to giving local teachers pay raises and health care benefits, pitting communities and teachers against one another. Even when communities vote against these tax increases, the state has the power to override public sentiment. The anti-property tax group, Pennsylvania Taxpayers Cyber Coalition, reports that 210 school districts in the Commonwealth applied for and were given permission to raise property taxes above the Act 1 imposed limit in 2007, alone (PTCC, 2010).

**Educational changes.** At the same time that rural communities have undergone transformations, so have their educational institutions. Having undergone successive waves of consolidation and reorganization, today’s rural schools function much differently than their predecessors. Once considered true community schools, contemporary rural schools now operate much more as entities of the state instead of the local community (Manna, 2006). State and federal involvement in education has increased steadily since the mid-1900s, with mandates ranging from instructional time requirements and curricular standards to lunch offerings, and initiatives that determine curricular policies and instructional foci.

Continuous waves of systemic reforms have focused on preparing students for a global economy and fail to address the unique concerns of the nation’s diverse rural schools and
communities (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the most glaring and pervasive of these reforms, has arguably further weakened the relationship between rural schools and communities (Schafft, 2010). At the same time, these increasingly intrusive initiatives have also weakened the traditional power of local school boards, the role of which has shifted largely to enforcement of state- and federally- mandated policies.  

**Pennsylvania.** In Pennsylvania, state mandates and initiatives, in large part a response to NCLB, include programs ranging from dual enrollment programs, which allow high schoolers to enroll in college courses, to elementary science and reading programs, technology initiatives, and changes to early childhood education programs. In addition, Pennsylvania schools now must comply with a Standards Aligned System, contend with the Common Core of Standards, and multiple standardized tests, including: the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and Keystone Exams. These state and federal initiatives and mandates may be far removed from the needs and wishes of a school district’s local community, but rural communities and their local boards appear powerless to resist the sweeping tide of reforms washing over them.  

**Professional changes.** The teaching profession has undergone its own metamorphosis, including the growth in membership and power of teachers unions. Nationwide, there were just 35 teacher strikes between 1955 and 1965. That number increased to 114 during the 1967-68 school year, alone, and to 131 the following year. Since the height of teacher labor actions in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of teacher strikes has declined drastically nationwide from 99 in 1991 to 15 in 2003 (Hess & Kelly, 2006). This sharp decline is due in large part to two major trends: (1) the natural maturation of the collective bargaining process⁵ (Hess & Kelly, 2006), and  

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⁵ As teachers unions and school boards have become more adept at successfully bargaining over the last 50 years, the need for strikes to apply pressure to school boards has diminished (Hess & Kelly, 2006).
(2) policies aimed at diminishing the power of unions in the most powerful teachers union states—Pennsylvania and Michigan (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000).

**Pennsylvania.** Pennsylvania has always been a leader in teachers union strength and activity. The number of teachers union labor actions in Pennsylvania hit a peak in the 1970s, averaging 34 strikes per year throughout the decade. The frenzy of labor activity came after the passage of Act 195 in 1970, which gave Pennsylvania teachers the right to strike. Pennsylvania experienced 757 teacher strikes between 1970 and 2006, but the number of strikes declined after the 1970s, commensurate with national trends, averaging 26 strikes per year in the 1980s, and 15 per year in the 1990s. Though teacher strikes have declined nationwide and across traditionally powerful union states, Pennsylvania continues to lead the country in number of teacher strikes. Of the 15 strikes that occurred nationwide in 2003, for example, nine took place in Pennsylvania (Zwerling, 2008). After hitting a low point in 2001-2002, teacher strikes have been on the rise in the state, with 13 strikes in both the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. In sum, 65 strikes occurred between the 2000-2001 and 2006-2007 school years. What accounts for the decline in teacher strikes in Pennsylvania? And, what accounts for the recent rise?

Republican Governor Tom Ridge enacted several statewide policies in the 1990s aimed specifically at curtailing the power of teachers unions, the most effective of which were Acts 46 and 88. Act 46 made it illegal for unions to strike in school districts that have been taken over by the state. In 2002, Philadelphia became the first (and, to date, only) district taken over by the state. This law has made it possible for the state to impose its own district reforms while simultaneously weakening the power of the teachers union. Act 88 was a consequence of political backlash aimed at teachers unions for their use of selective strikes in the early 1990s (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000). These selective strikes were announced without prior notice, were
unpredictable, and involved only certain schools within a school district at any given time. Written into the Pennsylvania School Code as opposed to state labor law, the passage of Act 88 was targeted exclusively at limiting the abilities of teachers unions to strike.

Act 88 diminished the Pennsylvania State Education Association’s (PSEA) power at the bargaining table through the establishment of required bargaining timelines and new impasse procedures, a mandatory 48-hours notice prior to striking, a new requirement that teacher strikes cannot interfere with the completion of the 180-day school year by June 30, and the establishment of guidelines that allow districts to replace striking teachers with substitutes during work stoppages. One major consequence of Act 88 is that districts can now force teachers to work without a new contract (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000). This is evidenced by the number of teachers working without new contracts for one or more years at a time. In the 2007-2008 school year, for example, there were 21 PSEA contracts unsettled from 2006, 12 unsettled from 2005, three unsettled from 2004, one unsettled from 2003, and one still unsettled from 2001 (Rhoads, 2008).

Broader economic conditions of the 1990s also played an important role in reducing the number of teacher strikes. The 1990s were a time of economic prosperity, with budget surpluses, low unemployment numbers, and robust economic growth. In short, it was easier for unions and district to amicably settle negotiations because they had access to more resources.

There are also multiple factors contributing to the recent rise in teacher strikes in Pennsylvania. The first decade of the 2000s was marked by a shift in state government, with the two-term gubernatorial victory of Democrat Edward Rendell, who made education a hallmark of his governorship. Gov. Rendell was widely critiqued by conservatives for his close relationship to the state teachers union (e.g. Benefield, 2010), whose political action committee, PACE, gave
over $500,000 to Rendell’s reelection campaign in 2006 (Pennsylvania Department of State, 2011).

At the same time that the teachers unions saw a friendly face in the governor’s seat, the nation experienced an economic recession, which further strained already tense collective bargaining negotiations. Many Pennsylvanians saw decreases in income and health care benefits, while teachers unions continued to bargain for pay increases and little or no cost sharing in their health care benefits packages, leading to increased support for anti-property tax groups and anti-strike groups across the state. This groundswell of anti-property tax sentiment gained so much momentum that Republican Representative Sam Rohrer brought the School Property Tax Elimination Act to the State House in 2008 and 2009, the purpose of which was to abolish local property taxes and other local school taxes. Though the act failed both times, several groups continue to push for its passage.

These conditions have led to difficult negotiations at the bargaining table, as teachers unions and school boards attempt to negotiate in a political environment hostile to property taxes and the local teachers who are paid through them. The political backlash aimed at teachers unions in the Commonwealth cannot be overstated. There are numerous groups devoted to banning the right of teachers to strike, including state groups such as: Stop Teacher Strikes in Pennsylvania, The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, the Commonwealth Foundation, and national organizations, including the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation. It has become sound practice for political candidates to attack the powerful teachers union, in part because of the rise of the Republican party, the broader deterioration of support for unions, and the perceived wealth of teachers by members of the public (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000). This is
most apparent in rural communities across the Commonwealth, which tend to be more conservative and less affluent than the rest of the state (Powell, 2008).

Madonna and Young (2010) argue that the divide between rural and urban in the state has created a “fault line” between rural and urban dwellers which “polarizes” state politics (p. 1). Furthermore, they contend that the more rural, sparsely populated areas of the state vote more conservatively than urban locales. Powell (2008) emphasizes that as Pennsylvania’s urban centers expand, particularly around Philadelphia, once solidly conservative rural communities are now becoming more liberal suburban areas, and in the process, rural areas are losing their political and economic power in the state, resulting, in part, in greater disparities in earnings between rural and urban workers.

**The Anthracite Region**

This study explores the impact of changes at the broader economic and social levels, as well as changes at the institutional and professional levels on conflict in Mountainville School District, a rural district located in a metropolitan county in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania (see Figure 1.1). The anthracite region provides an excellent case for studying the impact of these transformations on school-community conflict. This 500-square-mile patch of land once boasted production of over 99% of the anthracite coal mined in the United States (99 million tons of coal in 1917) (Roberts, 1984), and was a flourishing industrial hotbed. But this success did not come without a lofty price.
Figure 1.1. Distribution of Pennsylvania coals. This map shows the regions of Pennsylvania in which different types of coal are located, including anthracite (Department of Environmental Protections, 1992).

The anthracite region has experienced more strikes and work stoppages than any similar area in the country (Poliniak, 1970). The United Mine Workers had a huge presence in the region. Their strikes involved hundreds of thousands of workers at a time, and, at times, required federal intervention (Contosta, 2002). These labor actions were also frequently violent, including such tragedies as a massacre of striking immigrant miners, arsons, and attacks on mine owners and managers (Dublin & Licht, 2005; Roberts, 1984). These actions tore communities apart, and
further separated Protestant mine managers from the Catholic immigrants who supplied the mines with laborers.

Labor strife and community division are not the only legacies of the industry on this region. Just three decades into the start of anthracite production, the 1920s, the region’s forests had been stripped, the river and creek waters left contaminated by acid mine drainage and sewage, and the air clouded over with coal dust. Today, the smell of sulphur permeating the riverbed, and orange acid drainage collection pools, littered with dead and dying trees serve as a reminder of the time when coal was king in the anthracite region.

The anthracite region is illustrative of the effects of long-term economic collapse that plague so many once prosperous American boomtowns, particularly those built upon resource extraction industries (Dublin & Licht, 2005). Most storefronts are vacant in the oldest towns along the river, and have been for decades. The anthracite region lost over 50% of its population between 1930 and 2000 (Dublin & Licht, 2005), is projected to continue to lose population over the next 20 years (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2010), and contains the oldest population in the state (Jenkins, 2002).

Communities located in the anthracite region now find themselves trapped in a seemingly endless process of economic decline and shifting populations, including youth outmigration (Alter, et al., 2007). The substantial and sustained exodus of young people from the region that first began in the 1960s (Goin & Raymond, 2001) has yet to cease. The number of residents aged 18-35 years declined by 13% in the 1990s; this figure has increased since 2000 (Alter, et al., 2007). The latest national economic downturn has done further damage to this already economically decimated area. Mountainville Area School District is located on the edge of an otherwise largely metropolitan county, which saw an increase in poverty rates to 13.8% during
the first decade of the 2000s, the highest increase for a metropolitan area in the state (Keystone Research Center, 2010). The metropolitan center of the region—located approximately 20 miles from the Mountainville High School, ranks 97th in household income out of the nation’s largest 100 metro areas with a median household income just over $42,000; and 91st in educational attainment, with just 21% of people over the age of 25 holding bachelor’s degrees (Brookings Institution, 2010). Additionally, over a three-year period, the area saw steady increases in unemployment rates from approximately 5% in 2007 to over 10% currently. These increases fall above the state average and follow successive increases in unemployment resulting from previous recessions since the 1980s (Keystone Research Center, 2010).

In 2009 natural gas companies showed interest in the region’s Marcellus Shale deposits, exciting many area residents about the prospect of an economic boom. However, exploratory wells drilled by one of the major gas companies operating in the region in 2010 showed that many of the county’s gas deposits were not profitable, in part because of the negative effects of anthracite on gas quality (Skrapitz, 2010). This company pulled out of the area, but wells continue to be drilled in communities to the north and west of the anthracite region. Therefore, the economic benefits of shale gas extraction have not resulted in local economic growth or business start-ups as they have elsewhere in the state.

Teachers unions have historically been both active and powerful in the anthracite region. In fact, the anthracite and steel manufacture regions of the state are responsible for more teacher strikes than any other area (Zwerling, 2008), suggesting that teacher strikes are more likely to occur in particular communities. Beginning in 2000, the two-county area experienced 14 strikes in six school districts, up from 11 strikes in the 1990s. Though the increase in the number of strikes is small, the increase in the duration of these strikes is significant. In the 1990s, each
strike lasted only one day; in the 2000s, the average length of strike time was 9.7 days, with the longest strike lasting 25 days. Additionally, many districts went on strike multiple years in a row during the 2000s, a phenomenon that did not occur in the 1990s.

As the area’s economic situation declined in the 2000s, teacher contract negotiations became more contentious. What explains this phenomenon? In other words, what is the link between low income and high unemployment rates and active labor activity? This region has experienced years of economic distress, leading to lower-than-average household incomes and educational attainment, along with increases in unemployment, and an aging population. These combined conditions result in a declining tax base. The recent economic recession has only made this poor economic situation more pronounced. At the same time, the cost of education has continued to rise, with the burden resting largely on the shoulders of local taxpayers. This adverse relationship has widened the gap between the costs of local education and the willingness and ability of residents to pay for these costs, with the effect of pitting teachers unions against community members and vice versa. The result: drawn-out, bitter collective bargaining between teachers unions and school boards, marked by contentious labor actions, including lengthy strikes.

**Mountainville School District**

Mountainville School District is located at the western end of an anthracite field. Mountainville is categorized as a locale codes 8 and 42 district. That is, the school district is considered a rural district in a metropolitan statistical area and a rural distant district (located more than five but not more than 25 miles from an urban center). One room schoolhouses once dotted the community, along with the town school, and two high schools. The district was consolidated in the 1950s and initially included another mining town from the east side of the
river, but this jointure was short-lived. The population on the east side of the river was largely Catholic, and there were so many fights between the Protestants on the west side and the Catholics from the east that the district soon reorganized, separating from the east side town. At the time of this study, Mountainville School District included three elementary schools and one middle/senior high school.

The district now spans over 100 square miles and serves approximately 1300 students, encompassing a village that supplies workers to the nearby metropolitan area, two private residential lake communities, a small town, and an agrarian community, as well as a state park and state game lands. The district is divided into six communities for Census purposes—the Mountainville borough, four townships, and one other small borough, whose population is about 200 residents. The small town of Mountainville lies along the river and was once an integral part of a booming anthracite industry. Though the anthracite industry was already in the decline by the mid-20th century, it was entirely wiped out in a mining disaster in the 1950s, which resulted in mass flooding of the entire anthracite mine system. Mountainville has been decimated several times throughout its history, but its most prominent tragedy occurred as a result of Hurricane Agnes in 1972, which flooded the entire town, and resulted in the exodus of many residents to nearby rural villages. Now, despite major flooding that occurs every few years, most of Mountainville’s long-term residents stay.

In Mountainville proper, the median household income is $28,594, compared to the national average of $41,994. The town’s population is struggling in other ways, as well, with just 47% having earned a high school diploma or equivalency, and only 3.4% of residents over the age of 25 years having earned a bachelor’s degree. 47.8% of the town’s people are unemployed, and of those who are employed, the majority work in the manufacturing industry. About one-
quarter of the town’s people are over the age of 62 years (Census, 2000a). Though the town of Mountainville is in worse shape than the other, more rural communities that comprise the Mountainville School District, the other communities are not faring well. The median average household income for the rural communities that make up the district is $39,546. Educational attainment varies across the district’s other communities, with percentages of people with high school diplomas/equivalency ranging from 40% to 51.7% and those with earned bachelor’s degrees ranging from 5% to 9.7% in the tiny borough. Most residents who are employed (approximately 52% of the population of the other communities) work either in the manufacturing sector or in education and health and human services and report occupations in either production, transportation, and material moving or sales and office work. 38.9% of the district’s population is over the age of 62 years (Census, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d, 2000e, 2000f).

In sum, the median household income for the district is below the national average, with almost half the population not working or actively seeking employment, and low levels of educational attainment, well below even the figures for the region’s metropolitan area. In addition, the district houses high numbers of people over the age of 62 years and no industry. The effect of these conditions is that the district has a low property tax base, making it increasingly difficult for the district to pay for building upkeep, heating costs, instructional materials and supplies, and teacher salaries and benefits. This effect has been compounded by the failure of the school board to raise taxes in over a decade. These statistics make apparent the potential for contentious collective bargaining in the district. Prior to the start of the most recent contract dispute, teachers’ salaries ranged from $33,426 for a starting teacher with a bachelor’s degree to $67,356 for teachers with 20 years of experience and a master’s degree plus 60 additional credits. Teachers paid no share of their health insurance. In a community in which
employment and income security are low, the disparity between median income and benefits and those enjoyed by the local teachers can cause hostility and resentment during contract negotiations.

These tensions have existed between the community and the teachers union for decades in the Mountainville School District, alongside the community’s long-term economic decline, aging population, and adversity to property taxes. In the 1980s, during a bitter round of contract negotiations, teachers’ car tires were slashed while their cars were parked at the high school for a pivotal school board meeting. The board voted to accept the union’s offer, a source of contention even today among district residents.

Tensions have also existed between community residents and district leadership in recent history. Twice in the last 15 years, superintendents and school board members tried, unsuccessfully, to cut district costs by eliminating the agricultural education program, resulting in community uproar. The most recent attempt to eliminate the program came in response to the state’s increased requirements for agriculture programs in public school districts. Mountainville could not afford to provide the breadth of new science-oriented courses required to comply with the new mandates, which would lead to a completion certificate for graduates of agriculture programs. In the end, the district decided to keep the program, but without making the state-required revisions. The result is that students can participate in the agriculture program in the district, but they will not obtain a state certificate of completion upon graduation. Even though many family farms have closed or lay fallow, district residents cling to the agriculture program as a symbol of the district’s identity as a rural district in this metropolitan county. Being “rural” is important to many community members, who bring cow bells and wear John Deere hats to athletic events, and who boast about defeating the “big city” schools.
These historical patterns of conflict between different school district groups and community members have translated, in part, to short tenure for superintendents. Superintendents typically serve the district for no more than three to four years, with some accepting contract buy-outs and agreeing to leave before the expiration of their contracts. Surprisingly, given these school-community tensions, the Mountainville teachers never staged a strike until the most recent round of collective bargaining, which began in 2005.

The Mountainville Case: An Overview

In August 2005, the Mountainville Area Education Association’s (MAEA) contract expired, and the teachers’ union entered into collective bargaining negotiations with the Mountainville School Board. For several years these negotiations went largely unnoticed by the public, as evidenced by the consistently low attendance at monthly school board meetings and the lack of coverage by local media outlets.

Negotiations entered the spotlight, however, in the winter of 2007, when the teachers union instituted Work-to-Rule conditions in response to failed negotiations. Work-to-Rule conditions in Mountainville translated to teachers only working within their written contractual obligations. In addition to a refusal to continue early morning monitoring duties, teachers left together at the contractual end of the school day. They stopped chaperoning field trips that extended beyond school hours and resigned from numerous advisorships, including the senior class and prom committee.

Once the teachers union made a move that affected parents’ schedules and student activities, the negotiations process took center stage in local media outlets. Hundreds of stories, letters to the editor, and commentaries centered on the Mountainville contract negotiations were published in the district’s three local newspapers, including the release of negotiations details by
one school board member, resulting in an unfair labor practices lawsuit by the Mountainville teachers union. In spring 2007, the teachers union launched a two-day strike, followed by a one-day strike the following spring and a 17-day strike in November 2008.

In 2009 three school board member seats opened. The union supported a slate of candidates, and the other slate was full of first-time school board campaigners, all running on the same platform—make no concessions to the union. This write-in slate was supported by the school board president. Two of the candidates running in opposition to contract settlement won seats, and one union-backed candidate won. That same spring, the teachers union threatened to stage an illegal strike, forcing both sides into mandatory negotiating sessions at the county courthouse.

The contract was settled in September 2009. In the final agreement, the teachers union was awarded pay increases over a five-year period—with teachers at the top of the salary schedule earning $79,948 by 2011, conceded to a share in healthcare costs, and gave up five years of retroactive pay, resulting in financial losses of $20,000 for some teachers at the top of the pay scale.
Figure 1.2. Timeline of Case and Data Collection. This timeline shows the chronology of major events in the case, as well as the timing of data collection.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The Politics of Schooling: Community, Context, and Collective Bargaining

Rural Communities and Schools of the 21st Century

Economic and social conditions. Working-class communities in the Rust Belt region of the U.S.—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and part of New York, face a myriad of economic and social issues brought about by neoliberal policies and a global economy (Mitra, Movit, & Frick, 2008) and as a consequence of fallen industrial giants, including coal, steel, and manufacture. These issues include: chronic alcohol and substance abuse, unemployment, youth outmigration and brain drain, and lack of industry, resulting in a population with limited educational attainment facing underemployment and possessing a set of skills “that are no longer valued in the current economic structure” (Mitra, Movit, & Frick, 2008, p. 732).

These phenomena also impact rural communities. Opportunities for work in traditional rural occupations are declining—mining, manufacture, and agriculture—alongside employment opportunity decline in other working class communities. And, in part a consequence of brain drain, economically distressed rural populations lack the education necessary to secure well-paying jobs, assuming these well-paying jobs exist locally (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Budge, 2006; McGranahan, 2003; Schafft, Alter, & Bridger, 2006). Changes in economic structures in rural communities influence employment relationships, incomes, and job security (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Rural people are burdened by changes in health insurance, in addition to diminishing incomes, as increasing numbers rely on public insurance and are underinsured through employee-sponsored insurance. More rural people are paying more out of pocket for health insurance (National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2008).

This bleak picture lies in stark contrast to the economic reality faced by many rural teachers in the Rust Belt region, which houses the most historically powerful teachers unions in
the country, aside from California. In a time when rural people are experiencing uncertainty regarding employment security, diminishing incomes, and reduced benefits, teachers continue to enjoy tenure-secured positions, collectively bargained salaries, and access to good health care benefits.\(^6\) As rural community members continue to struggle economically, securities procured through the collective bargaining rights of local teachers may become sources of contention between working-class community members and teachers.\(^7\)

In addition to the harsh economic realities experienced by working-aged rural residents, rural places are home to higher concentrations of people aged 65-years and older than suburban and urban communities (Glasgow, 2003). These long-term rural elderly are more likely than urban elderly to be impoverished, have poorer health, and lower educational attainment, creating challenges to those rural communities that have an inadequate infrastructure to care for this population (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003; National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2008). One of the causes of the proportionally large elderly population in rural places is youth outmigration (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Economically distressed rural communities face youth outmigration and brain drain, and the people left behind have relatively low educational attainment when compared to urban populations—just 15.5% of rural people over the age of 25 years have earned bachelor’s degrees compared to 26.6% of urban people. This disparity is due in part to lower numbers of rural students attending postsecondary institutions and to a lack of jobs requiring college degrees in rural areas (Gibbs, 2004). Rural youth are likely to leave for more urbanized areas to further their education, and once they earn a college degree, are unlikely to return to their rural home

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\(^6\) The current battle over collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin may soon change these securities even for teachers in traditionally powerful union states (Ravitch, 2011).

\(^7\) Case studies show that communities marked by class differences can become fragmented (Howley, et al., 2005) and experience disproportionate social exclusion (Milbourne, 2004).
communities, which offer lower wage jobs, require little education, and provide little security or benefits. “This chronic brain drain not only contributes to high rural poverty rates in a statistical sense, for example, by creaming off better prepared workers thereby leaving a residual population with low educational attainment, but also contributes to the very underdevelopment that is one of rural poverty’s root causes” (Brown & Schafft, 2011, p. 225). In effect, chronic brain drain of rural areas creates a poverty-reinforcing cycle in which rural communities are unlikely to attract new industry because they lack a skilled and educated workforce, and educated youth are likely to leave because there are no job opportunities that exist in their communities commensurate with their education and skill levels. As Brown & Schafft (2011) posit, “…rural poverty is especially persistent and intractable when the people left behind live in places that have been left behind” (p. 190).

Rural regions are more likely to experience persistent poverty than urban locales (Brown & Swanson, 2003), and the poverty afflicting many rural places is arguably most pernicious in resource extractive communities, which have developed especially pronounced class divisions (Duncan, 1999; Howley & Howley, 2010). These class divisions and power relations are reproduced in local schools, as teachers and administrators “establish, and exploit, a determining association between poverty and low achievement, so that poverty is not merely associated with but caused by low achievement” (Howley & Howley, 2010).

Corbett (2007) argues that the purpose of secondary schools is to help students become mobile as a means of fulfilling the imperatives of a national labor market, and students who become mobile are those who can afford it or who lack the skills necessary to secure local employment, assuming local employment opportunities exist. Students who come from more
educated parents are more likely to succeed in school.\textsuperscript{8} As Corbett (2007) explains, in his study of a rural Nova Scotian community, the “discourse of educational attainment is framed . . . in terms of families that ‘valued’ education versus those who did not” (p. 217). When educators and school and district leaders subscribe to this discourse, they become facilitators of brain drain, preparing their brightest students for life outside the impoverished, backward, or “bad” community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010; Woodrum, 2004).

Corbett (2007) argues that school is “a quintessential institution of disembedding . . . concerned with severing the attachments of individuals to particular places and making young people adaptable, flexible, and mobile” (p. 251). To accomplish these ends, education must necessarily be placeless in nature—“a story about somewhere else” (Corbett, 2010, p. 117). For long-term stayers, the working class members of the rural community, the school, then, becomes an irrelevant institution, at best, preparing students for a life they cannot live in the local community, and an enemy at worst, contributing to the continual decline of the local place where the working class make their lives.

Compounding these destructive cyclical youth outmigration patterns, disconnects between school and community are further fueled by neoliberal educational policies that encourage disembedding or locally irrelevant educational practices. These policies are legitimated by the pervasive cultural message that rural places are “backward” places (Corbett, 2007; Theobald, 1997).

There is a cacophony of influence on schools and school-community relationship from forces within and outside the local community, including competing social and economic class

\textsuperscript{8} When teachers practice from a cultural theory of poverty (see Brown & Schaffit, 2011; Payne, 2005), they believe they can help break intergenerational cycles of poverty by replacing impoverished and working-class students’ behaviors and norms with the middle class behaviors and cultural codes needed for economic success. This approach tends to ignore or downplay the structural forces that perpetuate poverty and inequality (Schaffit & Prins, 2009).
values, intrusive federal and state educational policies, and divergent perspectives on the purpose of education. "Teachers may stand alone in their classrooms and principals alone in their schools, but the voices of judges, legislators, mayors, interest groups, and even U.S. presidents bombinate [sic] ever more loudly" (Howell, 2005, p. 5), a reminder that schools, including rural schools, are inherently political institutions (Monchinski, 2007).

**Rural School Politics**

Despite the challenges rural schools and communities face, and the historical patterns of tensions that disconnect and divide them, few recent studies these contentious relations. In fact, rural schools are usually described as institutions that create “tight-knit, supportive relationships between students, teachers, and staff and community members” [italics added] (Brown & Schafft, 2011, p. 63). In most rural communities, however, these harmonious school and community relations are difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain, in part because rural communities are political and factional spaces.

[T]he community as a unitary entity is largely mythical. It is instead a delicately balanced group of subcommunities, each with its own set of values, perceptions, and demands for public education. Assessing and addressing these demands is made even more difficult by the possibility of a sharply divided . . . community. New subgroups develop; interest in the schools waxes and wanes among groups and is often related to specific issues. (Lutz & Merz, 1992, p. 165)

In short, rural communities are not homogeneously-minded collectives, but are contested spaces full of power-struggles, as rural people vie for rural identities commensurate with varied ideologies, values, and ways of living (Groenke & Nespor, 2010).
Brown and Schafft (2011) contend that power within the rural community is exercised by “force, influence, or position” (p. 46), in accord with Vidich & Bensman’s (1968) classic study of rural school politics, in which school board members gained their power through the type of business owned, position, traditional power structures, and likability. Existing power structures within the rural community can be inclusive and/or excluding in nature. The presence of excluding power structures weakens the community and its institutions, making both difficult to sustain (Brown & Schafft, 2011). When considered in the context of school politics, the presence of exclusivity on the basis of class translates to board policies that act in accordance with powerful class interests (Vidich & Bensman, 1968), benefiting some students and community members at the expense of others. Community power holders are able to set definitions—good versus bad, educated versus uneducated—and limits for what is debatable in educational policy negotiations. In short, groups in power determine the dominant discourse of education (Monchinski, 2007).

In addition to the importance of power structures in understanding rural school politics, knowledge of values and value conflicts is also critical because educational politics is ultimately a study of competing values (Stout, Tallerico, & Scribner, 1995). Rural community members contend with multiple value conflicts, including: (1) reconciling the need to be neighborly with the need to be relatively economically and socially successful compared to one’s neighbors; (2) adjusting one’s ideals of success due to the limited opportunities available in the community to achieve it; (3) reconciling one’s vision of democratic control with the reality of local politics and power structures; and (4) reconciling the belief of local independence versus the reality of intrusive state and federal policies (Vidich & Bensman, 1968). These competing values in the context of existing stress between the working and professional classes (Vidich & Bensman,
1968), historical and changing power structures, and externally driven policies, naturally create opportunities for conflict. In these contested spaces, language is used as both an inclusionary and exclusionary tool to form constructions of sameness and other. The school often becomes the site at which these conflicts occur (Groenke & Nespor, 2010).

Scant literature exists that investigates the world of rural educational politics. Thus, a review of educational politics literature must rely on foundational and contemporary studies that offer insights into the topic either more generally or from a literature base concerned with suburban and urban school politics.

**Educational politics.** There is an exhaustive scope of research devoted to educational politics (see, for example, Apple, 2004; Boyd, 2003; Howell, 2005; Iannacone & Lutz, 1970; Monchinski, 2007; Spring, 2005; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). Educational politics literature reminds us that schools are, have always been, and will continue to be political institutions. They are sites at which conflicts occur over curriculum (Apple 1992, 2004; Lebo, 2008), the practice of teaching (Bascia, 1994; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Hartney, 2009; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001), finances (Peshkin, 1982; Spring, 2005), and culture (Corbett, 2007; Groenke & Nespor, 2010). Schools are influenced by politics at the national and state levels as elected officials from multiple parties and ideologies attempt to reinforce their worldviews through educational reforms aimed at what is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it (Spring, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). While educational politics encompass broader political ideologies, it is critical to remember that all politics is local, and educational politics is particularly local.

**Local school politics.** Through decades of educational reforms and an increasingly vocal public, schools have become more open to their communities, and thus susceptible to challenges from parents and community groups. Owen (2006) argues that the importance of the local
community on the school district cannot be overemphasized: “The community is the deciding factor in what the school will become. Because the school is embedded in the community, is paid for by the community, and belongs to the community, it must therefore reflect the culture of the community” (p. 14).

The politics of local school districts functions quite differently from the standard two-party political give-and-take many Americans think about when they consider politics (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970). Local educational politics involves much less compromise, and factions are unlikely to come together before an election. Instead, “the multifactional politics of education must achieve its consensus through informal community structures, the superintendent’s office, or direct confrontation at the central agency of school district government, the school board meeting” (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970, p. 6).

**Conflict: The heart of politics.** A study of local educational politics must focus on conflict because conflict is at the heart of all politics (Schattschneider, 1960). Sources of school and community conflict include lack of resources in the school district and community and divergent values and beliefs (Malen, 1995; Owen, 2006; Stout, Tallerico, & Paredes Scribner, 1995). Conflict is used by individuals or coalitions in the community to promote change where those fueling the conflict feel it is needed. For example, when groups feel they are not being represented by school board votes, they engage in electoral conflict in an effort to change board make-up (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Merz, 1992).

Conflict between the school district and community is more likely to occur in some communities than others, particularly blue collar, or districts with many low socioeconomic residents, and factional communities. Boyd (1976) and Minar (1966) found that low SES districts have more electoral conflict than high SES districts, and low SES districts are less able
to effectively manage this conflict. Working class district populations are more likely to support a traditional education focus on the basics, can be wary of higher education and resort to a “mob mentality” (Owen, 2006, p. 102) to promote their values. When the local community is factional in nature, school board members are more likely to engage in political conflict because they represent factional (and competing) community values and interests (McCarty & Ramsey, 1968). And, if community members form coalitions to show their displeasure with the school district, it can create chaos for the school and community (Owen, 2006).

As Owen (2006) argues,

Public education institutions are, for the most part, not about the good of the children or excellence in education, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. Public education is about power and control, adult issues that supersede anything that goes on in the classroom. For educators, and particularly for educational administrators, this is a fact of life. The day begins and ends with questions concerning governance, conflict, power, and the attempt to create policy that will defuse these volatile issues. (p. 4)

While educators and community members would argue that public education is about what is best for children (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007), in some instances, and in some locales in particular, power and control do appear to usurp the attentions of educators, administrators, and the school board members charged with creating policy.

**School boards.** School boards constitute the highest number of elected officials in the U.S., with over 100,000 members on 15,000 school boards (Hess, 2008). In 1969, Bendiner wrote that “of all the agencies devised by Americans for the guiding of their public affairs, few

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9 McCarty and Ramsey’s (1968) foundational work on school politics identified four community types: dominated (characterized by a powerful elite), factional (characterized by groups with competing values), pluralistic (characterized by multiple constituencies), and inert (characterized by lack of concern for the happenings of the local school).
are as vague in function as the school board, fewer still take office in such resounding apathy—and no other, ironically, is capable of stirring up the passions of a community to so fine a froth” (p. 3). This sentiment rings true today.

Most school boards operate as elite boards; members of these boards make decisions they feel are best for their constituents behind closed doors and publicly demonstrate consensus. Some boards, however, operate as arena boards. Instead of making policy decisions they feel are best for the community, arena boards act as agents of the community. Members of these boards make decisions congruent with the demands of their constituents in public displays of disagreement and debate. Arena boards typically arise as a result of a community group gaining enough power to elect a member or members representative of their values, which they have perceived as previously being ignored or rejected (Lutz &Merz, 1992). School boards, then, reflect the political, cultural, and power divides that exist between groups in the local community (Peterson & Fusarelli, 2008). When school boards fail to adequately represent the values of powerful groups in the community, they are often replaced by new members more representative of the community (Iannacone & Lutz, 1970, 1995).

Although local school board control has diminished through continuous waves of state and federal mandates and from bottom-up restrictions created through collective bargaining (Kirst, 2008), school boards still possess considerable power within the local community. “With their ability to create district policy, hire and fire administrators . . . approve the budget, tenure teachers, and negotiate teachers’ contracts, the power of the school board to move the district forward or force it into bureaucratic gridlock is significant” (Peterson & Fusarelli, 2008, p. 118).

People run for school boards for myriad reasons—concerns about their children, the feeling that they can make a difference in the school, the need for power, as a stepping stone
towards higher political office, or because of a single issue. The final of these possibilities—that a candidate runs in response to a singular issue—often results in conflict for the school district (Castallo, 2003).

School boards operate in an “intensely political world” that rewards them for responding to state rules that result in funding, and, more saliently, to “local political forces” (Teske, Schneider, & Caseese, 2005, p. 131), including “pressure groups” (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000, p.12). Because board members represent multiple community factions, interests, and power structures, they make policy decisions in order to garner support from their particular political constituencies (Elmore, 2000). In factional community with diverse, and often oppositional interests and values, school boards act as a microcosm of this community discord. Within them, “interests clash, power is exerted over the vocal opposition of certain constituents, alliances are made and broken, and organized groups converge in order to advance their own independent agendas” (Howell, 2005, p. 14). Boards also engage in conflict with their superintendent. About 20% of superintendents in small districts leave because of conflict stemming from ethical problems with the board, the most common of which are clear contract violations and nepotism (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Political wrangling occurs within the school district organization, in addition to the negotiations that take place in the local community. Schools are comprised of multiple organizational subcultures that arise through shared experiences. These subcultures consist of “distinctive clusters of ideologies” (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 147) that can become oppositional not just to dominant community worldviews, but also to the ideologies of other groups within the organization.10

10 Though there are three main types of professionals that comprise a school district organization—district-level administrators, building-level administrators, and teachers, this literature review focuses solely on the
Superintendents. The superintendent’s role was historically considered an apolitical position, with superintendents acting as impartial educational experts, working above the realm of politics. Today, superintendents are well aware that their role, as a boundary spanner between educators and the community, is incredibly political in nature (Owen, 2006). The superintendency is a delicate and isolated position with the school district organization. Superintendents are beholden to multiple constituencies, including community members, school board members, building administrators, and teachers. Communities expect that their local superintendent will improve the local community, garner resources above those produced by the community, exercise influence over outsiders to better their school and community, develop partnerships with all community groups, and be “likable” (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p. 71). These demands, of course, are highly generalized. School leadership is highly dependent on context, and varies with local conditions including: community and school workforce, district size and prosperity, community support (or lack thereof) for the school district, and organizational and environmental characteristics (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hannaway & Crowson, 1989). Effective leaders must be cognizant of the multiple constituencies that exist in their specific community and responsive to the constant change process that takes place within the community and district organization (Johnston, et al., 2002).

Because superintendents are hired, fired, and evaluated by the school board, the “single most important job of any superintendent from a practical point of view . . . is getting along with the school board” (Lutz & Mertz, 1992, p. 54). In practice superintendents must often act as agents of the board, as participants of the school board’s culture or as an impartial educational expert who provides board members with alternative solutions to problems in order to promote superintendent at the district level and teachers because these are the groups most salient to the study of collective bargaining in a small school district.
discussion between board factions (Boyd, 1982; Lutz & Merz, 1992). Most superintendents are hired by their local boards because of their leadership ability; less than 10% are hired because the board is looking for a change agent, suggesting that school boards are not looking for a superintendent to initiate major educational reforms. 41.5% of superintendents are hired to act as an educational leader, while only 15.5% are hired to be a political leader that manages board and community relations (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). In other words, most superintendents are hired by their local boards to lead in educational activities as opposed to political activities and conflicts, and in this role are expected to maintain educational practices in line with the status quo.

Because they are boundary spanners, superintendents encounter many politically problematic situations through their tenure in a given district. Superintendents, like school board members, need to protect their positions and reputations with the public. Consequently, superintendents tend toward “conflict avoidance” in their words and actions (Boyd, 1982, p. 1124). If superintendents are forced to get involved in resolving controversy at the policy level, they may find it difficult to engage in the “political maneuvering” necessary to survive such conflict (Boyd, 1976, p. 33).

21.7% of superintendents nationwide are female, and of this group, 55.4% work in small town and rural districts. Across gender differences, superintendents in smaller districts report having the highest degree of work-related stress (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Female superintendents find it more difficult to navigate challenging political situations than their male counterparts because they enjoy less support from community members and school district employees (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). These employees, in large part, are comprised of teachers and their unions.
**Teachers and teachers unions.** Today’s typical teacher is White, female, married, and religious, with over 50% possessing a master’s degree. Just 25% of teachers are male, and the average starting salary for a teacher is $31,704, according to the National Education Association (NEA) (Pytel, 2006). Teachers belong to their own subculture within a school district; they possess shared experiences and ideologies and find outside demands placed on their work problematic. As they develop a common worldview, teachers, as members of an occupational subculture, create “self-definitions, ideologies, and values that help them to sustain their occupational identities and justify their rights” (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 180). These ideologies can permeate the bounds of the school to inform a broader common worldview. These common ideologies, however, are not necessarily commensurate with those of the local community in which teachers work. One way in which teachers espouse their common rights is through union activity, which has become politically problematic for teachers in recent years. “Legitimacy for teachers—and their work—is now inextricably linked with the actions of their unions” (Kerchner & Cooper, 2003, p. 219).

While organized labor’s numbers shrank substantially from 35% of the workforce in the mid-20th century to just 7.9% in 2000, the two teachers unions (National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers) grew in membership, from 750,000 in 1960 to 4 million members in 2000, and now represent 90% of public school teachers (Kahlenberg, 2006, p. 7). The growth in teachers union membership was especially explosive in the 1960s and 1970s, and is attributable to competition between the NEA and the AFT for membership, along with their simultaneous push for collective bargaining rights (Kahlenberg, 2006), and the influx of males to the profession, particularly at the secondary level (Richards, 2008). Today, the NEA alone boasts a membership of 3.2 million members (NEA, 2009). The majority of Pennsylvania’s
public school teachers are members of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), a state affiliate of NEA. PSEA, founded in 1852 (Springer, 2009), represents 191,000 teachers in 483 school districts (PSEA, 2009).

Kearney (2009) argues that “public sector labor relations are deeply and inherently suffused in politics” (p. 85). Teachers unions have become politically active at the federal, state, and local levels. 31% of school board respondents in a nationwide survey of 827 members reported that teachers unions were very active in school board elections, with union influence greater in collective bargaining states than those that prohibit the practice (Hess & Leal, 2005, p. 241).

Local political culture has a huge effect on the influence of teachers unions on local school board elections. In the right context, union activity in school board elections can have big pay-offs, resulting in sympathetic boards. Because of teachers unions’ tradition of political power, conventional wisdom asserts that board members up for reelection should minimize labor conflict to increase their odds of election (Hess & Kelly, 2006). In certain contexts, however, this assumption proves false. When unions are faced with unfriendly local conditions, they may be required to make compromises in those candidates they endorse, so that even if their candidates win, they may not be as sympathetic to the union or collective bargaining as the ideal candidate (Moe, 2005). Friendly local conditions include democratic and liberal districts, which are more likely to elect union sympathizers to the school board. These union sympathizers are much more likely to be found among Democratic, as opposed to Republican, candidates (Moe, 2005). In rural communities, this poses a real challenge for teachers unions, because these communities tend to be more conservative (Madonna & Young, 2010), resulting in boards less likely to make concessions to union demands or avoid conflict with teachers unions.
Whether the goal is a sympathetic school board or support for contract negotiations, union leaders must engage in effective public relations with the local community. This can prove especially difficult in tough economic times. Even when the economy is prosperous, unions are often blamed for exacerbating fiscal problems because of their emphasis on increasing members’ wages and benefits (Kearney, 2009).

**Collective Bargaining and Strikes**

The ability of unions to secure better wages and comprehensive benefits occurs during the collective bargaining process in states that guarantee collective bargaining rights. Collective bargaining legislation was first enacted in manufacturing states with a strong two-party system and powerful unions (Kearney, 2009). Collective bargaining in the education sector was modeled after industrial bargaining in the 1960s (Bacharach & Shedd, 1989). In 1964 22% of teachers participated in collective bargaining; by the mid-1980s, 60% participated; today 67%—over 3 million teachers—take part in collective bargaining efforts (Eberts, 2007).

Though millions of teachers are represented through collective bargaining practices, research on collective bargaining is limited and polarized, largely because of the controversy that surrounds the practice (Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006a; Loveless, 2000). Research that does exist “has done little to separate the effects of varying state statutes, local political and economic conditions, and personal dynamics in union-management relations” (Hess & Kelly, 2006, p. 61). Despite the lack of research devoted to collective bargaining in the education sector, it remains “one of the most important areas of educational policy, bearing directly and indirectly on students, teachers, schools, and school districts” (Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006b, p. 257).
Collective bargaining styles. There are two approaches to collective bargaining by teachers: industrial\textsuperscript{11} and collaborative, or reform, bargaining. Collaborative bargaining is a relatively new approach to bargaining that began in the 1980s, in which boards and unions come together to create a contract designed with common goals in minds, including improved student performance. Industrial bargaining is the more common bargaining style, particularly among smaller schools (Johnson & Kardos, 2000). Collaborative bargaining, or “organizing around quality” is likely to remain a “novel” occurrence because of existing school cultures, union organization, educational politics, and the impact of state policies and labor laws on teaching and bargaining (Kerchner & Koppich, 2000, p. 298).

These differences in bargaining styles, along with distinctly different approaches to education—the factory and professional models—are responsible for teacher contracts being more diverse in both design and content than ever before (Johnson & Kardos, 2000). Professional model schools are responsive to their students and communities; factory model schools, on the other hand, are more akin to industrial style work in that managers (school administrators) direct the work of their laborers (teachers). Industrial bargaining in factory model schools is inherently more adversarial than in professional model schools where reform bargaining is more likely to take place, because instead of treating teachers as professionals with a sincere interest in improving their schools, industrial bargaining “defines participants as adversaries, favors uniform work rules for all teachers and schools, and deals with teachers as if they are interchangeable laborers” (Johnson & Kardos, 2000, p. 9). Industrial bargaining, in the context of scarce resources, assumes a zero sum playing field, in which one side’s loss is the other side’s win.

\textsuperscript{11} For the purpose of clarity, the term industrial bargaining is used to describe traditional notions of collective bargaining.
Collective bargaining context. The broad context in which collective bargaining occurs has changed since teachers first sat across the table from school boards. The shift in focus to school accountability and highly publicized achievement gaps together have created the conditions for incredible performance pressure placed on schools (Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006a). The conditions teachers face in contract negotiations are far different from those they faced when they began to collectively bargain in the 1960s. While industrial bargaining seemed to benefit teachers unions through the 1980s, more recent contracts show that management has gained the upper hand while unions are becoming less powerful at the bargaining table. At the same time, as new teachers enter the field, they tend to be more progressive than their veteran colleagues, and are more likely to engage in collective bargaining for professional purposes, supplementing traditional bargaining issues with issues centered on school reform and improvement (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000; Kerchner & Koppich, 2000). If this claim proves true, the face of collective bargaining may change drastically; however, whether these differences are accurate reflections of younger teachers across varied local contexts remains to be seen.

State laws and local conditions influence both the ability of teachers to bargain and the collective bargaining process itself (Shanker, 1992). At the state level, policies, historical context, and economic conditions influence collective bargaining. States vary considerably in collective bargaining statutes. Comprehensive policies include collective bargaining impasse resolution phases, such as mediation, fact-finding, and binding and non-binding arbitration (Hess & Kelly, 2006). Comprehensive bargaining laws tend to be located in the “industrialized, urbanized” Frost Belt states (Kearney, 2009, p. 63), which encompass the Northeast, Great Lakes, and Upper Midwest regions of the U.S. The highest percentage of teachers represented
through collective bargaining, 88%, are located in the Middle Atlantic Region (Eberts, 2007).

State economic conditions also affect bargaining across school districts. For example, PSEA’s executive director reports that Pennsylvania’s teachers unions had difficulty in their negotiations efforts in the 2008-2009 school year because of the state’s distressed economic climate (Springer, 2009).

While it exists within the broader context of state conditions, collective bargaining in the education sector is a local phenomenon (Cooper, 2000). Approaches to bargaining vary widely because of the “particular economic, legislative, and social environment[s]” in which negotiations take place (Hess & Kelly, 2006, p. 62). There were 13,809 regular school districts in the U.S. as of the 2008-2009 school year (NCES, 2010), which translates to 13,809 unique local contexts in which bargaining potentially took place.

The outcomes of collective bargaining depend on multiple local groups, including the local teachers union, school board, taxpayers, and special interest groups (Kearney, 2009). The influence of local media on collective bargaining has received minimal scholarly attention; however, one recent study of 20 districts concluded that very little media attention is given to the process of collective bargaining, with contentiousness of negotiations having no impact on the number of stories published in local newspapers (Hess & Kelly, 2006). This finding is surprising considering the adversarial nature of industrial bargaining, and the necessity for both sides to garner public support, which would readily be achieved through local media outlets.

**Problematic research on collective bargaining.** Despite the fact that collective bargaining occurs at the district level and is affected by local conditions, most collective bargaining research is not context-based, focusing instead on broader union issues and state and national policies (see Hartney, 2009; Olsen, 1984, 1986; West & Mykerezi, 2009). When, in the
rare instance, research on collective bargaining is localized, the research generally focuses on the
select few cases of collaborative bargaining in large urban districts, some of which serve students
numbering in the tens of thousands (i.e. Fuller, Mitchell, & Hartman, 2000; Johnson & Kardos,
2000; Kerchner & Koppich, 2000; Kerchner, Koppich, & Weeres, 1997), rendering much
contemporary collective bargaining research irrelevant to rural stakeholders. The failure of
scholars to address collective bargaining in rural school districts creates a critical gap in both
collective bargaining and rural education literature. For example, the opinions the public forms
about teachers and teachers unions develop as a consequence of their experiences at the local
level.

*Collective bargaining truths, myths, and the power of perceptions.* The power that
teachers unions have gained through collective bargaining efforts has made them controversial in
the eyes of the public (Kahlenberg, 2006). Critics of collective bargaining claim that teacher
contracts “usurp managerial authority, stifle creative staffing, protect ineffective educators,
prevent rewarding talent, and produce massive inefficiencies” while supporters argue that the
process has “helped deliver teachers from unacceptable treatment and that the provisions in
question were earned in fair negotiations, were agreed to by district negotiators, are essential to
protecting teachers from cavalier or incompetent management, and are sufficiently flexible to
permit sensible reforms” (Hess & Kelly, 2006, p. 53).

Anti-union advocates assert that collective bargaining raises the cost of school districts
while hurting student achievement. In truth, while collective bargaining does raise the overall
costs of instruction, through pay increases, benefits, and demands for smaller class sizes,
research shows that it has little effect on student achievement. “Taxpayer criticism of public
schools correctly identifies collective bargaining as one of the culprits in the higher costs of
schools, but incorrectly identifies it . . . as a culprit in poor student performance” (Stone, 2000, p. 76).

Whether local taxpayers are correct in their assumptions about collective bargaining outcomes, however, is relatively unimportant. What matters is what they perceive about the local teachers union—the images they construct. These constructions affect relations between community members and teachers and can spark conflict. Furthermore, teachers unions’ interests can be directly at odds with those of taxpayers. This inherent tension is critical to any examination of collective bargaining (Hess & Kelly, 2006) and plays out most visibly when tensions are exacerbated to the point of teacher strikes, another significantly understudied phenomenon.

**Teacher strikes.** When collective bargaining and impasse resolution efforts fail, teachers unions turn to strikes. Strikes are dynamic in nature, “shaped by the interactions among differentially distributed power resources (of which unions are a major component)” and formal prescriptions for conflict resolution (Rubin & Smith, 1991, p. 95). Strikes, in both the private and public sectors have garnered much anti-union sentiment among the public, influencing negotiations and strike outcomes, though public sector strikes have historically been viewed as particularly problematic (Rubin & Smith, 1991). Striking by public sector employees (including teachers unions) has been disparaged since the start of the 20th century. In 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that “All government employees should recognize that collective bargaining as usually understood cannot be transplanted into public service . . . Actions looking toward the paralysis of government by those who have sworn to support it are unthinkable and intolerable” (Rubin & Smith, 1991, p. 9).
Strike frequency and duration. In both the private and public sectors, the number of union strikes has decreased considerably since the mid-20th century (Clawson & Clawson, 1999). Nationally, the number of teacher strikes has declined continually since its peak in the 1970s, a consequence of right-to-work laws, anti-strike laws, and collective bargaining experience (Hess & Kelly, 2006). Currently, teacher strikes are prohibited in 40 states, though few of these states have stiff penalties for striking unions (Hess & Kelly, 2006).

Along with permissive state strike policies, the decline in strike frequency is also due in part to the increasing unwillingness of management (school board members) to make concessions to unions in collective bargaining, which results from the recognition that work stoppages negatively impact public perception of unions and can produce increased support for management. Keeping this in mind, board members attempt to sway public opinion in opposition to the local teachers union through the media, including the publishing of union salaries and illustrating how taxes would be increased through concessions to union demands (Kearney, 2009). The use of local media can further exacerbate tensions between the teachers union and board members and between the teachers union and community.

Strike duration also affects the bargaining process. Strike duration may be extensive because negotiating parties begin the bargaining process already harboring animosity towards one another or because the strike has extended past the point of realistic compromise and negotiation. “Regardless of the strike's institutional setting or surrounding micro-level or macro-economic conditions, after a period of failing to settle, the strike becomes entrenched” (Rubin & Smith, 1991, p. 94).

Strikes in Pennsylvania. The first recorded teacher strike in Pennsylvania occurred in 1880. There were no other recorded teacher strikes in the Commonwealth for the next 50 years;
however, the majority of teacher strikes that took place in the early decades of the 20th century also took place in Pennsylvania (Ziskind, 1940). Pennsylvania public sector workers were granted the right to strike in 1970. Following this legislation, the 1985 Government Employees Relations Report indicated that “teachers and other non-uniformed, local government workers so commonly walked off the job in the Keystone State that it impaired the state's ability to attract new business” (Kearney, 2009, p. 236). Pennsylvania continues to outrank almost all other states in number of teacher strikes into the 20th century (Kearney, 2009), in part because just the threat of striking has successfully been used to force negotiations with otherwise unwilling board members (Hess & Kelly, 2006). While permissive strike policies are considered important in determining strike frequency (Olson, 1986), Pennsylvania state law requiring the rescheduling of strike days appears to have an even greater effect on increasing the frequency of teacher strikes in the Commonwealth because union members lose no money as a result of striking (Kearney, 2009). Finally, the poor economic conditions in Pennsylvania have translated to drawn-out, contentious collective bargaining (Springer, 2009).

**Problematic research on teacher strikes.** Most recent research conducted on the effects of teachers union actions is limited to their success in influencing school district policy (Hartney, 2009; West & Mykerezi, 2009) or the impact of state policies on teacher strike frequency (Olsen, 1984, 1986). However, as any union member, school board member, or school leader is well-aware, teacher strikes affect the school district organization as well as the broader district community in substantial ways.

According to Streshly (2001), “while the economic costs of a teachers’ strike . . . are minimal, the human costs can be catastrophic” (p. 6). Because both sides engage in intense public relations battles in attempts to garner public support during a teacher strike, both come out
damaged in the eyes of the community, impinging upon school-community relations. In addition to damaged community relations, the school district organization, itself, suffers as a result of teacher strikes. Throughout the strike process, union members and school leaders engage in a “self-destructive ritual” that leads to suspicion and distrust within the school district organization (Streshly, 2001, p. 7). The constant attacks on unions by their own school board also contribute to anti-union movements.

### Anti-union Movements

**Historical context.** The success of professional unions in gaining power and salary increases has contributed to an already-growing anti-union movement in America. While the public was largely supportive of and sympathetic toward unions in the early part of the 1900s, unions were so successful in the 1950s and 1960s in their efforts to bring working-class members into the middle class that the public no longer saw them as representatives of the disadvantaged. “Organized labor was now believed to represent the ‘haves’ rather than the ‘have nots’” (Richards, 2008, p. 13). Unionized workers do fair substantially better than nonunionized workers; they are significantly more likely to have pensions, health care benefits, higher wages, and paid time off work than nonunionized workers (Block, Friedman, Kaminzki, & Levin, 2006).

As middle class workers increasingly became the workers engaged in collective bargaining and exercised their right to strike, unions were increasingly perceived as a powerful special interest group (Levi, 2003). This perception of unions is illustrated in a 1971 *Reader’s Digest* article: “‘The strike is a means for any group of workers with a stranglehold on some vital service to bring the community at large to its knees. It is rarely employed to ensure justice to mistreated workers, but is used frequently to make well paid specialists more affluent’” (Richards, 2008, p. 72).
Effects of anti-union sentiment on teachers unions. Today, unions face a “crucial juncture in their history” (Chaison, 2006, p. 173), a consequence of diminished membership numbers and political power. Membership among private sector labor unions has declined since the 1980s (Jacoby, 2004), as has public sector membership since the 1990s, though the rate is much slower among public sector unions (Wasserman, 2006). Pennsylvania has enjoyed union membership rates above the national average since 1989 when data were first collected, with 770,000 workers (14.7%) currently represented by unions, but this figure reflects a sharp decline from 1989, when 20.9% of workers were represented (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). While the number of unionized workers has declined, Pennsylvania, along with California, New York, Illinois, Ohio, and New Jersey, makes up half the nation’s unionized workers.

Unions are also losing their political and economic influence (Chaison, 2006). Today, public sector unions, including teachers unions, face increasingly negative public opinion, “weathering an uncomfortably high level of public and legislative attacks through calls for outsourcing and privatization of public services, citizen resistance to paying taxes” and legislative changes to collective bargaining statutes that threaten union negotiating power (Kearney, 2009, p. 326). Paradoxically, at the same time, a 2008 Gallup Poll found that 59% of Americans are generally supportive of unions, though they do not support unions having greater influence (Saad, 2009). Teachers unions’ legitimacy is also being contested both “directly as unions and indirectly as a result of their association with the existing public schooling structure (Kerchner & Cooper, 2003, p. 221), an institution continuously under attack by both political parties.

While international law protects the rights of workers to unionize and collectively bargain, through International Labour Conventions 87 and 88, the United States has never agreed
to ratify any of these conventions (Wasserman, 2006). Though the U.S. sends reports to the International Labour Organization that illustrate its support of the tenets of these conventions, its failure to sign them into law has taken a toll on public sector unions, including teachers unions, since the turn of the 21st century (Wasserman, 2006). President George W. Bush is credited with spearheading recent trends to deunionize public sector employees at the federal level following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. By 2005, state employees in Missouri, Kentucky, and Indiana lost their collective bargaining rights under Republican governors (Wasserman, 2006).

The push to limit or abolish the rights of public sector unions has negatively affected teachers unions across the country, with wide support from political conservatives. In 2010, a Rhode Island school district superintendent fired all the teachers at an underperforming high school after the teachers union and school board failed to reach a compensation agreement for additional instructional time required by the board (Kaye, 2010). In 2011 newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin, Florida, New Jersey, Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania are attacking their state budget shortfalls through attempts to weaken the rights of state public employee unions. The Wisconsin case has garnered the most national attention, with mass protests by unions in response to the governor’s plan to curtail collective bargaining rights, while increasing union employees’ contributions to healthcare and pensions (Ravitch, 2011). Most notably, several days into protests by union members, former Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Rick Santorum, compared the Wisconsin unionized workers to drug addicts, commenting that “‘They [unionized workers] are acting like their drug has been taken away from them’” (Summers, 2011). This villainization of teachers unions has weakened their power considerably (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000), and the future of collective bargaining hangs in the balance.
Conclusions

Teachers unions are inherently political organizations, and the communities in which they collectively bargain are factional, contested spaces in which groups vie for power, resources, and representation of competing values. Because teachers bargain at the local level, the process of negotiation is uniquely local, dependent on and shaped by community contexts. Collective bargaining in rural communities may prove especially contentious because (1) rural communities have experienced an increased disconnect between the work of their local teachers who implement neoliberal initiatives that are either irrelevant or harmful to the community; (2) members of these communities face increasing economic insecurities; (3) rural communities continue to experience youth brain drain resulting in a local devaluing of the local school; (4) powerless against many macro-policies, these communities are able to create coalitions strong enough to exact power over their government at the most local level—the school district, which can lead to school and community conflict; and (5) school board members elected by local community members tend to be unsympathetic to teachers unions and representative of an increasingly anti-union, economically and socially unstable, conservative community unwilling to grant their local teachers the salaries and benefits they feel are deserved. Combined, these factors contribute to an increased likelihood of acrimonious collective bargaining, drawn-out negotiations, and labor actions, including teacher strikes.
Chapter 3
The Mountainville Conflict Explained: Formal Negotiations

Introduction

I guess my naïveté got the best of me when I came here. I enjoyed working here, I enjoyed the rapport I had with the kids, I had heard talk of animosity from community members toward people in my profession. I had heard that people were not very sympathetic to the plight of the classroom teacher, simply because we made too much money and we didn’t work enough hours. That seemed to be the overriding theme in most people’s dislike of what I do. Although I hadn’t seen it firsthand. It is kind of like the sleeping tiger in the room under the table. It is there. –Mountainville teacher

I am quite familiar with the Mountainville district and community. I graduated from the school system in the 1990s and returned to the district, where the majority of my extended family lives, in 2010. While I lived away from the area, Mountainville experienced the first teacher strike in the district’s history as part of a conflict that consumed the rural district and community. I heard snippets of the conflict whenever my husband and I came home to visit with friends and relatives. People were so emotionally tied to the controversy, however, that it was difficult to get a real sense of what was going on in this case.

In 2009, after the conflict was resolved through settlement of the teacher contract, I decided to investigate the case. I wanted an explanation of the origins of the conflict, the processes through which it escalated, and how it was resolved. In 2010, I began collecting data through newspaper accounts and interviews. I began with very open-ended interviews. While my interviews became more focused throughout the process, I began each interview with very open-ended questions because I wanted respondents to feel comfortable enough to tell their own
accounts of the conflict. Through our discussions, union and board members, as well as administrators, pointed to specific actors, events, and discourse that shaped the conflict from beginning to end.

This chapter provides an in-depth investigation of the origins and early years of the Mountainville school-community conflict. It explains the importance of local community context in creating school-community tensions and disconnects over the value and purpose of education, which stem from economic distress, youth outmigration, and class differences. These tensions created the conditions for conflict in Mountainville. Chapter 3 also analyzes the behaviors and motivations of key figures in the collective bargaining process in the district, with an emphasis on power brokers in the formal policy/negotiation arena. The chapter examines significant events that transpired over the first few years of the conflict and the ways in which these events, including Work-to-Rule and two short strikes, escalated the conflict and made the formal negotiations process more contentious and tenuous.

This chapter focuses specifically at the conflict that occurred in the formal policy/negotiation arena in Mountainville. An in-depth investigation of the players in this space as well as the causes of its deterioration and ultimate collapse has important theoretical and practical implications. First, the chapter illustrates the processes through which the formal policy space can become limited and ineffective during school and community conflict, and the contributing effects actions by competing groups can have on the space’s deterioration. Second, the chapter highlights the importance of trust and power (im)balance on the effectiveness of the space. Third, the chapter explains how the presence of weak experts, including a weak superintendent, undermines a formal arena that is supposed to foster compromise.
The Mountainville Community: Economic Distress, Taxes, and Perceptions of Privilege

The Mountainville School District and community have seen better days. The community has experienced economic distress for decades, and the recent recession has only made life more difficult for many families in the district. High school principal James Royal discussed the lack of job opportunities for educated youth in the community. “Where, besides being a teacher in the district, where else are you going to get employed in Mountainville? If you do have a degree?”

Casey Westin, an outspoken community member who won a seat on the school board in 2009, portrayed the Mountainville community this way:

We are struggling out here. Everybody that lives out here that works, we have to commute quite a way to go to work. A lot of people have lost their jobs or been cut back on their hours. I would say 75% of the people out here are paying a hundred percent of their healthcare.

In contrast to the economic distress described by Westin, teachers in Mountainville had maintained full healthcare benefits and income security through their previous contract. In 2006, just one year into contract negotiations, the average teacher salary in Mountainville was $51,851 with an average of 17.5 years of service, and 50% have at least a master’s degree.

Liz Hopkins, a Mountainville teacher and alumna, illustrates the perceived differences in socioeconomic status between the Mountainville teachers and the majority of the community:

So many people are blue collar workers and then they see a teacher driving a BMW, Lexus. Oh, they only work 180 days, they can drive a BMW? I work, you know, 50 hours a week. They are comparing apples to oranges instead of apples to apples. If we lived in a big city, I don't think . . . that would be an issue . . . I think in a city there are so

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12 A table of participants and major actors, as well as their positions, can be found at the end of Chapter 3.
13 These statistics were provided by the regional PSEA negotiator for the district.
many different kinds of workers. There's doctors. How many doctors do we have living around here? How many lawyers do we [have]? They are not a majority that is for sure.

The school board rarely raises taxes in Mountainville; in fact, winning candidates typically run on a platform of “no new taxes.” This resistance to increasing levies makes crafting budgets a challenge, but as PSEA representatives view the problem of revenue generation, the issue in Mountainville is as much structural as a lack of political will. Because Mountainville is both “land poor” and “income poor,” they explained, the district receives 70% of its funding from the state, in addition to subsidies it receives from the federal government. Mountainville receives the highest level of state subsidy in its county; therefore, Mountainville’s residents are responsible for the lowest percentage of property taxes in the county—less than 30% of the cost of running the school district.

Though the percentage that Mountainville’s community members contribute is relatively low, PSEA representatives added that the high level of state subsidy the district receives tends to correlate with low community education levels and a lack of industry that leaves the Mountainville community unable to finance their share of school district costs. As one representative explained,

They don't have a lot of industries right in the district, if they are getting 70% of their budgets subsidized it is a poor area, so people are probably lower education, low paying jobs, unemployment, poverty. All the issues that come with that rest in that school district, so they do these large tax increases every couple of years, and that gets people angry, stirs the nest, these candidates come out their ax to grind is they’re never going to raise taxes, teachers are overcompensated, and they get elected.
Former board member Kyle Klein discussed the finance problem faced by the district succinctly.

“We are not that wealthy. We don't have a business; we don't have a tax base . . . Money that comes from the state and taxes. That is our school district.”

**Perceived Purpose and Value of Education: Competing Views within Mountainville**

Competing views on the purpose and of value of education pervade the Mountainville district. This difference largely stems from the economic distress in the community as little industry has arisen to replace an agricultural and mining sector in decline for over fifty years. This has resulted in few opportunities for the district’s graduates and the best and brightest have migrated to other communities. As youth outmigration has become a salient community issue, it has promoted divergent perceptions on the role of the district to promote or combat this phenomenon. Should the local school, with advanced placement classes and dual enrollment programs, be a vehicle to propel rural youth into cosmopolitan success and exacerbate outmigration or simply serve as a hub of social engagement? And finally, the most visible display of the local economic disparity is also the most personal and inflammatory: the socioeconomic differences existing between Mountainville’s educators and the majority of the community in which they work (and in over 50% of cases live). It is a gap that produces conflicting perceptions regarding the role of education, the position of the school within the community, and the relative privilege afforded Mountainville’s teachers. Community members see teachers flaunting wealth at the expense of overburdened taxpayers and teachers see uneducated locals who do not understand or value the promise of education.

The economic distress faced by many Mountainville residents, according to several respondents, creates a vicious cycle in the district. There is no industry to attract an educated workforce, and with few promising employment opportunities, youth leave the district. Those
left behind, including a large aging population, are unwilling or unable to pay increased taxes to improve their schools or to pay higher salaries for their teachers. This has led to widely varying perceptions regarding education’s role amongst local residents. One PSEA representative depicts a depressing picture of those remaining in old coal mining areas like Mountainville after years of industry displacement and youth outmigration:

[They] don't really see the value of having these great public schools as tools to making the area economically better or moving kids on to better economic things in life. These areas are economically depressed areas; education is not a high priority, but anti-government, anti-tax is out there in these areas . . . So writing that big [property tax] check out to your municipality, your local government and the school districts really makes people angry.

The teachers of Mountainville tend to view youth outmigration from Mountainville as largely a product of educated individuals with few prospects for local careers leaving in pursuit of social and economic advance.14 Alex Powell, a young teacher and Mountainville alumnus, describes how this brain drain affects community-school relations.

[Community members] just sort of see [education] as, I just have to go through it because the state makes me, it is not really worthwhile, it never got me anything. I mean, we have had school board members who have already said why do we need class X Y or Z because Mountainville doesn't produce any graduates that do anything anyway . . . The biggest issue affecting the community is that I think it is that the good people who we have educated here aren't here anymore. They leave. And the people who are left behind don't see a value in education, and that creates apathy, you know . . . I don't think they

14 See Corbett’s (2007) study of a Nova Scotian school district and community for a similar perception by educators of youth outmigration.
care one way or another what actually goes on here unless it comes down to, are my taxes going to go up.

Many teachers and administrators, as well as some school board members shared Powell’s perception of community members and the lack of value they place on education, including Principal Royal.

As you become more educated . . . I think that you value school differently than people that are just trying to survive day to day. That don't have, that are working bare minimum jobs that are working at minimum wages. I think that you don't value school as much, and then it becomes something that you ‘have to's’, those have-to things like following the speed limits, you have to go to school.

For board member Klein, this community sentiment was confirmed through conversations with members of the board majority who wanted to cut Advanced Placement classes from the curriculum. “A basic education, get rid of everything, just do a basic education,” he was told. Klein lamented that when the board cut those advanced courses, no community members or parents complained.

Board member George Carver, who served as board president at the start of contract negotiations, is one of the majority members who would like the school district to offer a more basic education.

. . . [O]ur administration has the opinion that every child should more or less be educated to the level of college participation once they leave that school. And they really drive the curriculum choices to meet that need. And I don't believe that the public necessarily expects every child leaving there to be prepared for college, but they want them prepared for life . . . I do feel that with the community, the community in a whole [sic] wants a
well educated student when they leave the district. But I don't think that the envisionment [sic] of what that education looks like is the same as it is with the faculty and administration.

Carver’s views lie in stark contrast to those of Superintendent Waters, who resides in a wealthier district closer to the county’s urban center. She feels that the “goal [of Mountainville School District] should be to train everyone to be college ready.” Carver also expressed frustration that the district is forced to teach skills beyond the basics in order to comply with the state’s standardized testing initiative under NCLB. “I really believe that this area is still very much into the realm of making sure that the basics are instilled and that they are recite-able [sic], not to add three double digits that they need a calculator [sic].”

Carver’s parting remarks on the curricula illustrate his perception that the community is more interested in maintaining an entertaining athletics program than a superior academic program.

I know that a lot of people view the community as not being as educationally minded because of our sports and the way that we seem to coddle those programs. But the fact of the matter is, what else is there for them to do? . . . I think the ability for people to be able to come out for a basketball game and watch that happen, or people to come out to a football game, or baseball game, or whatever, affords them an opportunity for them to be a community. Otherwise we are just people. So, I understand why they feel the need to maintain a good sports program the way that they do, and I don't know that it is always fair that they are viewed that that is all that they care about. I feel it is because they feel they have more possibility of interacting with that then they do the education system. He attributes the lack of involvement with the district’s education system to a limited
understanding or background knowledge that allows or encourages participation in educational
decision-making. Superintendent Waters was in no way content with such parochial, anti-
education caricatures of the district and wanted Mountainville to be academically competitive
with urban districts in the same county. She did concede, however, that reaching such a goal
would be a challenge.

As evidenced by the opinions of Carver and Waters, a real disconnect exists between
some Mountainville educators and community members. The purpose of education for the
district’s teachers and administrators is to prepare students for college by offering rigorous
course electives towards these ends. This can be contrasted with board majority members who
are confident that they represent a dominant community sentiment to instill the basics and
prepare students for life not college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board Majority Coalition</th>
<th>Union Coalition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprised of board majority, vocal community members who won seats on the board in 2009, majority of politically active</td>
<td>Loosely comprised of teachers, board minority (who wanted settlement), small number of politically active community members</td>
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<tr>
<td>community members</td>
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<td>Self-identified as</td>
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<td>• Overtaxed</td>
<td>• Valued education</td>
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<td>• Hard workers/Retired</td>
<td>• Part of a professional class</td>
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<td>• Did not see returns on educational investments</td>
<td>• Wanted students to be prepared for College</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Wanted students to be prepared for Life</td>
<td>• Education was key out of Mountainville, which offered no employment opportunity, rural, “backwards”</td>
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Table 3.1. Competing values in Mountainville. This figure summarizes the competing values held by members of the two major political coalitions in Mountainville.
Formal Negotiations Begin for the Mountainville Teacher Contract

On August 31, 2005, the employee contract between the Mountainville School District and the Mountainville Area Education Association (MAEA) expired. This event, in and of itself, was quite ordinary in the Mountainville School District. Average teacher contracts last about five years, and negotiations for the subsequent contract typically begin several months prior to the current contract’s expiration, with the hope of a seamless transition between one contract and the next. The teachers union and school district have not had amicable contract negotiations in recent decades, and there were several times since the 1980s when teachers worked under the terms of an expired contract while contract details were negotiated. However, this was the first time in the district’s 50-year history that the teachers union went on strike. It was a labor dispute that would come to embroil the Mountainville School District and its community. In order to fully understand this conflict, it is necessary to start at its origin—the expiration of the MAEA contract in 2005.

A previous labor contract expired in 2005, but as was custom, teachers continued working under the terms of the old contract while the union and school board negotiated the terms of a new working agreement. Negotiating on behalf of the teachers were Edward Clarke, Union President, union leaders from the elementary and middle/high school levels, and the regional PSEA representation. Those who engaged in formal negotiations for the Mountainville School District included George Carver, Board President for the first year of negotiations, and other board members like veteran Maxwell Stone. Superintendent Mary Waters sat in on the process as did Frank Miller, the Board Solicitor, to offer legal counsel to the district representatives. Negotiations were held in a formal negotiations space. This is a space in which negotiating teams, with the assistance of experts including the superintendent, solicitor, and
business manager, come together through formal negotiations procedures in an attempt to reach a compromise that is agreeable to both parties. The negotiations remained a rather closed and innocuous affair as the local media largely ignored the process and both sides steadily worked through their numerous contractual issues. During this initial phase, Clarke and Carver met one-on-one in a formal capacity to iron out sticking points and move the process forward, as had been tradition at Mountainville.

**A Break Down in the Formal Negotiations Space**

*The failed handshake agreement.* In November 2005, Clarke and Carver came to a tentative agreement on the contract, an event to which most involved referred to as the “handshake agreement.” This tentative agreement fell apart, however, when the respective presidents took the agreed-upon offer back to their negotiating teams. Carver had a much different recollection of the so-called “handshake agreement,” and instead he recalled a much wider gulf between Clarke and him in the eve of returning to their respective constituents:

> Let me tell you right now. There would be no handshake between me and Mr. Clarke as the fact is that he and I had sat down at one point over [at] his house and reviewed some things, and we both agreed that we would take the issues that we thought could possibly be agreed upon back to each side, and when they went back to each side, they didn't have the support.

But members of the union’s negotiating team and board minority share a different story. For them, there had most definitely been a tentative agreement between Clarke and Carver, and its breakdown was a pivotal moment in the collective bargaining process. It signaled that Carver was incapable of garnering the support needed from his allies on the school board to approve a negotiated settlement. Barry Haverfield, a minority board member, describes the mutual distrust
between the negotiations leaders that ensued:

Carver . . . was board president at the time, and he had what he referred to and Edward Clarke who was the union president referred to as a handshake agreement. And, Carver, I think, was caught off guard that he had one or two allies on the board who refused to vote for this deal, and left him hanging more or less, and Clarke called him a liar, and Carver was, “No, you are the liar. This is what you said you would do, and you didn’t come through for me.” So there was a lot of animosity there between the two presidents, and that is when things started getting nasty, I think.

This response indicates that very early in the negotiation process—just three months after the contract expired—cracks appeared in the formal negotiations space. The handshake agreement was essentially a *Gemeinschaft*-like social contract, and it failed, sparking feelings of betrayal and mistrust. This mistrust, which appeared in November 2005, was exacerbated later that same school year by a breach of confidentiality.

**Betrayal of trust: Leaked negotiations and unfair labor charges.** Bill Jackson, a member of the school board negotiating team who was involved with a local property tax abolishment group, breached negotiations rules and released details of closed-session bargaining to the public. According to Superintendent Waters, Jackson took any paperwork to which he had access, and faxed it to the local media. As she explained, “That really sent animosity to the next level.” Haverfield described the act as a “huge betrayal of trust between the two sides” because both negotiating teams had agreed to confidentiality of formal negotiations.

This mistrust was further aggravated by the school board’s vote to allow Jackson to remain on the negotiating team in March 2006. In response, the teachers union filed an unfair labor practices suit in April against the district in response to Jackson’s actions. Aware of the
precarious legal situation, the board voted Jackson off the negotiating team in a 7-1 vote (Jackson was absent from the meeting), but remaining defiant in their support of transparency, resolved to make public any tentative agreements reached with the teachers union for “public comment and recommendations” ten days prior to voting on the contract (Guydish, Aug. 25, 2006, p. 1A). This action brought a second unfair labor practices suit.

In August, 2006, both parties met at the county courthouse where the union aired its multiple unfair labor practices suits against the district. During the proceedings, Kathleen Reinhart, lead negotiator and initial PSEA regional representative for the union, contended that the school board’s resolution at the April meeting “blew the [negotiations] process apart . . . It broke trust between us” (Guydish, Aug. 25, 2006). The judge ruled in favor of the board’s resolution, granting them permission to publicly post future tentative agreements for public comment before voting.

**Fact-finder’s report: Compromise rejected.** Within weeks of the court hearing, the two sides agreed to the use of a fact-finder. Both sides submitted proposals, and by October 2006, the fact-finder’s report was issued. It was rejected by both sides. It recommended salary increases higher than 2%, the figure proposed by the school board, but lower than the union’s offer of 4%. The report also suggested a co-pay for the teachers, which would start at 2% of health insurance premiums and increase to 5% over the life of the contract. The fact-finder had offered a middle course, but neither side appeared willing to move even a step closer to their adversaries.

The distrust stemming from the failed handshake agreement and the public release of confidential information compounded a general mistrust that already existed in the union ranks. Union members confessed they did not know who they could trust on the school board, in part
because they were uncertain as to who the real power brokers were. In fact, it seems there was confusion all around as to who was really leading the bargaining process.

**Power Brokers within the Formal Negotiations Space**

**School board power brokers.** Early in negotiations, the two local presidents—union and school board—engaged in one-on-one talks. Union members assumed that these presidents, by virtue of their elected leadership positions, were the major power brokers in the formal negotiations space. When the handshake agreement collapsed, however, so did this assumption. As union member Ronald Cole explained,

> [Carver] and Clarke had a handshake agreement way back, when this thing first started, and [Carver] took it back to his team and it was shot down. And then we found out that he didn't have any power . . .

Interviewer: So who had the power on that team?

Response: My opinion?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Response: Maxwell Stone. He controlled everything. Right after that, Carver was the president of the board, right after that he was no longer the president of the board. Chet Long was president. Right after that.

Interviewer: Right after this happened?

Response: The handshake agreement was in November, and it was right after that.

Interviewer: How did that affect things?

Response: It just set us back big time because we did not know who to trust, as far as the board went, we did not know who to trust. Actually, we did not trust anybody.
Maxwell Stone is a retired government employee and a veteran of the school board. Stone was regularly identified by union members and board minority members as the real power broker on the board—the “big fish.” The superintendent complained that Stone seemingly held enough power that he could cut budget items line by line without consulting anyone, including her and the business manager. Union officer Gabe Sawyer witnessed how Stone wielded power at numerous school board meetings:

[Stone] is the guy at the meetings who yells and screams . . . And for some reason, the other board members seem so intimidated by him, he shouts them down; they don't question it. They don't, I don't know why he has that power over them, but he really calls the shots in some ways.

Sawyer recounted an incident towards the end of negotiations when both sides were forced to bargain at the county courthouse, during which Carver and the union leadership started discussing stalemate issues on which they thought compromise was possible. According to Sawyer, Carver was shouted down by Stone and board member Tom Morrison, and the compromise fell apart.

PSEA representatives, unlike most local respondents who viewed him as relatively weak, saw Carver as a skilled negotiator, who successfully gained more and more concessions from the local union.

So what happened was the local president would deal with Carver, and they would reach an agreement, so then the agreement would fall apart and Carver would make him jump though one more hoop and they would have an agreement. The agreement would fall apart and they would have to jump through one more hoop, and do one more thing.

Sawyer described Carver as a “sensible guy” who seemed to really be negotiating the “numbers”
as opposed to bargaining from an emotional or “vindictive” stance like he believed was the case for other members of the board majority, particularly Stone and Morrison.

While Carver may not have possessed the power of Maxwell Stone, he held more sway than his successor, Chet Long. Haverfield described Long as “strong-armed by Stone,” and recounted Long’s editorials to local newspapers in which he praised Stone for his service to the community. According to Haverfield, Long needs to be connected to Stone because Stone is such a powerful figure on the board.

Stone is really strong. Stone had a lot of, when we first got, when Chet [Long] and I first got on, Stone wielded a lot of power on the board. He had George Carver in his corner, he had [former member Kyle Bucci] in his corner. In terms of number of votes, those are the two strongest people on the board. So to have those two people say, we need Maxwell Stone on this board, it gave Stone a lot of power. And Chet likes to be in power so he needs to keep Stone.

And Sawyer believed that outgoing president Carver even held a lot of power over Long. “We felt if you got to Carver, you probably got to Long, because I think he owns Long.”

Although Long is popular in the community, he seemed either unwilling or unable to expend his political capital to take the lead on contentious issues and remained content to follow the lead of those that may have been less politically popular but savvy on the board (i.e. Stone) or intellectually superior (i.e. Carver). Right after Long’s election as president, initiated and supported by members of the board minority, another contract offer came up for vote. Andy Walker, a minority member, explained that the motion to settle was tied and required a tie-breaker vote from Long.

So it came down to Long. And Long said, “Well I guess it comes down to me, I have got
to make the vote.” This is after, in December after we got him elected president. In January, when they get down and took that vote, he said, “Well I have been with these other people for a longer period of time, so I am going to vote with them” . . . I was furious. I said, “How could you do that? We just got you elected. You wanted to be president; we just got you elected and voted you to be board president, and then you turned and stuck us in the back.” “Well, I gotta do what I gotta do,” [he said] and that is exactly what he has been doing.

Sawyer concluded that not only did Long not have much influence on fellow school board members, but he was keenly aware of maintaining his popularity in the community. Sawyer states, “He is very weak. He is very concerned with public pressure. Sometimes I think Long could do the right thing, but he is afraid to.” Both the union and board minority viewed Long as chiefly a politician who gains his power through community popularity. Union member Cole remarked, “I think Chet Long has a lot of power in our town, I tell you that much. Lots of power.” Sally Whitehall, a veteran teacher described Long this way: “I think he thinks he is a big fish in a small pond. Because he is out in the public, and people know him, think he is a nice guy or whatever, they are going to be led like sheep, and he is loving it, and he is using it.”

Most respondents used the latest school board election as evidence of Long’s power through popularity. When a slate of write-in candidates joined Long’s ticket at the last minute, they easily won seats on the school board, and he beat the standing record for most votes ever won by a school board candidate in the district. Andy Walker, a retired Mountainville administrator who joined the board alongside Long, described the source and power of Long’s popularity.

[The newest board members] ran on the heel of Chet Long who a lot of people know, and
they won. I had a new board member say to me, or I was told, sorry, I misspoke. He told a friend of mine that the reason he ran, he got elected, because he knew if he ran with Chet Long he would get elected . . . [Chet] does a lot of taxes . . . he has a lot of clients. Plays basketball, did play basketball. A lot of people know Chet. Are influenced by Chet.

As Joe Sampson, high school principal explained,

He is one of those guys [who] had three kids that graduated from this district, has lived here his whole life, is well known in the community, has a tax business where a lot of people in the community go to, drives bus. Lot of parents that he drives bus for know him. So he is just well known and he has that influence.

Former board member Haverfield refers to Long as “the consummate politician. He sticks his finger in the air to see which way the breeze is blowing before making any [policy] decision.”

The power make-up of the board is complex and not necessarily connected to title or position. Though Carver was initially elected board president, he did not possess enough power to build a coalition to support an agreement. Regardless if there had been a “handshake agreement” or an agreement to discuss possible compromise points with allies, Carver could not forge a coalition behind what seemed to be a genuine hope for a negotiated settlement. Instead, Stone was perceived to hold the real power on the board. He tended to dictate board direction regardless of the person in the president’s chair. The dynamics between Stone and Long were especially useful to illuminate how power was expressed in different ways on the school board. Stone appeared to be the most influential member of the board in terms of building coalitions and dominating debates, whereas Long was meek in the boardroom but a popular force in the community. Together, they made a powerful couple, one wielding power on the board out of the
public eye, and the other following dutifully while gaining community support for their common goals.

**Power brokers in the teachers union.** There may have been confusion as to who held the power on the school board, but for the union, the leadership of Edward Clarke was unambiguous. Yet even though his union presidency and influence persisted through negotiations, members recall that union meetings were places of heated debate and dissent. As Sawyer pointed out,

> We did talk everything out. We fought with each other; I think the public would be surprised if they saw how much we argued with each other over things. Everything that was said was discussed. It was beaten against the wall. Our meetings would be four or five hours long. And we just, we would be emotionally spent when it was finished. We fought hard over healthcare, we fought hard over salary. We argued over where the money should be put. How much we should pay. We argued with each other a lot. And they were very stressful. They were very tense. You really felt the weight of the Association on your shoulders. After every failed agreement I felt like we failed the teachers, and it was hard.

While union members expressed ample respect for Clarke, both the regional PSEA representatives and even some union leaders felt his power was no match for that of the school board majority. Sawyer stated,

> The union president during negotiations Edward [Clarke], he is a hardball guy, and he is not going to, he is not willing to be flexible, and I think when he dug in . . . he did so for the right reasons—I understand why he did it—but when he dug in, the board was not intimidated. They just said if you are going to dig in we are going to dig in. So I think if
we came in and gave off an attitude that this is what we expect to get, and weren't willing to back down . . . And the only thing I will say in our defense is the more we gave, the more they wanted.

This sentiment was echoed by the regional PSEA representatives who claimed that the problem was compounded by the fact that Kathleen Reinhart, the early PSEA negotiator for the local union, did not possess the experience and knowledge necessary to successfully support Clarke in bargaining with the school board. Regional PSEA representatives describe Reinhart, who served in the capacity of PSEA negotiator until 2008, as “inexperienced” and “a very weak negotiator.”

“Her skill level [was] very limited. She came across that way with the board, and I think that the board smelled blood in the water, and that changed the dynamics in negotiations.” Stone described her as nothing more than “counter-productive” to the formal bargaining process.

Not only was Reinhart inexperienced, according to the regional union representatives, Clarke did not have confidence in her ability to successfully negotiate on the union’s behalf either. Union members, in general, place some blame on their regional PSEA representation for failed negotiations, including PSEA’s failure to provide the local union with a lawyer who could negotiate opposite the school board solicitor, and their erroneous advice to the local union about strategies to use to pressure the board to make concessions. Reinhart made crucial mistakes at the beginning of the process. One of these early major mistakes included a negotiating session before which she was given a bottom line by the local union, but during which she went below union’s set bottom line. Because of this and other mistakes made by Clarke and Reinhart, the regional PSEA representatives argued, the union was continually forced to make concessions to the school board. “The Association continuously bargained from a position of weakness and they kept going down and down and down.”
Experts in the formal negotiations space. Educational and other experts were also important to the formal negotiations space. These actors are labeled as experts because of their knowledge in a particular area related to negotiations, such as education, finance, and law. In Mountainville the “experts” that were integral players in the formal negotiations included the mediator, superintendent, business manager, and board solicitor. Respondents from both formal negotiations parties harbor mistrust and blame towards all of these specialists.

PSEA representatives call the state mediator, who was assigned to the district through Act 88 procedures, a “wet napkin,” who was “marking time to retirement.” As one of them explained, “Not only does a mediator have to try and be neutral, but a good mediator will take the role of both sides, leaning on them pretty hard. This is a mediator who basically sat back and didn't do anything, but just watched the process.”

Neither side trusted the board solicitor. In a letter to the editor in the Daily Delivery, Barbara Calwell, a member of the union negotiations team, wrote,

Because the school board's law firm is from outside the area, the lawyer who represents the board in contract negotiations has no ties whatsoever to the Mountainville community. Therefore, he has no reason to care about how the stalled contract negotiations have disrupted the lives of students and their families, and he has no reason to care that the negotiations have pitted the community against the teachers. (Nov. 28, 2008)

Members of both negotiations parties blamed the solicitor for negatively influencing the bargaining process by providing misinformation about the district’s financial state. For example, during the final stages of negotiations, the false information he provided to several members of the board resulted in yet another failed tentative agreement because the board was negotiating
with funds the district simply did not have. As Sally Whitehall put it, “How can you negotiate in good faith when you don’t know that you don’t have money?”

Board minority members and union leaders were also angered by what they consider to be a conscious mismanagement of finances by the business manager, who is an accountant for an outside firm contracted by the district. Board member Klein explained that the business manager advised the board not to raise taxes during the entire collective bargaining process because, the business manager argued, the teachers union would see available funds, and try to claim them to increase their salaries. Union leader Sawyer agreed with Klein’s assessment of the business manager.

I blame [the district’s] business manager . . . Every district he is in seems to have trouble. He doesn't budget for teachers' salaries, so he teaches boards kind of not to accurately plan your budget because he doesn't account for any raises, or even attritional savings. He never took that stuff into account . . . I don’t know if it is just stupidity, or just a conscious, if you want to have lower salaries, this is how you do it.

While these experts created mistrust and damaged the formal negotiations space, responses to their actions were incomparable to the intense emotional reactions members of both negotiating bodies had towards the superintendent. Mary Waters became superintendent at Mountainville prior to the start of negotiations. The school board renewed her contract at the end of the 2007-2008 school year, but both minority and majority members were ready for her to leave the district at the conclusion of her second three-year term.\(^15\) Waters argued that she did not take sides in the formal negotiations space.

I tried to take a very neutral position. I would be at the negotiations. I was there, for

\(^{15}\) Vidich and Bensman’s (1968) classic study, \textit{Small Town in Mass Society}, reflects a similar struggle and fate for the district leader.
everything but the courthouse, forced negotiations, and would try to promote and mostly
would try to take notes on and then offer suggestions . . .

Building principals, union leaders, and teachers contend that Waters, in fact, did side with the
board, which created hostility between teachers and administrators during the negotiations
process. Jack Thompson, a veteran teacher and former administrator charged that Waters
overstepped her bounds in formal negotiations.

I think she was actively involved in the negotiations and she should not have been. I
don't think she should have been. . . I think she should have been independent. She
should have answered board questions if they had questions. About finances or about
teaching staff or about classroom load or classroom size, stuff like that. But she should
never have been involved.

Sawyer was blunter in his opinion of the superintendent’s role.

She has never helped. She has never stayed in the middle. She has always impeded
negotiations . . . She has always made comments to teachers, why won't you pay more for
healthcare? Would it really be bad if you took this salary? She has never stayed in the
middle.

Waters was also distrusted by the school board. Stone described several instances during
formal negotiations in which he suspected that she and the solicitor were engaged in secret
discussions about negotiations. Haverfield was more compassionate, describing her as “stuck” in
a tenuous middle.

She had board members confront her in meetings, tell us whose side you are on . . . in
executive session . . . whose side are you on, are you here for the union, or are you here
for us? And then I had union members tell me, we don't care what she has to say, she is a
de facto, she is a tool for the board. So here she is in this position. She has a board that
doesn't trust her because she is too close to the union; she has a union that doesn't trust
her because she is too close to the board. And she got stuck. And she is still there. She
told me that she is afraid to go into her buildings, because her people don't like her, and
she has had board members tell her, once her contract is up she is gone because they don't
want her.

Klein argued that she could have avoided such a situation and “would have been best served to
stay out of it.” Regional PSEA leaders agreed with this sentiment, arguing that when
superintendents get involved, they try to straddle the fence to avoid conflict. “Basically what you
wind up doing in blunt terms is pissing off both sides, because both sides think you are working
for the other side, so for superintendents it is best for them just to steer clear of the process.”

**Cracks in formal negotiations.** The formal negotiations space was comprised of many
actors who contributed to its weakness, deterioration, and eventual collapse. Leaked negotiations
by board member Jackson, compounded the early failed handshake agreement between the union
and school board presidents, creating a tone of mistrust in the first year of formal negotiations.
Secondly, uncertainty regarding power differentials on the school board contributed to mistrust
by the union, whose negotiators were unsure who was powerful enough to direct school board
decisions and with whom they should actually bargain. Third, union leadership, because of
inexperience, bargained from a position of weakness from the start of negotiations, creating an
uneven playing field and an imbalance of power between the negotiating parties. Fourth, the
presence of weak and distrusted experts in the formal negotiations space added to its demise.
Distrusted and disliked by both parties and holding little power, these experts were unable to
direct two polarized sides towards middle ground.
Stalemate Issues

As argued in the previous section, there were many structural issues that contributed to the failed negotiations. However, there were also deep philosophical and policy differences that separated the union and the school board. There were two issues that proved the most intractable: salary and healthcare. Teachers did not contribute any portion of their health insurance costs prior to this contract negotiation. However, the school board was adamant that teachers contribute a percentage of healthcare costs in the new contract. In addition, the teachers union and school board majority were unable to agree on several salary issues including salary step increases and pay increases related to teachers’ education levels.

The Conflict Escalates: Union-Initiated Labor Actions and Increased Perceptions of Teacher Entitlement

Work-to-Rule. In February, 2007, after 18 months of failed negotiations, the teachers initiated the first of several progressively controversial labor actions—Work-to-Rule. Under Work-to-Rule conditions, teachers worked only within their contractual limits. That translated to teachers’ refusal to monitor students in the morning before the first bell and all teachers leaving together at the contractual end of the day. It also meant that teachers would no longer advise extracurricular activities, including clubs, class organizations, and the senior prom, and stopped chaperoning field trips that extended beyond the contracted school day. The impetus for initiating Work-to-Rule, according to union members and administrators, was to put pressure on the school board to make some compromises. The union leaders thought that engaging in Work-to-Rule would show the community all the work they did for students outside their contract—time spent working without compensation. They assumed that this act would create community
support for them and pressure the school board to settle. Instead, this act created a firestorm of media attention and brought the foundering negotiations into the spotlight, particularly when teachers refused to participate in Meet-the-Teachers Night. In short, the implementation of Work-to-Rule backfired, spawning community hostility toward the teachers and producing greater support for the school board to remain steadfast in its contractual demands.

As Superintendent Waters explained,

It created a real, who do they think they are kind of an attitude . . . When they did work to rule and [the community] saw advisors go away from positions, and they saw extra-curriculars being affected, and it was very clear. The public took a stance and we saw more people coming to board meetings because it affected them.

Joe Sampson aptly illustrated the effect of Work-to-Rule on multiple constituencies.

When the Work-to-Rule first happened and we had a big change with the busing, that was huge. That was huge for elementary, mostly for elementary because now you are talking childcare issues. Parents who usually go to work at five after seven, ten after seven have to find somebody for another half hour, elementary ten after eight. Somebody to watch their kids an extra half hour, they can't drop them off at the school at twenty after and go on their way. It backfired to me, because as a teacher when Work-to-Rule first happened, we were really killing ourselves. As a coach, we leave right at two thirty, to go to practice or whatever it is you are going to, so the only time you have to make copies or grade tests is sometimes in that morning slot, when you can show up at seven. You know? And that message was clear the day Work-to-Rule ended, and there were 35 people in the building at seven o'clock. That is a majority. Most of our teachers are here seven or shortly thereafter. So I don't think that worked as well as, the part in this office
as work to rule was going on was just the frustration from the kids. Because the voice of the parents when the kids went home really started to be more vocal. Here we are, now these teachers, they want more money, but they do less things, as a teacher you would consider that to be above and beyond your duties when you are volunteering to chaperone a dance, those are things that teachers have traditionally done forever. So that is one of those things you do it, even though you are not getting compensated for it, you are expected to do it. So when the parents became frustrated with that the kids started to become frustrated with that, it changed the atmosphere of the building.

Not only did the atmosphere in the building change, school board meetings became increasingly heated. Attendance shot up, from the usual five attendees to standing-room-only events. Sally Whitehall recounted one meeting, in particular, that centered on Work-to-Rule.

Somebody sent a child up to the microphone at a public meeting, it was a big heated public meeting, looks at the school board and says to the microphone, “Why won't our teachers take us on field trips?” And a board member I don't remember I can't think of which one it was said, “turn around and repeat that to those people right there. Those are your teachers.” At which point the superintendent came rushing off the stage to save the child from becoming—the whole thing was just ludicrous.

Spectacles were made at school board meetings, and heated opinion pieces appeared in the local newspapers. The more animosity that developed between the teachers and community and the more media attention that was given to the negotiations, the more tenuous the formal negotiations space became. As the board perceived increased community support for its steadfastness, they became less willing to participate in negotiations in this space—it was
becoming unnecessary for the board to negotiate because it sensed no community pressure to settle.

**A Change in Negotiators and Historic Work Stoppages**

Frustrated by the board’s refusal to make concessions even after months of Work-to-Rule, the Mountainville teachers staged a two-day strike in June 2007, the first in the district’s history. In January 2008, PSEA negotiator Galen Taylor replaced Kathleen Reinhart. A more experienced negotiator than Reinhart, Taylor’s presence changed the dynamics of the negotiations even further. Union members agree that Taylor was much a more effective negotiator than Reinhart. Board member Haverfield told me that when Taylor came on board, animosity only increased.

I think a lot of people on the board saw Kathleen [Reinhart] as softer and easier to deal with (which probably meant she was easier to manipulate). When Galen [Taylor] came in, he was seen [by the board majority] as making things much more difficult. He was much more vocal in the press; he was present at board meetings; he would speak out at meetings and sometimes take a chastising tone toward the board . . . Not that the process was ever cordial, but once Galen [Taylor] came on as the negotiator, things got really nasty. While the board never walked around saying "Kathleen's great. She's easy to deal with," members—particularly Maxwell [Stone] and Tom [Morrison]—thought that he really represented the strong arm of the union.

Under Taylor’s charge, the union staged a one-day strike in March 2008. Cole explained that these strikes were initiated to “get us into the next step of the process which would be fact finding or . . . arbitration. That was the only reason we did those, was to get to that next step.” Certainly, these short strikes did move the bargaining process in the formal negotiations space
forward through state-mandated procedures. (These procedures were outlined in Act 88, a revision to the Pennsylvania School Code.) But, they were also attempts to build community support, to pressure the board into compromise.

**Public response to striking teachers.** Like Work-to-Rule actions, these short strikes did nothing to generate support for the teachers union. Instead, they further fueled public animosity toward teachers and increased support for the board’s no-compromise stance. The public response created by these strikes eventually empowered the school board to refuse to negotiate with the union in the formal negotiations space, leading to its demise. On June 8, 2007, in an interview with the *Daily Delivery*, Stone spoke of the increased community support he perceived for the board majority.

*A Mountainville school director said he believes the public wants the board to stick to its guns in its battle with the teachers union . . .*

Director Maxwell Stone said he’s received nothing but positive comments from the public about his column in which he said Mountainville teachers are already well-paid and have excellent benefits. In the same column, he also demanded that teachers pay part of their health insurance premiums. They pay nothing now.

**Negotiations Collapse**

Through numerous stalls in formal negotiations, and animosity generated by labor actions, the formal negotiations space began to deteriorate. In the beginning, the union and school board presidents bargained one-on-one, but this personal process steadily broke down. Negotiations continued to stall over two major issues—salary and healthcare—prompting the union to wage two short strikes, which led to Act 88 impasse procedures, including non-binding arbitration and the assignment of a state mediator. The two sides came together with the state
mediator to formally bargain, but reached a point at which it was counter-productive to be in the same room. This was due largely to personal animosity that had built up over the course of negotiations and personal attacks that appeared in local newspapers. Finally, they negotiated in separate rooms, with the state mediator going back and forth between the groups. Aware that little progress was occurring in negotiations, the opposing sides began devoting most of their energy to influencing public opinion. The contest for a settlement now moved squarely into the public, political realm with each side vying for public support for their respective positions. As the board perceived that public opinion was moving overwhelmingly in their direction, they felt no pressure and had little incentive to negotiate with the union. It was from this point onward that a formal negotiations space ceased to exist.

Conclusions

Chapter 3 illustrates how community context—economic distress, youth outmigration, and class differences—affected teacher contract negotiations in Mountainville through creating divergent groups with competing values and perceptions of the purpose of education. The Mountainville community perceived teachers as an entitled and privileged group at the start of negotiations. This sentiment was reflected in the make-up of the board majority. Meanwhile, Mountainville’s educators viewed the community as one that did not value education. Early in the process, then, we see divergent narratives of Mountainville starting to form.

These varied perceptions of Mountainville and the proper role and purpose of education influenced negotiations that occurred in the formal policy/negotiation arena. Negotiations leaders entered this space with an ideal Gemeinschaft orientation, as evidenced by the tradition of handshake agreements between board and union presidents. Early in the process—less than one year—we see conflict brewing, and the formal negotiation space started to break down. The
space was made more contentious, and the sides became more polarized over time. This 
polarization was exacerbated by mistrust, weak experts who were unable to move the sides 
toward a meaningful middle ground, and labor actions initiated by the teachers union. 

Chapter 4 will illustrate the dramatic collapse of the formal negotiation space, which 
ocurred as actors from the formal space engaged in power struggles in the informal arena to 
influence the outcome of negotiations. These power struggles took the form of competing 
Attempts by both sides to establish a hegemonic narrative with which they could consolidate their 
power over the opposition to direct the contract’s outcome and promote their interests.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Affiliation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bucci, Kyle</td>
<td>• Former board member (majority)</td>
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<td>• Resigned during first year early in negotiations</td>
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<td>Calwell, Barbara</td>
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<td>• Outspoken community member</td>
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<td>• Won seat on board in 2009</td>
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<td>Westin, Casey*</td>
<td>• Outspoken community member</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Won seat on board in 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whitehall, Sally*</td>
<td>• Union member</td>
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Table 3.2 Union-affiliated people and positions. This table provides a list of people and their positions in the Mountainville case. * Denotes study participants.
Chapter 4

The Mountainville Case Explained: Local Politics and the Power of Othering

Introduction

*I think the personalized attacks are what exacerbated everything. I don't think that, if it would have been stuck on dollars and cents and what is right and it would have stayed there that it would have ever gotten to the point of being ugly. Believe me, it became personal...*–Mountainville Principal

Chapter 4 explains the latter years of Mountainville conflict and focuses on the political wrangling that occurred outside the formal negotiations space. The chapter examines powerful figures in the community, and the means through which coalitions vied for the majority of community support and corresponding political power in the informal arena. The informal arena consisted of power struggles that occurred in informal community networks as well as the local press. The teachers union and board majority built opposing coalitions outside the formal arena and worked to increase their perceived power over one another.

The main focus of this chapter is on the extensive use of “othering” by both coalitions in their creation and promotion of competing narratives to consolidate political power. Through the creation of Other, the coalitions framed the debate in terms of us-versus-them and seriously undermined the ability of lead negotiators to engage in meaningful compromise. “Othering” is the process by which groups distinguish and contrast themselves from one another (Krummer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Lister, 2004). In policy debates or times of conflict, othering becomes part of a hegemonic narrative, or a linguistic and conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a), which is used “to control the identity of a group of individuals for purposes of power augmentation by an opposition group and to foster their policymaking hegemony” (O’Brien,
These narratives create derisive depictions of a particular group and serve as a guide to action for both coalitions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b; O’Brien, 2009). Once these narratives become widely accepted, it is exceptionally difficult for the othered group to reframe themselves because the narratives come to be regarded as truth (O’Brien, 2009).

Othering is determined by power structures; those with the majority of power determine the Other and use othering as justification of their actions (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Lakoff, 1996). In times of conflict, those with the majority of power cast the Other as an enemy that must be defeated and portray themselves as the community’s protector against this threat (O’Brien, 2009). Othering creates an “impassible barrier . . . between ‘us’ and ‘them’ ” (Krumer-Nevo & Banjamin, 2010, p. 696).

In the Mountainville case, the school board majority and its outspoken supporters effectively othered teachers in their creation of the Mountainville narrative, successfully excluding them from the rest of the Mountainville community. The board majority’s candidates easily won seats on the school board in the 2009 elections, consolidating the coalition’s hegemonic narrative and confirming the board’s perception that it had won the majority of community support. This imbalance of power created no motivation for the board majority to negotiate with the teachers union in the formal policy/negotiation space.

The conflict was finally, though tenuously, resolved through court-ordered bargaining initiated by the union and a realization by the Mountainville teachers that they had minimal community support and power. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the aftermath of the conflict, including school closure, personnel turnover, teacher morale, and respondents’ concerns for the future of the district and community in the wake of these damaging, competing narratives.
Political Power in the Community

Several groups comprise the Mountainville community, and each had a stake in the outcome of the contract negotiations. As the conflict progressed, these groups consolidated into two coalitions. The groups included the teachers union, school board majority, school board minority, middle class families, working class families, and retirees. By the time the contract battle became public, the school board was split 5-4, with the majority opposed to compromise with the teachers union. This majority was made up of Carver, Stone, Long, Morrison, and Jackson; the minority consisted of Klein, Haverfield, Walker, and Sandy Pearson.

The board minority was eager to settle the contract with the teachers union, but could not get the votes it needed. Compounding this issue for the minority, Haverfield, often voted with the board majority on politically controversial issues. The youngest member of the board and one of the most highly educated, Haverfield claimed he had to vote with the majority to retain some political power. Union members charge that Haverfield tended to vote with the majority because he frequented Morrison’s bar, where, they argue, back door conversations took place among the board majority and community members. Others claimed that Haverfield did not want to vote against the intimidating board veterans.

Some of the powerful players in formal negotiations from both camps also led the political campaign for community support. Stone wrote many opinion pieces in local newspapers; Walker engaged in door-to-door campaigning; Clarke held informal meetings with families who had children in the district; union member Marvin Jones maintained the union website, which disseminated information to the public directly from the union; and Long worked behind the scenes to recruit candidates for an increased board majority. But none of the previous mentioned players on the board or in the union were able to influence public opinion like
community members Casey Westin and Robert Smith, who eventually won seats on the board in 2009. Westin was able to sway public opinion through her continued verbosity at board meetings, as well as her frequent interviews and commentaries in local newspapers. Smith also participated in interviews with newspapers, but, more importantly, he engaged in public displays of condemnation against the teachers, which drew media attention and community support.

**Political Coalition-Building through Formal and Informal Networks**

All of these players, and like-minded community, union, and board members, engaged in media warfare and accessed local networks of friends and neighbors to build, and later strengthen, coalitions of support for their positions regarding the contract. Teachers union members tended to find support from middle-class parents and other professionals, while school board majority members built a coalition with working-class community members, including those with children slighted by labor actions, retirees, and families who felt overtaxed. The board minority, though not a formal political ally of the teachers union, was loosely affiliated with their coalition because of the minority’s desire for contract settlement and willingness to compromise. Hundreds of articles, editorials, commentaries, and write-in pieces were published in the four newspapers that serve various parts of the Mountainville community, many of which were geared toward building coalitions and influencing support for either the board majority or the teachers union. Public relations battles also took place over the union’s website and formal communications sent to the community from the school district and teachers union. These formal communications claimed to simply share the facts of the contract negotiations, but were clearly aimed at political ends.
Othering as a Means to Garner Support and Power

Rhetoric aimed at creating an Other flared with the first labor action. This discourse became increasingly acrimonious, full of personal attacks hurled from both sides when the teachers went on strike, and ultimately impacted the school board elections in 2009. Through the process of othering, each coalition attempted to distinguish itself from the opposition by creating caricatures of the group with competing views. As O’Brien (2009) argues, “The use of metaphors to foster a pejorative image of the target group also objectifies those who presumably belong to the group by stereotyping them and casting all members into the same worst-case condition” (p. 35). In the Mountainville case, both coalitions relied on these damaging metaphors to consolidate their political power around their competing narratives.

The school board majority coalition, comprised of board majority members and outspoken community members Westin and Smith, among other community supporters, used othering not just as a means of differentiating themselves from the union coalition; through the act of othering, they successfully socially excluded teachers union members from the rest of the Mountainville community. In public, teachers created negative constructions of the school board majority. In private circles, they also used othering as a means to distinguish themselves from the community majority, particularly in the last year of the conflict.

The School Board’s Narrative and the Successful Othering of Teachers

The board majority coalition gained power in the community through discourse that characterized teachers as (1) an entitled upper class that did not care about the community, (2) a group that entered the teaching profession because of greed as opposed to genuine care for students, (3) a militant union, and (4) a union-protected group that did not engage in real work.
The school board majority’s narrative was woven through these interconnected caricatures, which played on class differences and economic hardship faced by community members.

**Teachers are entitled.** Most of this discourse revolved around the sense of “entitlement” teachers felt towards “high pay and healthcare” despite the little amount of time they actually spent at work and the ease of their jobs. Whether the board member was a veteran or a brand new member, all board members who consistently voted or spoke out against settling the contract used the same term to characterize the union—“entitled.” Some board members said that union members felt a sense of entitlement because of their relatively high educational attainment levels; a newcomer to the board said she could not believe the sense of entitlement teachers have; Carver said teaching is an easy job with high pay, and still teachers feel “entitled;” “A teacher is teaching for 185 days at 7 ½ hours a day, but have [sic] this sense of entitlement [that] healthcare should be free.” In general, board majority members described the teachers’ union as a group who thought they were above the rest of the community, including the board members. This caricature began with the first union action and remained a constant throughout the collective bargaining conflict. In a letter to the *Hometown News* (Feb. 17, 2006, p. 13A), Jackson compared the work, pay, and benefits of teachers to the rest of the community.

Our teachers are getting one of the best plans out there. As you have seen listed in the paper, we pay the most for health care for our teachers. I know the company I work for doesn't pay for the best health care for me, and I have to pay towards that. And I know that there are so many other taxpayers in the same boat.

Our teachers get 100% health coverage for them and their families. If the husband and wife are teachers, one of them will get a reimbursement of 50% of the cost of that health coverage. Do you get reimbursed if both you and your wife work and both have medical
coverage, and one of you doesn't use their coverage?

The teachers not only get their salary, but they also get step and longevity pay, paid overtime, early retirement incentive, reimbursement for unused sick days, and the list goes on. And there is another thing, how many of you taxpayers out there get your health and welfare paid for after you retire at age 55? How many of you can retire at 55? We have to wait till we are 65 because we can’t afford the health insurance, but we the taxpayers have to pay for the teachers’ health insurance. I don't think that is fair at all.

Casey Westin, an outspoken teacher critic and future school board candidate, directed most of her assaults at the local union president, high school teacher Edward Clarke. In a letter to the editor of The Daily Times, she urged the union president to get off his “high horse.” “The only thing you are accomplishing here [through Work-to-Rule] is making the taxpayers and parents just loathe what we see as the culprit of this problem: the teachers” (Aug. 24, 2008, p. 4B).

**Teachers are greedy and selfish.** Another common construction of teachers was that they are greedy, selfish, and do not care about the children in their charge. One board member commented that teachers “used to be in it [the teaching profession] for other reasons . . . now [they’re] in it for pay.” In response to Work-to-Rule, Westin, in an interview with The Daily Times (Long, June 3, 2007, p. 10A), commented that “The teachers say they care about our kids. They don’t care. They care about that almighty dollar.” This became a mantra for community members and was substantiated with every labor action that affected the school day, field trips, and extra-curricular activities.

**Teachers are part of a militant union.** Outspoken teacher critics used a specific Work-to-Rule action as the foundation to build a construction of the teachers as a militant union. In September, 2007, teachers were scheduled to attend the Meet the Teachers night. This was not a
contractual obligation; instead, an agreement had existed between teachers and the superintendent for years, in which teachers left early the day of the event and on a subsequent in-service day. During the labor dispute, the superintendent did not allow teachers to leave early. Accordingly, teachers refused to attend the Meet the Teachers night as part of Work-to-Rule. The union contends it gave notice to the district, but the superintendent claimed this was not the case, and she did not inform parents, who came to the event expecting teachers to be present. The following editorial appeared in the *Daily Delivery*, a local newspaper, which teachers refer to as anti-union, after the event, which affirmed the construction of teachers as greedy, selfish, and a militant union.

. . . Instead of putting the needs of students and their parents first, the teachers chose instead to advance their own agenda by boycotting a venerable program intended to get everyone off to a good start in the new school year. That’s the ugly face of militant unionism in our schools; to strengthen the bargaining hand of the collective, it insists that individual teachers forsake the very instinct that attracted them to teaching in the first place. Then the union uses that collective might as a cudgel . . . (Sachetti, Sep. 5, 2007, p. 10)

Not only were teachers “entitled” and members of a union that possessed excessive power, the board majority and its supporters also portrayed them as members of an elite group, as opposed to the hard-working citizens whose salaries were significantly lower than that of the Mountainville teachers. Members of the board majority coalition used these perceived class differences to exclude the teachers from the rest of the community. It was part of a successful narrative that, through the evocation of an emotional response (see O’Brien, 2009), framed the
debate as the community versus the teachers, with the school board majority serving as the community’s protectors.

In an opinion piece written by a *Hometown News* staffer in response to Work-to-Rule, the writer contrasted the work of teachers to the rest of the Mountainville community (Fennick, Feb. 28, 2007, p. 3A).

Most parents today must work, whether they want to or not, whether they are two-income families or single-parent households.

Maybe a 20-minute delay in a morning routine won't mean that much to some parents. But, I'm sure the schedule change will hurt many mothers and fathers who will be forced to decide between seeing their children safely off to school or making it to work on time. These are the parents who, unless they have government jobs, are likely contributing hundreds of dollars a year toward the cost of their health insurance. Or, they might be self-employed and footing the entire bill or, worse yet, they might work for a company that doesn't offer any coverage.

These are the parents who don't get two-hour delays when it snows a little, or stay home, with pay, when it snows a lot.

These are the parents who probably work just so they can afford a home and its ever-increasing property taxes - the source of a chunk of every school district's income.

I believe that most people like and respect their children's teachers.

But I don't believe that most teachers understand what it's like on the other side . . . they've got to take a good, hard look at the real world, too. Health insurance is skyrocketing. Most employers are unable to provide full coverage, and most of us are happy with whatever help we can get.
In response to the first strike, two mothers of children in the district also differentiated themselves from teachers based on their work, salaries, and benefits in an interview with the *Daily Delivery* (Raftery, June 3, 2007\(^\text{16}\)).

Susie noted that teachers at Mountainville are the second-highest paid among area schools, with average annual salaries upwards of $51,000. They also pay nothing toward health insurance.

Anyone here make anything close to $51,000? She asked a handful of mothers who were working at the sidewalk sale. They all shook their heads.

I have no sympathy, Susie said. I think it’s terrible. It’s greedy.

Carley and Susie both said teachers should get raises like other working people, but they also believe the teachers should contribute to their health insurance costs.

Susie said she has a second job just to pay her medical bills. She said teachers need to join the real world.

Carley said she works in the health field and still has to pay her own insurance costs; she’s angered at teachers refusals to contribute to theirs.

Everybody does these days, she said. I don’t see where the teachers get off.

During the June strike, former students entered the fray, creating an even larger divide between the work and socioeconomic status of the rest of the community versus the teachers (Baver, June 6, 2007).

With newly close-cropped hair, Carrie Sooner, 17, a National Guard recruit, took issue with the fact that teachers have not been required to pay toward their health insurance under the expired contract.

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\(^\text{16}\) Because the *Daily Delivery* is a small newspaper, it does not maintain online archives and is not accessible through newspaper databases. *Daily Delivery* articles were obtained largely through email communications with a *Daily Delivery* reporter. Her records do not indicate page numbers for articles.
Soldiers are in Iraq fighting for our country and they have to pay, she said. Sooner held a sign that echoed her sentiments: Soldiers pay Y can’t they [sic].

It’s not right, she added.

Her mother, Tanya Sooner, said getting full benefits was especially unfair considering how high their salaries are.

The average Mountainville teacher salary this year was $51,848, according to newspaper records.

I have to pay all of my health care and I don’t make a quarter of what they do, said Sooner, who works as a clerk and baker at [the local donut shop].

**Teachers do not engage in real work.** Discourse centered on what constitutes real work was used by the board majority and their supporters to differentiate between the real work done by community members versus the union-protected job of a teacher. A member of the board minority explained that several members of the board majority are anti-union. “Pension. Sick days. Pay for basically nothing. That is what some of them say. They get a raise for just showing up.” Carver also discussed the problem of union work. “In their own world of union employment and knowing that that employment is without risk, that [sic] they don’t realize the perils that are out there in everyday life for the people who are [financially] supporting them.” This veteran board member explained the teaching profession in the following way:

A lot of people, when they look at the profession, feel that it is like being a weatherman that can’t be fired. Doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong, you are going to get your paycheck. You are guaranteed retirement, you are guaranteed your salary, and I think there are a lot of people that think they don’t have to perform to their utmost, because there is no retribution if you don’t.
It’s not just a question of the value of the work of the local teachers; it’s also a matter of the quality of their work for the board majority. As Robert Smith, the outspoken farmer who would later win a seat on the board, explained, “Me as a farmer, what I put in the ground is what I get out, and if I don't put it in the ground, I don't get it out, and these students you know all the tests isn't as good [sic] in Mountainville as they are in some other schools.”

According to the board majority, the quality of work did not matter to teachers because their jobs were protected by a powerful union at both the local and state levels. As Westin put it, “The union for the teachers thinks they are stronger than the Ford union.” Stone lamented the political power of teachers union at both the local and state levels, claiming that “many individuals in the legislature are in the pockets of the teachers union.” In general, he argued, “The power of the teachers union has to be curtailed.” Another board member commented that “[The union] has ruined this country.”

Board majority members asserted time and again that it was the union leadership’s fault that negotiations dragged on as long as they did, that younger teachers wanted to settle, but were afraid to disagree with their powerful union leaders. Board members consistently projected the image through local media outlets that accepting the union’s offers would bankrupt the district, and more importantly, that union leaders knew that their demands would bankrupt the district and did not care. The board majority consistently pushed the narrative that the teachers were a selfish, powerful, entitled group that would destroy the Mountainville district and community if the school board did not stop them.

**Teachers Union’s Attempts to Establish a Competing Narrative.**

Teachers explained that they initiated Work-to-Rule actions because they wanted the community to see how much work they put into the school outside of the actual work day. When
this move backfired, teachers engaged in their own constructions of Other in an attempt to consolidate power around their own Mountainville narrative. Union members expressed great distaste for the school board majority, and the more veteran the teacher interviewed, the more vitriolic the othering. According to union members, school board members were anti-education, “teacher haters,” “uneducated,” power mongers “looking for a soap box,” and fiscally irresponsible. A veteran teacher depicted board members as incapable of managing a school district.

What we have are people who know nothing about education, literally nothing, have never attended, some have never been in a college classroom. Some may have barely made it, because this is America where everyone can move ahead. And they are in charge of a multi-million dollar institution. If Bill Gates ran Microsoft and chose his managers using the same criteria that we use to choose school board members, there would be no more Microsoft. And I fear that in the near future there will be no more Mountainville.

One teacher told me that board members used to be “pillars of the community”; this is no longer the case. Union members expressed their concern that the school board is full of immoral individuals who regularly engage in nepotism in hiring practices, going so far as to create new administrative positions when necessary to hire a family member or friend despite a lack of district funds.

Union members also accused individual board members of being misogynists, “idiots,” a “mentally incapacitated…child molester,” a “racist . . . who is [one of] the most vindictive, personal people I have ever met,” and an alcoholic who is “inebriated at board meetings.” One union member recounted a conversation with a member of the board majority about a history
book under consideration for the high school. “The one board member’s comment was, ‘There's too many niggers in this text book’ . . . And he said, ‘These kids are never going to leave Mountainville, they don't need all this cultural diversity.’ That was his comment.” As for the two most outspoken board majority supporters, Westin and Smith, union members refer to them as the “ex-stripper” and “illiterate pig farmer.” Few, if any, of these accusations and constructions appeared in the local newspapers for the first few years of the conflict, with the teachers union electing to stay out of the media fray. This changed, however, by 2008.

The union, like the school board majority, created a narrative in which the opposition, if left unchecked, would destroy the Mountainville district and community. In the teachers union’s narrative, the union was the last check against the school board, which was full of immoral and incapable people. The community majority either dismissed this narrative by the union as false or ignored it as the board fought to freeze teacher pay and force contributions to health care, all in the name of protecting the local taxpayers. In response, union members othered the community, as well, as the battle lines became firmly drawn. These constructions were not publicized in local media, but were disseminated through informal community networks of neighbors, family, and friends. Union members and the district superintendent described the community as uneducated, lower class, lack of professionals, “rural,” “doesn’t value education,” “stuck in an older mindset,” clings “to traditional gender roles,” “backward as backward can be,” and “time and modernity has [sic] passed us by.” One veteran teacher described Mountainville proper as “low class. The gene pool is extremely shallow, practically dried up in some cases . . . Lots of need.” Teachers, time and again, expressed concern that the community does not care about the students or their educational success, nor does the community care about teachers.

Union member Littleton described the community as
. . . still kind of stuck in older mindsets than other communities that maybe have progressed a little bit more and moved on, have more industry . . . more advancement . . .

Even if it is something as simple as the women don't work. Some people stay on the farm where they have the older gender roles . . . They are the ones who [say] we should be paying. They are less accepting of people getting their education and being rewarded for their education.

Several teachers expressed frustration over the lack of parents that attend open houses or conferences, and used this as evidence of a devaluing of education and the work of teachers in the community. Jones explained,

As I understood a community when I was growing up, this there is no community here.

Interviewer:  What do you mean by that?

Response:  There is no central, the school district serves no one particular area, no one particular town, no one particular identity, and they are very, the variance of the people's education levels, economic status is, are extreme. There is just an extreme difference . . . You might find a neighborhood in Village Park, you might find a neighborhood of Grassy Fields, the Mountainville Lake Area, which of course is not Mountainville. And then there is Mountainville itself, Mountainville proper, which is if you want to call that a community is the worst representation of one, even though there are good people there. But by and large, it is as backward as can be. When I first took this job, there was a shop on the corner that sold shirts [with a] guy in a washtub saying, my month is up, time for my bath. That was my welcome to Mountainville.

The teachers union used rurality as a major mechanism of othering. In their narrative, they were
saving Mountainville’s youth from this backward, rural place. While the superintendent was not part of the teachers union coalition, she also used rurality to differentiate herself from the community.

If we play a team [from the city], hey, if the kids go and they want to represent themselves as a farm community and they do that and they are proud of that, that is okay. But there is a point where I think we need to instill some character within the students and the community that says, we live in a rural community but don't treat us like we are an uneducated, backward community. And I think those are the kinds of things that administrators who don't live in the district see that and it just takes us back again, because [the students] don't get the respect that they need, in among the general population of communities they consider them in a negative way as farmers as rednecks as and I mean, there is nothing wrong with kids working the part of a redneck kind of behavior, but when it is detrimental to your community and people do not view you as educated as they are, then that's not something the region [sic].

Like the teachers, the superintendent used rurality to other the community. In this narrative, unlike the teachers and the superintendent, the community is uneducated, poor, and backward because of its rurality. The community, unlike Mountainville’s educators, support “redneck behavior” for the community’s youth. In this narrative, the backward, redneck behaviors of Mountainville’s youth and community make the work of Mountainville’s educators difficult because they are serving a community that does not value education. And it becomes the job of these educators to save talented youth by getting them out of this rural, backward place.

Jack Thompson explained the dilemma of negotiating a contract in this working-class,

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17 See Theobald and Wood (2010) for a historical description of the stereotyping of rural places as backward spaces, from which youth should aspire to leave.
rural community context, and the hostility that grew between community members who supported the union coalition versus those who supported the board majority coalition.

This [the school district] is the biggest employer in the district, and when they publish your salaries in the paper, and it says you are making $67,000, they automatically look at that as, they are working half a year and they are making $67,000. That is the mentality of most of the people, not all of the people. Most of those people come from down in Mountainville [proper].

Thompson went on to describe the community support that he witnessed during the conflict and the frustration he felt when these community members failed to publicly support teachers.

What surprised us was that all of these good people that you would see outside and talk to us, as we were coaching and track, oh hang in there, we are behind you, wouldn't come to the board meetings. And when they did want to come to the board meeting and want to speak, they were shouted down by the other people. So it is kind of like they put up a white flag and said, okay, we tried, it is not going to go anywhere. But the attitude of the community is one of hate, would be the best way to put it.

Thompson and other teachers felt that they had succeeded in generating some community support from parents, but were upset by the lack of public support they received. Thompson refers to a “white flag” of surrender in his comments. The warfare metaphor was generated by both coalitions throughout the conflict. Its inherent us-versus-them implication illustrates the high level of polarization that resulted from the continuous process of othering through competing narratives designed to advance political positions.
The board majority coalition members were the real members of the community. They understood the economic plight of community members and were initiating steps to bring the teachers down to the level of their neighbors. It was their job to protect the community from these greedy teachers who were willing to bankrupt the district and community for their own benefit.

The teachers were educated, professional, upstanding community members who deserved fair compensation and good benefits. They worked well beyond the school day and regularly went above and beyond for the community’s students. They had earned their salaries and benefits through years of education and dedication to the profession despite a lack of support from community or board members.

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Table 4.1. Competing hegemonic narratives. This figure summarizes the competing narratives of Mountainville propagated by the opposing political coalitions.

**An Olive Branch: Extended and Rejected**

Competing narratives were propagated during the deterioration of the negotiations space. With the board majority coalition’s awareness that it had gained the majority of community support, its offers to the union became repetitions of previous offers. Several months before the total collapse of the formal negotiations space, the teachers union, for the first time in settlement talks, offered to contribute a small amount ($20-$24 per month) towards health insurance—the first time the union offered to pay anything towards healthcare. For community member Westin, these concessions were minimal at best. “If you were dying of thirst in the desert, their concessions wouldn’t have even made a drop.”

The board’s counteroffer was “regressive,” according to Clarke and late-stage PSEA negotiator Taylor. In a written statement to the Daily Delivery, Clarke argued,

We have extended the olive branch to the school board and built a bridge for a contract compromise, but they continue to be regressive with their counter proposals. It’s almost three years now that we’ve been working without a contract and our association has made
repeated efforts to negotiate a fair agreement for all stakeholders—teachers and taxpayers alike . . . I understand the concerns of the taxpayers since we’re also taxpayers living in the district, but our proposal is reasonable and affordable to the district. It would not require a tax increase and it would help our teachers keep up with the cost of living.

(March 29, 2008)

His statement went on to remind community members that in addition to receiving no pay increases since 2005, teachers also accepted a two-year salary freeze under the terms of the previous contract. It is important to be cognizant that in addition to describing the conflict from the union perspective, Clarke also attempted in this piece to remind community members that the teachers were members of the community, as well.

**The Long Strike**

Once the board majority coalition realized that it had accrued the majority of community support and corresponding power over the outcome of contract, it no longer had any incentive to engage in bargaining in the formal negotiations space because it felt no pressure to settle. In November 2008, the teachers responded by staging a 17-day strike. The much weaker union coalition needed community support, to force the board to negotiate. Instead, this act led to the intensification of discourse, further increased support for the board majority coalition, and confirmed constructions of other for members of both coalitions.

There was hope among members that the union’s 17-day strike could finally rally community support behind the teachers and advance their bargaining position. Union member Claire Littleton described her perspective of the impetus for the work stoppage:

We really wanted to draw attention to it so that the community would put pressure on the board and say enough is enough. And then the board in turn would be more willing to
meet with us, because at that point, they were just cancelling meetings, we couldn't even get to sit down with them sometimes more than once a month, and it really was dragging on.

**A Step Backwards**

But it became clear that these procedures did not further negotiations, according to Superintendent Waters. It was, in fact, more polarizing and drove the bargaining teams even farther away from settlement. As board member Walker explained,

> I understand [the] frustration, at least I think I do, the frustration of the teachers: the strike has been going on, the contract negotiations have been going on and on and on, and we have got to do something to get the attention of the public. And I think they felt, the teachers felt that if they by going on strike, they would get the public to back behind them to put pressure on the board members to pass this, get this contract settled. And I think it worked just the opposite.

In interviews with the *Daily Delivery*, PSEA negotiator Taylor and board member Stone speculated about the impact of the strike on the battle for community support just two days before it started.

> Both Taylor and Stone suspect hardship caused by the strike could encourage some parents to support the teachers, [commented the reporter].

> The strike brings everything to a head. People are made aware of our position. Hopefully, a strike is a call to action for the public, Taylor said.

> But Stone figures most residents stand with the board.

> There’s a chance that more people will go to their side. (But) most of the public is solidly behind us, he said. (Nov. 15, 2008, p. 1)
A Clear Perception of Community Support

Stone, it appears, was correct. As union member Thompson argued, “Once we did the strike, I will tell you, then they came out of the woodwork, the people in the community.” According to Superintendent Waters, “doing the strike was just what pushed the community over . . . Teachers lost complete and thorough support of community from people who would normally have probably supported them.” Soon to be board member Casey Westin called the strike “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Teacher Liz Hopkins discussed how after the strike, she was afraid to go into Mountainville proper to the drugstore or grocery store. Before going into a store, she checked to make sure she wasn’t wearing anything that might identify her as a teacher. She recalled the following:

“. . . [A]nd it was kind of like in and out, don't hang around. I just felt like [pause] intimidating. I didn't want to see anybody or have to talk about it, I think is kind of how I. So, get in there, do what I have to do, don't make eye contact with anybody, and nobody will talk to you.”

Coffee Talks: A Last Ditch Effort at Generating Support for the Teachers

In an attempt to generate some public support, the teachers union, in addition to formal labor actions, also initiated “coffee talks” with members of the community to try to increase support outside the formal negotiations space. These coffee talks were small, informal gatherings at different homes, in which union leaders discussed the conflict with groups of parents and other community members and pushed their narrative. The hope was that these talks would garner public support for the union coalition. However, these meetings were largely ineffectual, in part because the targets of them were “intelligent people, people that could have a positive, who were open to some reasoning,” according to Whitehall. It appears that these talks were geared towards
more highly educated members of the community. Instead of generating increased support for
the union coalition, these talks reaffirmed the board majority coalition’s construction that
teachers were elitists. Carver said because of teachers’ “social status,” “they only meet in public
with people of similar stature and backgrounds, and it only ostracizes them more from the
community. Because they don’t really feel they are a part of it.” These talks helped the board
majority coalition in its efforts to socially exclude teachers and their supporters from the rest of
the community by affirming the board’s narratives.

An Attempt to Reopen the Formal Negotiations Space

During the same period as the long strike and until the summer 2009, the board minority
engaged in secret negotiations with union leadership in an attempt to reopen the formal
negotiations space. In these side negotiations, members of the board minority entered into
dialogue with union leadership in an attempt to create compromises to which both parties would
agree. Some of these offers were taken to the whole board, but each time they were voted down
in a 5-4 split, and the formal negotiations space remained essentially closed, with no real
negotiations taking place.

Affirmations of Competing Narratives through Actions

Consolidation of the school board narrative’s hegemony. The strike worked to
confirm the board majority coalition’s narratives, which it had been forming in the community
for over a year: teachers were nothing but a powerful organization consisting of selfish, greedy,
entitled people that cared more about money than students; they posed a serious threat to the
community and had to be stopped. Teachers seemed to recognize that this narrative had been
embraced by large segments of the community. As teacher Hopkins explained,
Certainly [the long strike] didn't make [relations between the teacher and community] better. Did it make it worse? At that point, it was pretty bad; I don't think it really could have gotten much worse. All it really did was in some instances made people not hate us more, but maybe solidified our greediness or whatever they think we have.

This narrative was further affirmed by the superintendent at a public board meeting during which she declared that the strike initiated by teachers made her question how much they actually valued students (Nardone, Dec. 5, 2008). As board member Walker explained, “[the strike] put more fuel on the fire so to speak against the teachers. And I think the board members who are basically anti-teacher ate it up. They were jumping for glory, they [were] just overjoyed by the fact that this was going on. And their negative comments was even more . . . and the public was saying, don’t give in to those teachers [sic].”

Write-ins to the Daily Delivery focused on the striking teachers. A man from Village Park, a rural Mountainville district community, wrote,

I am happy that they have to walk the picket line in a cold snap. At least they are getting a taste of what those of us who have to work outside during the winter instead of a heated building. Even college educated people have to work outside. Not everyone get a cushy inside job. Also, when I get a 25 cent per hour raise I'm grateful. I've gotten as little as a 12 cent per hour raise in poor years for the company. Even a few percent on a $50k salary is a huge [sic]! (Nov. 29, 2008)

A published letter signed “Mountainville neighbor” also weighed in:

I have a question for the Mountainville teachers. Have you taken the time to look around the area you live in? Your neighbors and friends have their homes up for sale because they've lost their jobs or taken reductions in their pay and benefits just to survive. What
are you doing to them by asking for more benefits and pay raises? We could all understand and your reasons for a strike if you were the ones who weren't making ends meet, but we all know that's not the case. We also understand you've been working without a contract for the past three years, but it's because of your own choosing. You need to be satisfied with what you're being offered since you work for the taxpayers. (Dec. 1, 2008)

On December 2, 2008, a man from Grassy Fields, another of Mountainville’s rural townships, wrote,

Let's all come together in support of the striking Mountainville teachers . . . to be fired. Why not make examples of these teachers and get rid of all of them. Do you think any other teachers would strike after the Mountainville teachers are let go??? Ronald Reagan did it to the air traffic controllers, why not do it to the teachers. The Mountainville teacher's [sic] think that the community will support them? [sic] Why not show them exactly how we would support them by firing every last one of them. The economy is extremely scary right now, and they strike? Their [sic] thumbing their noses at us, it's just like them to say so what who cares gimme gimme gimme [sic].

These write-ins illustrate how effectively teachers were excluded from the rest of the Mountainville community. Authors actively excluded teachers from the rest of the community. Their words define who is in the community and who is out. Teachers were clearly out, as evidenced by the comments made by the Grassy Fields writer who wanted to get rid of every teacher in the district. His rhetoric reflects an us-versus-them approach to the conflict, which pervades public discourse by this point in the conflict. This is also apparent in the other write-ins, as authors differentiate themselves and the rest of the community from teachers based on type of
work and income levels.

**Teachers union narrative affirmed—but just for the teachers.** All union members with whom I spoke mentioned that the community and the school board do not value education. Littleton lamented that before the current conflict even began, she was involved in a fundraiser for the eighth grade to alleviate the cost of class field trip. One student, after going home and discussing the fundraiser with her father approached the teacher and reported her dad’s response: “‘Help the eighth grade—What has the eighth grade done for me?’ So that is what the students are hearing at home, and they just don’t value, value the school.” Sawyer explained the community’s value of education in this way:

The overall mentality—it seems to be they [community members] don’t see the importance of it. There doesn’t seem to be a lot of respect for the profession or even the value of one. I have had a lot of students say to me, ‘I am going to be a mechanic; I don’t need education. Or, my dad does this [job], and I don’t need a lot of education.

For teachers, these anti-education perceptions of the community were confirmed (1) as public attendance at board meetings skyrocketed, which both sides report had the appearance of a circus by 2009, with the majority of attendees speaking out against the teachers, and (2) public confrontations during the teachers’ picketing sessions. Two incidents, in particular, stand out: the actions of Robert Smith during one picketing session and the community’s praise for the revocation of teacher’s health insurance by the school board during the November strike.

*The case of Robert Smith.* For the teachers, no one became more of a symbol of the uneducated community that does not value education more than Robert Smith, a local farmer in his 70s. Smith graduated from one of the high schools that eventually consolidated as part of the Mountainville merger. Smith told me he had wanted to become an undertaker after high school,
but his father died, and Smith took over the family farm. He’s been farming ever since. He also drives a school bus to supplement his farm income. Smith has a long history with the teachers union.

In the 1980s, in response to increased taxes in the district, Smith came to a public board meeting with buckets of pig manure to send a message about new taxes. Union member Marvin Jones vividly remembers this board meeting—the first one he ever attended as a teacher in the district.

And so, this guy came [to the meeting], Mr. Pig Poop is how I knew him, came with a bucket of pig crap and a fan; he was going to . . . throw the pig crap into the fan and spray the school with pig crap. The security guard stopped him . . . That was the first [school board meeting] after I came [to the district]. And that changed me forever as a teacher. I think of that night now, still it was a surreal experience. When I think about it, I cannot believe it actually happened. I was there and saw that. That is probably one of the most traumatic moments of my life. I thought, my God, where have I landed? What is this place?

During this conflict, Smith came to a board meeting with union leaders’ phone numbers written in marker on his shirt. Most importantly, he picketed opposite the teachers during their long strike wearing an adult diaper and sporting a calf bottle around his neck with the word GREED written on it. Countless teachers described this act as a formative experience that confirmed they lived in an anti-teacher community. But for the board majority and anti-concession community members, his actions were a rallying call for “regular” folks. When I asked Smith about his actions, he explained that the bottle and diaper signified that the teachers were cry babies. Smith continued, “I had no business being there, doing that, but neither did the
teachers have business being there walking around. Their students could have been in school [and they] could have been teaching them, you know.”

Revocation of health insurance. The second major act that affirmed teachers’ narrative of the board and community was the revocation of their health insurance during the 17-day strike. According to teachers, this act proved that the school board majority were teacher haters and immoral. Not only did the school board not care about the teachers, the teachers now believed the board did not care about teachers’ families, either. Director Haverfield, who did not seek reelection, lamented a conversation he had with a teacher in which she told him that the cancelling of her insurance also meant the cancellation of her husband’s health insurance and that of her children. He also explained that several teachers were pregnant during the strike and “suddenly couldn’t afford to go to the doctor.” In retrospect, he said, “It was a very strong message to send to the union, but it wasn’t, I don’t think, a very healthy message either.”

During the strike period, union members reported having their mailboxes and houses vandalized. On one of the storefronts in the town of Mountainville, a sign reading “Make my day. Shoot a teacher” was displayed. In Jack Thompson’s description of public rants against teachers at a board meeting, he lamented, “The attitude of the community is one of hate.” The teachers saw in community members’ actions confirmations that they, in addition to the school board, actually did hate teachers and did not care about their well-being or that of their families.

Narratives Define Reality

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend that narratives, what they call conceptual metaphors,

. . . have the power of defining reality . . . by highlight[ing] some features of reality and hid[ing] others. The acceptance of the metaphor, which forces us to focus only on those aspects of reality which it highlights, leads us to view the entailments of the metaphor as
Being true. Such “truths” are true, of course, only relative to the reality defined by the metaphor. (p. 485)

In Mountainville, both coalitions readily accepted their narratives as truth. The anti-concession board majority coalition, including Westin and Smith, saw this contract as their opportunity to set things in what they considered to be a more equitable direction—teachers should make less money and contribute more to their healthcare costs, commensurate with the majority of the district’s community. They promoted an image of themselves as the “real” members of the community, who understood the economic plight of community members, and were initiating steps to bring the teachers down to the level of their neighbors. It was their job to protect the community from these greedy teachers who were willing to bankrupt the district and its community members in order to get a good contract.

In contrast to how teachers were presented by their opponents, the teachers perceived themselves as educated, professional, upstanding citizens, unlike school board members, and deserved to be fairly compensated with the full healthcare benefits they had always enjoyed. The teachers pointed to their work beyond the hours of the school day, and how they regularly went above and beyond for the community’s students. They had earned their salaries and healthcare benefits, teachers argued, through their years of education and dedication to the profession despite lack of support from parents or community members. In fighting for this contract, they were fighting for the worth of their profession.

When the school board elections took place, and teacher critics won, particularly the outspoken Westin and the theatrical farming Smith, the teachers saw that the board majority’s efforts at othering teachers as part of their narrative had won over the community—that the community had accepted their narrative as truth. Consequently, teachers’ thoughts turned
fatalistic as they came to believe that to continue to fight for what they considered to be a fair contract was futile.

The Power of Memory

In the contest for the majority of public support and power, memory, another form of narrative, also played an important role. Union members and board majority coalition members have very different memories about past contracts and past negotiations cycles. Union member Marvin Jones said in his 30 years in the district, he could not remember a negotiations cycle in which community members supported the teachers. “It has always been about number one, keep the taxes down. This is a poor community, keep the taxes down. That has been the mantra for 30 years.” Jones expressed frustration that as the conflict intensified, particularly after the long strike, younger teachers, who did not share long memories of harsh negotiations, started to waver in their steadfastness to the union coalition’s cause.

As things got really tough, some of the younger, and even some of the older more seasoned people were a little bit afraid. Started to buy some of the propaganda. The community can't afford, the community can't afford. Well, we weren't asking for the moon. And it was forgotten that in the last contract we took a pay freeze for three years. That had been completely forgotten. The fact that 15 years ago we gave up back pay as a gesture of good faith, completely forgotten. Again, the teachers are greedy. We offered, formed a health consortium to help the district save money. They want to be out of that consortium now. I couldn't think of a reason to tell you other than they are saving too much money and couldn't tell you why.

Veteran teacher Sally Whitehall was also angered by the lack of union solidarity that started to show after the long strike, which seemed to stem from differences in memory. She recounted an
emotional meeting towards the end of the conflict in which a two-year pay freeze teachers agreed to in the previous contract was an issue.

... [P]eople were crying. Tell me what to do. And [union leadership] didn't want to influence, they really wanted to know, because by that time there was this, you old people already made lots of money. We don't. That kind of thing. And the ones who are there saying, if you lose it now, you are never going to get it. Because we never got that two years that we gave back. We never got that back... If you give it up, you are never getting it back.

Ronald Cole explained the power of memory for community members as well as veteran teachers.

I also think past is a big thing for the public as well. In the ‘80s there was a contract settled where teachers at Mountainville got a big increase in wages... That was huge. It only put us up to where, to the rest of the schools. But our public didn't see that. And a lot of those people that fought against that then are now in positions of authority. One is... Carver, one is Long. They both fought against that contract, that is 20 years ago.

And I talked to [union member Reese]... He has lots of brothers and sisters and stuff in the community. Dad. At one time we were trying to grab support and we said go to your family members, he couldn't even get his own father to support us because of that contract twenty years ago. That is how bitter they were toward us because of that contract a long time ago.

Veteran teachers expected community hostility toward them during this round of contract talks, were prepared for it, and were largely undeterred in their push for increased salaries and full healthcare benefits because community animosity towards them was a cyclical norm. This
was not the case for younger teachers, whose memories with the district were much shorter and quite different, as was the case of younger teachers whose prior experience with the district was as students.

The board majority coalition’s actions were also fueled, in part, by memory. Westin, who just moved into the Mountainville district a few years ago recounted a contract from the 1990s that she felt conceded too much to the teachers.

The board that was there 15 years ago that gave the union the sweet deal, I think they didn't have the foresight and they didn't really care and now it is left in last year's board member's laps, and now this year, in January, we have got to start negotiating a contract again? Would the normal person bring [that past contract] up? No. If they saw it in the paper, would they get pissed off? Yeah, they would. Memories are short, but they do remember.

Stone remembers past contracts as too easily settled for the union—a practice that he sought to correct during this round of negotiations.

Now the teachers? Their attitude towards the community, I think before I got on the board, and several other people got on the board with me, I think they felt, because of the education level of people in the community they could get their own way. As a matter of fact, their reaction to how long this strike went on, was they could not understand it, they could not understand why this, right, why this conflict was occurring. Things had been settled so easily in the past.

The memories of the members of the board majority coalition are quite different from those of the union coalition, inclusive of the minority board members, whose memories were in line with those of the union members. Each group’s memory is selective to a previous contract
cycle in which they felt the end result negatively impacted them and corresponds to the narratives they constructed. For teachers, the most recent contract was useful in defending their demands in pay increases; the board majority coalition used agreements from the 1980s and 1990s as justification for their refusal to compromise. Like the practice of othering, memory was also dependent on individual and group perceptions in building support.

**School Board Elections: The True Measure of Community Support**

The constructions of the in-group and Other created and confirmed through the initial labor actions and subsequent strikes impacted the school board elections that took place in 2009. Up to this point, both coalitions acted in accordance with *perceived* community support—*perceived* political power. In a small, rural community such as Mountainville, no infrastructure exists with which to poll public opinion outside of local elections. In Mountainville, school board elections are held every two years, with winning candidates serving four-year terms. There was unusually high voter turnout for the school board elections in 2009, with four contested seats, three of which were open. Long was up for reelection. Westin and Smith, along with another member of the board majority coalition ran as a slate of write-in candidates, but the third candidate later backed out due to family issues. Opposite these candidates were four union coalition candidates, who supported contract settlement. Westin and Smith easily won seats on the board, with the help of Long, who attached his name to their ticket. Sally Cutter, a local professor wanting settlement also won a seat. During the period of campaigning that followed the teacher strike and the election results, themselves, the majority of political power consolidated around the board coalition’s narrative. This ultimately resulted in contract settlement as union negotiators came to recognize that they could not successfully negotiate a contract that would be satisfactory to their members in this climate of public sentiment.
By the time of the school board elections in 2009, it was obvious to both groups that the community solidly supported the board majority coalition. And for union members like Sawyer, this support was not surprising.

These are people who they may have to have two or three jobs to make ends meet. They didn't graduate from high school. They are very poor. And I understand why they would say how dare you people argue over 3% raises when I can't even put food on the table. I definitely can see where they are coming from . . . You think that you deserve that salary, you deserve that healthcare, and like I said you are dealing with a community that I mean I have had students who don't have money for lunch, and you are going to tell their parents that you need 80,000 [sic] a year. I mean they are never going to see it that way.

Whether teachers were able to make sense of the overwhelming support the community showed the board majority, they were cognizant that the community did not support their stance. One veteran teacher lamented, “At some point you got to sit back and relax and say, ‘we are screwed and that is it.’” Superintendent Waters agreed that the board majority coalition was much more successful in generating community support for its position than that of the union during the election cycle. “It got to the point where even on Election Day, teachers who went to vote were heckled at the polls as they walked through.”

**Consolidation of the board’s narrative’s hegemony and the realization of defeat.** The successful write-in campaigns of Westin and Smith to the school board confirmed, without doubt, for teachers that the board majority had won the constructions war. The event also confirmed the teachers’ constructions of the community. The election of Smith, in particular, seems to have spurred intense emotions from the teachers and is partly responsible for the union’s move to settle the contract. One teacher complained that Smith spelled words incorrectly
on his campaign signs; he split the school district name into two words, and misspelled “education” and “teachers.” The fact that he won a seat on the school board as a write-in candidate against a slate of candidates who appeared on the regular ballot, and that he got the second highest number of votes in the primary, confirmed union members’ views that community was a collection of uneducated people who did not value education. As teacher Whitehall pondered, “Who would vote for a man that goes out on television dressed in a diaper outside his pants? I mean, clearly he is not only incontinent, he is stupid.”

Powell said the anger stirred in the community through public attacks on teachers led to the high voter turnout and election results. Without the personal attacks, he says, I don’t understand how they [the community] could have put someone in charge to run basically a multi-million dollar business who can’t spell. And I don’t think that [the election of perceived unintelligent board members] would have happened, because I think the only people who would have gone out to vote are the people who actually had a stake in the district, you know what I mean? And we would have gotten someone who may not have been great but at least would have a head on their shoulders.”

Veteran teacher Kessler described Smith’s election win this way:

What these communities have turned into is mob rule. If the mob gets up and shouts for our heads, they are willing to go out and find the people who will deliver the head, and they have done that. In the last election cycle here, they elected people to the school board who were one issue people . . . If you want the best example, look at Robert Smith. A man who can’t spell. A man who can’t converse in his native tongue. A man whose intellect is questionable, and he is now one of the leaders of an educational community.
He is a decision maker in the process. He is, as our superintendent likes to say, a stakeholder in our learning community.

And, union member Cole assessed the victories of Smith and Westin as a consequence of media warfare. For him, the elections solidified power structures in the community. “It just, told us is where we fell, how we stood . . . Second class citizens.”

Despite the perception prior to the elections that the community majority supported the board majority coalition, teachers still seemed surprised by the election of Smith. Therefore, they need to rationalize his victory, whether the explanation is as simple as taxes or high voter turnout. Neither of these explanations, however, considers the reason for the high voter turnout that contributed to Smith’s election.

Teacher Kessler’s final thoughts on the election were telling of how teachers were feeling that their life’s work was wasted:

We have produced over the years, we have produced exemplary human being, who have left this little district and gone on to do things that even amaze me . . . To hear that education doesn’t matter, how I feed my family doesn’t matter, whether or not my family has healthcare benefits doesn’t matter. All that matters is that their tax bill is kept at an absolute minimum. And then to face the realization that they will elect anyone who promises that.

**The Power of the Court**

**The opening of a new formal negotiations space?** After the school board elections of 2009, the union recognized that the majority of the community did, in fact, support the board majority’s narrative. With few options left, they threatened a second strike for that school year. This strike would have been illegal because it would have forced the district to hold school past
June 30, a violation of Act 88. The intent of this strike threat was to force the union and district into court-ordered collective bargaining.

The union and board negotiating teams were mandated to negotiate at the county courthouse in the summer months of 2009. Members of the union allege that the board negotiating team was bargaining in bad faith at the court house by failing to produce any new offers. But they made no legal complaints to this effect. As Cole explains,

The [union] guys that were at the court house working their butts off, every time I would go there they had their laptops out trying to work the numbers do this, do that. Board, every time I walked in they were downstairs drinking coffee. A picnic for them, because they didn't want to change anything. They knew that we had to come down to them. They didn't have to come up to us. And nobody was forcing them to, either.

Veteran teacher and negotiator Kessler’s assessment of the court-ordered sessions concurs with that of Cole.

I was there 156 hours. That is the one figure that I am confident that I know as a fact. There were members of the school board that were there eight times . . . They took time off for things like birthdays, Fourth of July parties, and we know this. We would be in the court house in our room that we were assigned to, arguing back and forth between our association members. They would be out on the steps smoking cigarettes and telling jokes. They did not take, they knew that they had the upper hand in this.

Board members also agree that during this time, the offers they gave to the union were duplicates of previous offers with a revised date at the top of the page, including Carver. “As far as the fact of us not coming up with new proposals at the end. That is because we couldn't. We were at our very limit, and they were in disbelief that was our limit.” Union member Sawyer
expressed frustration that neither side seemed willing to make the compromises necessary to settle the contract. “[S]ometimes I would see things that I would think, if we just tweak this and we just tweak this why can't we do that? But sometimes it was pride, sometimes it was anger.”

Union members also charge that board members failed to appear for court-ordered bargaining sessions. Board member Carver agrees with this allegation. He said it was unfair to hold court-ordered bargaining during the summer because teachers did not have to miss work to participate, whereas most board members did. He was also angered by the number of union members who came to the courthouse to support their negotiating team. “Some of the things that they did during negotiations I thought were childish. During negotiations they would have a stance of solidarity where probably 45 teachers would show up with cookies and stuff for them on break.”

Another failed tentative agreement. Despite these forced, acrimonious negotiations, the two teams came to a tentative agreement in June 2009, with teachers conceding to a share in healthcare premiums and a lower pay increase. But, the board reneged in July 2009, after a new financial assessment showed the district could not afford the contract to which they had agreed, sending both parties back to the courthouse. Union member Sawyer described this failed agreement as “devastating.” Board member Stone lays the blame with the board solicitor, who, he says, provided the board with inaccurate figures. Agreeing to the contract would have put the district $2 million in debt, according to Stone, because the district could not afford the five years of retroactive pay that had accrued over the lengthy conflict.

A settled contract. In the end, faced with the realization that the community, or at least the voting public, was solidly opposed to the teachers union’s contract demands, the union conceded to a share in healthcare costs and to a loss of five years of retroactive pay, resulting in
financial losses of over $20,000 for some teachers. The two sides settled the contract before the new slate of board members took office in the fall of 2009. Board majority members also conceded to higher pay increases and lower healthcare shares than they initially wanted, though these concessions appear minimal compared to those of the teachers union.

**No incentive for real negotiations.** Whether the court-ordered bargaining was actually a real negotiations space is debatable. At this point in the conflict, the board majority, through successful coalition building outside the formal policy space, gained the majority of community support and the political power that accompanied it. Board majority members contend that they stopped making new offers to the union because they were bound by fiscal constraints. This may be true, but it is also necessary to recognize that the board received no pressure from the community to settle; rather, it had just won a boost of support by the public through the spring elections. The board had no motivation to settle with the union, no incentive to make new offers, generate creative solutions, or offer substantial compromises during the court-ordered bargaining sessions because it had secured political power in the form of community support. Instead, the union, faced with the realization that it held little political power, made large concessions to the board, in particular the yielding of retroactivity. As Hopkins explained of the school board in court-ordered negotiations sessions,

I think for them it was ‘Don't even come in here unless you are going to give us what we want, because this is how it is going to be.’ Really in the big scheme of things, even though it wasn't as big as they wanted did they get a premium share? Yep. Did they get the pay freeze where we didn't get retroactive pay? Yep. They got it, so. Did they win? Yeah, I think they did. But that was the thing from what I understood. The frustration it seemed from the negotiating committee, that it wasn't negotiating. It was, ‘Here is what
we want, are you going to give it to us or not?’

**Conflict Settled: An Uneasy Resolution**

The decision to settle was difficult for the teachers union. Union members engaged in long, emotionally-charged meetings. The vote tallies for the final union vote, which resulted in settlement, have never been shared with the union, and no one felt comfortable sharing them with me, because of fear that the final figures would only deepen the divides created within union ranks. Many members feel that the vote essentially came down to younger versus veteran teachers, with younger teachers willing to settle. To Littleton this divide makes sense because younger faculty members were having trouble making ends meet four years into the conflict. Jones described this final meeting.

I gave an impassioned plea, I never have done that, ever, trying to explain, especially to the young people who have no idea, don't have the experience, to see what was going to happen, that settling for this contract would open flood gates that would do nothing but harm them down the road. In fact, one of the, a person I considered as a friend here, took it as a personal assault, when it certainly wasn't. ‘You know,’ I said, ‘before you know it, your kids are going to be ready for college and you are going to have expenses you can't think about. We worked for these benefits for 30 years.’ I started, they don't believe me, I couldn't afford a phone. I wanted to be a teacher. I chose the path. I knew that in years to come, I would get more comfortable. Now that it is more comfortable for me, all of a sudden it is not comfortable for everybody else. Now wait a minute, I earned that. I did everything I was supposed to do. But I think the union leadership tried to be as neutral as possible, and I am not so sure that was a good idea, because they didn't want to sway the membership one way or the other and the membership voted to settle. And 'til this day
we are not privy to the numbers or what the vote count was.

School board members agreed to settle in a 7-1 vote. Members of the board majority, however, expressed concern that the district cannot afford the contract on which it settled. According to Carver, the election had little bearing on the school board’s settlement vote. “If we could not meet the contractual obligation that was signed, how are you going to pass it?” Carver views the contract settlement as a loss for the board because it did not accomplish its objectives, particularly concerning healthcare premium shares. Others, like Andy Walker, wanted settlement because he wanted to focus the board’s attention on other issues, like more efficient heating systems and new windows in the buildings to save on energy costs. Klein says the contract dispute ripped the board apart, damaging relationships beyond repair.

Aftermath

Despite large concessions made by the teachers union, the Mountainville district is in dire financial straits. According to Principal Royal,

There was a time that . . . people really thought [Mountainville] was the diamond. But now with the contract being what it is, we are so engrossed with our budget with just making teachers' salaries that the building is falling apart, the grounds are falling apart. It is almost to the point of embarrassment. You came in past the loading dock, you see that roof. Ripped the asbestos off two years ago, because structurally it wasn't sound, they put in a PVC pipe and a different support beam and never closed it back up, never did anything with it. It is god awful. People are okay with that.

School closure. Not only are existing facilities falling apart, the school board voted to close one of its three elementary schools in order to save money and pay for its contract. So far, the savings to the district have been minimal, at best, from the closure of this elementary school,
which served the poorest community in the district—Mountainville proper. Minority board members, however, claim that the board majority voted to close the school in order to get rid of teachers—a form of retaliation—and that cost savings were a secondary goal. Board member Carver warns that programs will also have to be cut in order to save money. “I do believe that currently the view of the board is survival of our district, and in order for that to happen, there may be programs that are about to be cut. Will that be viewed as a lack of wanting the best education for our kids? It probably will be viewed as such. Is it true? No.”

Teacher turnover. The teachers experienced deep divides as a consequence of this prolonged conflict. Relationships between retirees and current teachers have especially suffered because recent retirees lost tens of thousands of dollars in retroactive pay. Relationships between teachers currently employed by Mountainville have also been negatively affected. 40% of Mountainville’s teachers left the district between the start of the conflict and the 2010-2011 school year, most of them retiring before the start of the next round of contract negotiations, which began January 2011, including union president Edward Clarke. Principal Royal provided his opinion on the high turnover.

People wanted out. People wanted out. And they didn't want to leave, because of the things that they could do here. But you look out at other districts, paying this much more, giving this much more respect. I don't know. Maybe I don't walk into my kids’ school and look at the teachers and see them as selfish people. I go in and I say, ‘Thank you for educating my child.’ I can't say that same tone is here. There is a public disdain for teachers . . .

Teacher morale, according to respondents, is at an all-time low at the conclusion of the conflict. The comments of veteran teacher Kessler aptly depict this morale issue.
I alone had 20-some thousand dollars in back pay owed to me that I will never see. And I talked to my colleagues and a lot of them who suffered the same indignity that I did, say, I am not going to do X anymore because you bought that from me for 20,000 [dollars]. I don't take papers home to grade them anymore. I don't wear a tie to school anymore. They can't afford me in a tie. I don't take papers home because I don't work at home anymore. They don't pay me enough to do that. The Weis potato chip guy doesn't take his work home. The power plant guy doesn't take his work home, and they make more money than I do.

Respondents from both sides agree that the split between the teachers and community seems permanent. A veteran teacher explained the divide this way:

Having been here for 29 years, knowing some of things [I did] that weren’t part of my job for some of the kids in this community, only to be told by the community that I am not worth what I get, I am bitter . . . I am just bitter toward the community.

Another veteran teacher agreed, and illustrated his perception of power structures in the community in the wake of the conflict.

The bottom line is the community hates us. The people who are vocal, and I don’t know how many there are. And I don’t know if they are the majority, but right now they are in power. You don’t have to be the majority to be in power. And they are in power. And they are slowly letting us know.

**Turnover in district leadership.** In a move expected by all parties involved in the conflict, the board voted not to renew Superintendent Waters’ contract in 2011. She was hired as superintendent of the regional technical high school, to which Mountainville is a feeder district. In spring 2011, outspoken teacher critic and new board member Casey Westin also left the
district. Her seat was filled by former majority member Kyle Bucci through special appointment, which keeps the board in a 5-4 split.

**The future of Mountainville.** Neither side is approaching the next round of negotiations positively. The hostility and animosity generated through this conflict are still fresh. Neither union nor board members expect the next round of negotiations to run smoothly. Board members told me they will not vote for a contract in which teacher salaries exceed $80,000, but top salaries at the conclusion of the settled contract are $79,000. Naturally, teachers will ask for more than $80,000 for their top earners over the life of the five-year contract just to keep up with cost of living increases. Both sides anticipate the board asking for higher shares of healthcare premiums.

Cole said of the next bargaining process, “It is not going to be pretty. Going to be worse with this one, get ready. Because their team is not going to change.” Board minority member Walker agrees. Unless the board negotiating team changes, he sees another long, bitter conflict. Veteran teacher Thompson said of future negotiations,

My advice to younger teachers, look for a job . . . Because I don't think it is going to get any better here. There is no money, and now that you gave them back the back pay, the board has no incentive to settle, because now the board can say, ‘Wait, we did it last time, go for five years, lock it in, know what the rates are, you know what everything is, and okay, the contract is status quo, nobody gets raises, at the end of five years, well we don't have any money,’ and that is exactly what is going to happen again. I can see it happening.

Principal Royal assessed the situation from a more removed stance. He agrees that the next round will be bitter and drawn-out. He also foresees increased tensions between the teachers
and community because the board will have to substantially raise taxes over the next several years just so the district can survive. Newly elected board member Westin, who ran on a platform in direct opposition to the teachers union, says it would be best for veteran teachers to retire before the next contract because she supports “a 50% increase in the insurance. No increase in pay at all. I know that some of the board members are even looking at asking for pay cuts.” Carver disagrees that the next contract talks will be long and heated. With so many teachers retiring this year (13), combined with the high teacher turnover over the past four years, the board will be negotiating with a much younger faculty, and Carver thinks they will be satisfied with their salaries. Smith said the next round of talks will be “years of agitation.” But, no respondent forecasted the next round of negotiations quite like Jones. “I see a shit storm coming like we have never seen before.”

Principal Royal is worried not just about future negotiations, but about the future of the Mountainville district.

I am fearful. I am fearful. Because you know the second part of this is they close Mountainville Elementary, we decrease in numbers in the school, actually lose some teachers, high school, elementary. We have retirement spots we are not going to fill, these kind of things. So the increase in the numbers in classes are going to go up [sic]. We are not going to have. Right now we are talking about deficits being half a million plus, even with the max millage increases. Where do you cut next? Supply dollars, books, uniforms, extra-curriculars. God only knows where it is going to go. So when you start compounding that. Now we have tension already before you start talking about dollars and cents increases, because if you have settled this contract here, next contract it is going to go up, and at what cost?
And, Stone worries that if the district continues in the financial state it is currently in, the district cannot survive. “I can anticipate unless we dramatically raise taxes year after year, I could see either the state coming in and taking over or the dissolution of the district. I think . . . dissolution and perhaps consolidation with other districts.” This is a real issue in Mountainville as school board candidates continue to win seats on an anti-tax, anti-concessions platform.

Despite these fears, both building principals are encouraged by signs of healing in the schools, showcased by the enthusiasm of new faculty hired over the past few years, and the willingness of most faculty members to move on from this conflict. The principals talked to me about the reinstitution dances for the students, clubs, and monthly faculty-administration potlucks.

While some progress has been made within the confines of the school buildings, deep divides still characterize the relationship between the teachers union and the community. As one veteran teacher lamented,

Unfortunately, I see Mountainville self-destructing. I can be honest with you and tell you that I can’t get over—I won’t be able to get over—the animosity that was created in this last failed negotiation. I don’t know if any of us are going to be able to get over it because a lot of people were wounded in this thing. It was a big blood bath.

In my interview with Robert Smith, he explained the divide that now exists between the teachers and community.

[The divide] is a scar that will never go away. See my hand? I run a power saw through that. It is a scar, but I got my hand. We've got a scar there that is not going to go away. We have to work to overcome it, that is all.

Interviewer: And how do you think that is going to happen?
Respondent: Well, if people can be more honest with each other and have faith in each other, it will happen.

Conclusions

The words of Principal Royal and Robert Smith suggest that the future is not entirely bleak for Mountainville. However, in order for the district and community to recover from this devastating conflict, stakeholders from the teachers union, school board, and community will need to overcome powerful competing narratives created and propagated throughout this conflict. This will be an arduous task because once narratives have been firmly established and accepted as reality, it is very difficult to reframe the issue and the group that has been othered (O’Brien, 2009). The possibility of the coalitions coming together in the spirit of compromise in the next contract negotiations cycle is hard to imagine. It would require the changing of existing narratives. Altering these existing narratives “requires emotional and cognitive work built on interactive processes of individual and social awareness and reflection . . . [and] demands a shift in values, and therefore in how individuals and populations make sense of their lives” (Stephenson, 2010, p. 2). These are not easy tasks and require deep commitment to the future of the district, something that appears to be missing in this case by the majority of respondents.

While this possibility seems an unlikely outcome in Mountainville, Stephenson (2010) argues that changing hegemonic narratives is possible in the wake of conflict, but it requires strong, trusted leadership, time, and “sustained efforts to clarify and articulate differences and similarities among the parties as well as to identify their hidden and often unarticulated assumptions concerning existing ways of knowing and community organization” (p. 9). If the coalitions are unable to come together in an attempt to change these narratives, the true victims of this conflict—the Mountainville students—who were given barely a mention in passing by
participants in this case, will suffer the consequences of a school system and community broken beyond repair.
Chapter 5

Conclusions: A Grounded Theory and Implication for Practice and Research

Introduction

The primary goal of this study was to build substantive grounded theory to provide insight into the conflictual nature of rural school politics. Specifically, I wanted to create a grounded theory that could help explain the conditions through which school-community conflict originates as well as the processes by which it escalates and is resolved. A second aim of this research was to provide practical implications for school district and community leaders, based on this theory, to diminish conflict and the potential damaging effects it can have on rural school districts and communities. Mountainville provided a revelatory case in which I was able to fully explore the conditions and processes of school-community conflict resulting from teacher contract negotiations from a wide variance of perspectives. This final chapter explains the substantive grounded theory built from this case, including the theory’s overview and background. A detailed discussion of the grounded theory follows, and each component is related to the Mountainville case. I conclude with implications for practice and research.

Grounded Theory: The Community Fragmentation Model of Micro-Political Engagement

Overview of Community Fragmentation Model. The purpose of The Community Fragmentation Model of Micro-Political Engagement (See Figure 5.1) is to conceptualize the processes through which rural school-community conflict originates, escalates, and is resolved. Specifically, this model explains how community subpopulations with competing values vie for: (1) legitimacy of their values and; (2) power over educational decision making processes to advance their values and interests.
Figure 5.1. Community fragmentation model of micropolitical engagement. This model is used to conceptualize the processes through which school-community conflict originates, escalates, and is resolved in a local community context and within broader economic and social contexts.

The Community Fragmentation Model is comprised of four major elements that are salient to understanding the processes of school-community conflict: micro community and macro social contexts, competing value systems, formal negotiations/policy formation space, and political power continuum. Micro community context and macro social and economic contexts create the conditions for fragmentation in a given community. Actors within the factional community who possess competing values and interests form opposing political coalitions. These groups vie for power and resources through two processes: (1) policy negotiation in a formal
space, and; (2) power struggles in the informal arena along a continuum of perceived political power.

In the formal arena, opposing coalitions construct and contest local education policy; in the informal arena, groups with competing values and interests attempt to consolidate political power within the micro community context through the creation and propagation of competing hegemonic narratives of the community. These socially excluding narratives are used to determine who is “in” and who is “out” of the community. Through the use of these narratives in the informal arena, competing groups consolidate the power needed to achieve their end goals and influence policy and other decision-making outcomes. The socially excluding form that these political struggles take makes the micro community context critical to the grounded theory and is particularly salient to the study of rural school-community conflict because of the tight links that exist between the community school and local identity in rural communities.

Theoretical Model Background

As Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue, “the essential element of theory is that [conceptual] categories are interrelated into a larger theoretical scheme” (p. 104). Theory building is an integrative practice. Instead of listing themes relevant to the research, theory generation requires showcasing the relationships between conceptual categories. For this model, micropolitical literature was used as a basis for understanding these relationships.

This theoretical model was created through extensive memo writing during data analysis of this case, using micropolitics literature as an orienting framework. Micropolitics is the study of local educational politics (Easton, 1965), and can be defined at multiple levels, from the level of district-community interaction to the organizational level of a single school building. Micropolitics can also be understood as “the push-and-pull among differing local entities in
order to develop policy that will result in the allocation of resources in a manner satisfactory to
the power sources in the community” (Owen, 2006, pp. 7-8). Micropolitics goes beyond the
allocation of resources (Malen, 1995) to include the allocation of values (Owen, 2006) within the
given unit of study.

The Mountainville case involved relationships at the school district-community level. Pushes and pulls in this case took place between the teachers union and its supporters and a coalition of support created by the school board majority. The conflict in Mountainville centered on collective bargaining; therefore, it necessarily involved a struggle over the allocation of resources, which were quite scarce in the district and community. However, the school-community discord extended beyond the allocation of resources to include a struggle for power over community values, including the worth of teachers and the purpose of the local educational system.

Owen (2006) argues that education “is about power and control,” and as a result of increased public demands on the local school and access to limited resources, politics is the “underlying force driving public education” at the local level (p. 4). She further contends that “who plays, who wins, and who loses are all constants in the [political] game” (p. 4). Because competing values are central to micropolitics, local school districts rely on the formal policy process to create compromise between competing values or satisfy the greatest number of constituents (Owen, 2006). Malen’s (1995) research on micropolitics within the school organization found that principals engage in power struggles with teachers and community members in both formal decision-making and informal political arenas. Though the scope of this case goes beyond the bounds of the school organization to include the district and community,
the tenets of Malen’s work are useful in their indication that power exchanges take place in multiple arenas, including formal and informal.

In the Mountainville case, power struggles took place in both formal and informal arenas. The policy formulation space was the sphere in which leaders of both groups participated in efforts to make compromises between their opposing values and interests at the beginning of the conflict. At the same time, these groups engaged in the creation of competing narratives in the informal arena to consolidate the legitimacy of a set of values through the construction of a particular community narrative. The school board coalition successfully consolidated its power around its narrative and socially excluded the teachers from the Mountainville community, even though half of the teachers lived in the community.

The presence of two distinct coalitions with competing values systems and interests emerged early in data collection and analysis, showcasing the fragmented nature of the community as opposed to the consensual, public good orientation that epitomizes the Gemeinschaft assumptions of many rural education studies. Local contextual factors including local economic distress, school-community disconnect, and brain drain, as well as a history of contentious relations between the teachers union and community only exacerbated community divisions. Broader contextual factors also contributed to community division, including the regional teachers union organization and an anti-tax special interest group, and a national economic recession.

The fragmentation of this community occurred along multiple lines. However, throughout this conflict, community factions coalesced into two distinct, political coalitions with opposing values and interests, each with its own narrative of Mountainville. One coalition self-identified—through interviews, media outlets, and formal communications with the public—as a group that
valued education, that was part of a professional class, and that was willing to pay for high quality educational services and opportunities. This coalition was loosely comprised of the school board minority, district teachers (100% of whom were members of the local union), and a small number of politically active community members. The other coalition self-identified as a group that was overtaxed, largely working class or retired, and that did not see returns on their investments in the local schools. This group included school board majority members, vocal community members who won seats on the school board in 2009, and the majority of the voting public.

The two coalitions engaged in power struggles in two arenas during the conflict. Beginning in 2005, the leadership of both groups attempted to formally negotiate the terms of the teachers’ contract in a formal policy/negotiation space. This was the arena where official negotiations occurred; it was also the space in which the superintendent should have acted as a mediator between the negotiating teams, leading them to points of compromise. At the same time that coalition leaders were formally meeting in the negotiations space, they were also engaging, along with other coalition members, in political power struggles outside the realm of formal negotiations through informal networks of friends and neighbors and local newspaper outlets. Through these political contests, the two factions vied for increases in power and built coalitions in order to influence the outcome of negotiations and promote their particular interests over those of the opposition. Coalition building and consolidation of political power happened largely around the propagation of competing narratives, in which each group “othered” the opposition.

Because of the ineffectiveness of the formal negotiations space and shifting power structures outside the formal decision making arena due to successful othering, the school board coalition perceived that it had obtained the majority of community support and political power.
Once the school board coalition perceived that that imbalance of power had tipped largely in its favor, it had no incentive to continue to participate in formal negotiations, and the formal negotiations space collapsed. In response to the loss of the formal negotiations space, both coalitions attempted to increase the power of their coalitions through engagement in political strategies in the informal arena in order to promote their values and interests and influence the outcome of the conflict. With the demise of the formal negotiations space, the conflict intensified and polarized, with both sides attempting to frame the situation based on their values and interests through competing narratives of the community. These competing narratives were particularly salient to rural education politics because: (1) community identity was inextricably linked to these narratives, and; (2) the narrative propagated by the school board coalition socially excluded the teachers from the Mountainville community even though many lived in the community and had families who had resided for generations in Mountainville. Both sides engaged in a zero-sum competition for power, with the school board coalition’s narrative consolidating the majority of community support and political power. Once school board elections in 2009 solidified the power of the school board coalition over the other, the weaker coalition—the teachers union—resorted to legal power to force the opening of a new formal negotiations space in which the contract was finally settled.

These interrelated processes are explained in greater detail in each of the following sections. Although these sections highlight specific components of the theoretical model, the individual elements are all closely interconnected. An understanding of the relationships between these elements, in addition to the elements, themselves, is critical to comprehension of the grounded theory, which explains the conditions that create rural school-community conflict, as well as the processes through which it escalates and is resolved.
Contextual factors. At the micro community level, fragmentation, particularly when it comes to the value placed on education, is largely a consequence of social and economic forces, as well as the community’s local history. In economically distressed communities, or those in which work traditionally could be found without much formal education, working class populations often tend to be ambivalent in their attitudes regarding formal education (see, for example, Corbett, 2007; Woodrum, 2004). Case studies of school-community conflict show that communities divided by class differences, become fragmented (Howley, et al., 2005) and experience disproportionate social exclusion (Milbourne, 2004). Additionally, lower socioeconomic status communities are more likely to engage in conflict and less able to manage it than higher SES communities (Boyd, 1976). Local history, including school consolidation, also plays a role in dividing community members (McHenry-Sorber & Sorber, 2010; Peshkin, 1982). In addition, micropolitical studies and national surveys highlight the important role of special interest and political groups in shaping school-community relations (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) and collective bargaining (Nothem, 1992).

When communities become factionalized—characterized by conflict between two powerful groups—the results include a factional school board engaged in conflict reflective of that of the community, heated school board elections, and shifting power structures, with the board make-up continuing to reflect the community conflict (McCarty & Ramsey, 1971).

Broader contextual conditions also influence community politics. Economic recessions make it more difficult for certain community members to feel economically secure and to pay property taxes to fund their local schools and teachers. Social trends, including anti-tax and anti-union movements make certain members of the public less likely to support teachers unions (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000; Kearney, 2009). Ties to larger teacher union networks likewise
influence teachers’ perceptions of legitimacy and rights, which may lie in contrast to the views of
the rest of the community (Kerchner & Cooper, 2003; Nothem, 1992).

In the Mountainville case, the community became fragmented for a several reasons, including local economic, social, and historical contexts, with the national economic recession playing a role in polarizing the two sides. The Mountainville School District community is in economic and social distress, with average median household incomes well under the national average, high unemployment rates, a large elderly population, brain drain, and low educational attainment rates. Community residents have been negatively affected by the recent economic recession, and influenced by anti-tax groups, a national anti-union sentiment, and the power of regional PSEA leaders. Meanwhile, Mountainville’s teachers have continued to enjoy income security, good healthcare benefits, and high levels of education. These micro conditions existed within a macro context in which the nation experienced (1) an economic downturn, which eventually led to a recession by the time of data collection and (2) a swelling anti-union movement, which gained national attention by the time of data collection.

For these reasons, a disconnect existed between the educators of the Mountainville School District and the community they served. Board majority members and many community members disagreed with the district’s emphasis on college preparation; instead, they wanted the rural district to instill the basics in students and prepare them for “life.” Another divide stemmed from the chronic brain drain experienced by the economically distressed community. Mountainville’s educators (50% of whom lived in the district) viewed the rural, largely working class community as one that does not value education or the work of teachers. Board majority members and their supporters, comprised largely of working class families and retirees, agreed that teachers in this district are overpaid for the type and quality of work they did, and, therefore,
were not worth the tax increases necessary to pay their relatively high salaries and good healthcare benefits. These tensions were exacerbated during the conflict, as increasing numbers of community members lost their jobs and/or healthcare benefits as a result of the national economic recession. These perceptions also formed the basis for competing narratives by the opposing sides in the informal arena.

**Competing value systems.** When groups within the same community, particularly one in which resources are scarce, possess opposing values and interests, they are forced to compete with one another for value legitimacy and power over educational decision making that is congruent with their values and interests, including the allocation of resources (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Among other reasons, divergent values are held by individuals and groups with different occupational backgrounds, levels of education, disposable income, and perceptions of formal education (Boyd, 2003; Howley, et al., 2005; Spring, 2005; Woodrum, 2004). Groups who have historically found employment without formal education or who see little or no opportunity for work for the highly educated in their local community, place a lower value on the work being done in the educational system. In contrast, those in professional occupations with higher levels of education, or who have children who economically benefited from their education place a higher value on their local educational system (Corbett, 2007; Woodrum, 2004). The latter group is more likely to be able and willing to pay increased taxes in order to maintain their educational facilities and academic and extracurricular opportunities as well as pay for increases in teacher salaries. The former group, however, is either unwilling or unable to fund better facilities or programs, or to contribute to higher teacher salaries (Howley, et al., 2005).

While multiple groups with factional perspectives may exist within a given community, at some point in the political process, it becomes advantageous for groups with enough public
support to coalesce into two politically powerful coalitions in order to increase the possibility of influencing policy outcomes, particularly when these more politically powerful coalitions are represented by majority/minority board members on a factional school board. These coalitions are represented as Values A and Values B on the theoretical model.

In the Mountainville case, multiple stakeholders emerged in response to teacher contract negotiations, including board majority members, outspoken community members, and other members of the voting public, including some working-class and middle-class families and retirees, as well as the teachers union and school board minority. These myriad constituencies coalesced into two major coalitions: school board majority coalition (Values A) and teachers union coalition (Values B). According to those ascribing to Values A, teachers were entitled, greedy, selfish, and protected by a powerful, militant union. It was therefore up to the Values A coalition to protect the community from the demands of over-entitled and undeserving teachers. On the other hand, according the members of Values B, the school board majority and the majority of the community was backward, uneducated, immoral (particularly school board members), and teacher haters. It was the job of Values B to educate youth out of this place.

In addition to these oppositional coalitions, students and community and district members focused on promoting students’ best interests were also concerned with the conflict that consumed the community. However, they were relatively voiceless in the debate and unable to consolidate power around their values and interests as the conflict became increasingly polarized.

**Informal arena/Political power continuum.** The political power continuum is the spectrum of perceived political power by the two major coalitions. Because many small communities lack the infrastructure to measure political support, aside from cyclical elections,
the political power continuum is the main means in which coalitions gauge political support in
the community. Based on perceived support or lack thereof, individuals and groups engage in
political strategies in the informal arena to build coalitions and increase their power. The
political power continuum assumes a zero-sum game in which one group has to lose power for
the other to gain it (see Bolman & Deal, 2008). The political struggles take place outside the
formal policy arena of the school district even though actors from the formal policy/negotiation
space may play a central role in these power contests.

Opposing values groups engage in various political strategies within this space in order to
achieve political power (Bolman & Deal, 2008). These strategies include utilization of local
media sources, local personal networks and gossip channels, and formal organizational
communications (Kearney, 2009; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Streshly, 2001). Through these networks,
groups promote their values and agendas while undermining those of the opposition (Owen,
2006; Streshly, 2001).

The main means through which these power struggles occur is the use of competing
narratives. Through the propagation of competing narratives, coalitions attempt to consolidate
their power and establish hegemony over the opposition, including socially excluding one group
from the community (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b; O’Brien, 2009). This is accomplished through
the practice of othering, which creates a difficult to resolve us-versus-them dynamic (Kumer-
Nevo & Benjamin, 2010). In rural communities, these contests can quickly become personal in
nature, resulting in vilification of opposition members as community identity becomes tied to
these narratives, and groups that lived in the community for generations can suddenly become
identified as outsiders, or worse yet, as enemies of the community.
These battles can influence the formal negotiations space even though they take place outside this space. If political power struggles become too heated or personal (Nothem, 1992), or if one side succeeds at gaining a perceived solid majority of power, the negotiations space can collapse, leaving no room for compromise. A coalition that succeeds in establishing a hegemonic narrative has no motivation to compromise; instead it can impose its will on the policy/negotiation outcome. Alternatively, if the negotiations space collapses for other reasons (see following section), the result is an increased emphasis on the political power continuum because it becomes the main avenue through which groups influence educational decisions (see Nothem, 1992).

In this case, Values A and Values B did not begin engaging in power struggles along the political power continuum until they reached a point of deep mutual mistrust inside the formal negotiations space, about one year into the collective bargaining process. Once the negotiations process reached this point, the two groups simultaneously engaged in the formal policy process within the formal negotiation space and in power struggles along the political power continuum through the propagation of competing narratives, including othering. As formal negotiations continued to stall, both groups increasingly turned their resources toward the political power continuum, engaging in external power struggles to dominate the collective bargaining process and outcome through these competing narratives. It is through this battle for the majority of community support and political power that coalitions were built and power shifted.

Coalitions attempted to consolidate their power around competing hegemonic narratives. Values A effectively socially excluded the teachers union, as well as other members of Values B by highlighting class and work differences between the teachers and the rest of the community, in addition to claims that the teachers were greedy, did not care about the students or the rest of
the community, and belonged to and were protected by a powerful, militant union. In Values A’s narrative, the school board majority and outspoken teacher critics were the protectors of the community against the teachers—an enemy that threatened to bankrupt the district and community members with its contractual demands. Values B constructed a narrative in which the school board and the majority of the community was backward, uneducated, and immoral, and it was up to Values B to educate Mountainville’s children out of this poor, backward place. These constructions were ineffective at generating support.

These discourse battles were fought through local networks of friends and neighbors, but also extensively through local newspapers. Previous research on collective bargaining points to the low level of coverage that local media outlets give to collective bargaining, as well as the minimal influence press coverage has on negotiations (see Hess & Kelly, 2006). However, the Mountainville case reflects the opposite function of local media. In this case hundreds of articles, editorials, guest opinion pieces, and community write-ins were published over a four-year span, with the effect of generating overwhelming community support and political power for the school board majority coalition (Values A) through reinforcement of its narrative.

The power struggles that occurred in the informal arena, along the political power continuum involved war-like rhetoric. Each side identified the enemy, and the fight over the teacher contract became a win-lose battle, in which everything was fair game, and the long-term effects of vitriolic discourse were ignored. Because of the focus on winning versus losing at any cost, both sides engaged in personal vilification and damaging constructions of other. It was an emotionally scarring process for members of both sides of the conflict, who were personally attacked in private community circles and in local media outlets.
When Values A perceived that it had successfully gained a majority of political power through community support, it had no motivation to compromise. The negotiations space collapsed almost entirely, leaving no room for formal negotiation or bargaining between the two sides. This perception was confirmed through the school board election results in May 2009, in which vocal members of Values A won seats on the school board.

**Negotiations/policy formulation space.** The policy formulation space is the formal arena in which groups with competing values and interests come together to make compromises that are acceptable to these parties and that benefit the district and community. In the Mountainville case, this space was reduced to a formal space for contract negotiation. That is, during the collective bargaining process from 2005 to 2009, the school board, teachers, and community were completely embroiled in the conflict surrounding teacher contract negotiations. Other issues that would normally be important to the district’s functionality, including facilities maintenance, curricula, and student enrichment, were relegated to the sidelines, as the battle over the contract consumed all parties. Because the policy formation space was reduced to the arena in which formal contract negotiations were held, the remainder of the section will focus on the space as a formal negotiations space.

The negotiations space is the formal space in which Values A and Values B come together, typically with district leadership and other experts, to engage in formal policy negotiations. It is the space in which leadership from the two sides engage in creative alternative decision making processes in order to design a compromise that satisfies both parties (Nothem, 1992). In this space, the superintendent and other bureaucratic experts, including the business manager and district solicitor, work with both parties as experts in their given field to provide pertinent information. A successful negotiations space has two parties that are knowledgeable
about the issue on which they are negotiating and willing to make compromises for the benefit of the district and community (Nothem, 1992). A successful negotiations space also contains neutral and effective bureaucratic experts, and mutual trust between negotiating parties and between negotiating parties and these experts (Streshly, 2001).

This space can break down for myriad reasons. First, the space can be strained by scarce resources (Owen, 2006). It is more difficult to negotiate educational issues if the district does not possess the resources necessary to allow for compromise. Second, the space can be strained by pressure from outside influences, including special interest and other political groups not interested in compromise (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Howell, 2005). Third, the presence of politically ineffectual bureaucratic experts can undermine the space. This can be problematic because superintendents, in particular, are beholden to the wishes of the school board majority (Boyd, 1982; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Spring, 2005), and once a community builds coalitions around an educational issue, it becomes increasingly difficult for educational leaders to remain autonomous in their actions (Minar, 1966). Fourth, personal mistrust or other personal animosity inhibits the willingness of the two sides to negotiate in good faith (Streshly, 2001). Finally, once one coalition holds the majority of power, it is able to promote its interests without incentive to make meaningful compromises.

In the Mountainville case, the leadership of Values A and Values B worked together in the negotiations space with bureaucratic experts for the first year of the collective bargaining process once the previous contract expired. After a failed tentative agreement and the leaking of confidential negotiations to the press by a board member, Values B members began to harbor mistrust for Values A, and the space started to deteriorate. Neither group trusted the experts that resided in this space, leading to further break down of the space. At the same time, the factions
engaged in political power struggles in the informal arena through the distribution of competing narratives. These power struggles resulted in personal vilification, mistrust, and animosity between the formal negotiations teams, and a power shift to Values A. Once Values A perceived that it had gained the majority of community support and political power, it had no motivation to negotiate in the formal negotiations space.

The formal negotiations space collapsed, leaving no middle space for the superintendent. Values B perceived that the superintendent joined the Values A coalition, and some of her publicized actions suggest this possibility. Because Values A was comprised of the school board majority, and thus responsible for her continued employment in the district, it is likely that when the superintendent perceived clear community support for Values A, she publicly backed that coalition’s stance. Regardless of the teachers’ perception of the superintendent, she was also distrusted by the school board majority, was relegated to the role of note taker by the board, and fired at the end of her contract.

Without a formal negotiations space, this conflict could have lasted indefinitely, with Values B refusing to concede, and Values A refusing to negotiate, particularly after the school board election in May 2009. The large voter turnout and resultant winners, most notably outspoken Values A supporters Westin and Smith, confirmed for both coalitions that the perceived political power of Values A was a reality. Though the school board majority-minority split did not change as a result of the elections (it remained a 5-4 board), the victories of Westin and Smith, who campaigned on a “no concessions” platform, created the sense for union members that continuing to fight for what they considered a fair contract was futile.

Needing the participation of Values A for the bargaining process to progress, the teachers union used legal force to push both sides back to the formal bargaining table in summer 2009.
after threatening an illegal strike. This move ultimately resulted in a settled contract and tenuous conflict resolution, but whether this new formal negotiations space was a space for real compromise is questionable.

Values A still had no motivation to settle with Values B. In fact, the elections confirmed for Values A that the community did not want to make concessions to the union. While members of the board majority argue that they did not accomplish their goals—that teachers won higher pay increases and contribute less to healthcare premiums than desired by the board—the teachers union made major concessions. The most significant of these concessions included an agreement to a loss of five years of retroactive pay, which resulted in losses of $20,000+ for teachers at the top of the pay scale and recent retirees, and a contribution to healthcare costs. This is the first time in the district’s history that the teachers have shared in healthcare premiums, and it makes them only the second district in their county to agree to such conditions. It appears that while a formal negotiations space was technically created in summer 2009, Values B was largely at the mercy of the more powerful Values A. Values B was forced to make large concessions to Values A, particularly after a realization by the district that it could not afford the first tentative agreement reached during the summer 2009 negotiations. One result of this imbalanced formal space and the effectiveness of Values A’s narrative is lingering hostility by members of both parties as they begin the next round of contract negotiations.

**What about the students?: The effect of no middle ground.** While it is important to discuss the findings of this research, it is equally critical to draw conclusions from data that was largely missing from my discussions with conflict participants: the students. Members of the board majority coalition argued that teachers did not care about the students, but even these respondents failed to consider the effect of this conflict on the students, including their
relationships with teachers, their academic program, or student achievement. Likewise, teachers discussed students largely in terms of behavior problems that arose in the classroom as a result of the conflict. Only the building-level administrators and superintendent discussed the consequences of the discord on Mountainville’s students and their schools.

Members of both coalitions were so engrossed in a battle to establish a hegemonic narrative that they failed to consider how the conflict affected students. When the conflict became so polarized that there was no middle ground—no room for compromise and reason—no one was left to represent Mountainville’s youth. Instead, these students read vile depictions in the newspaper and heard negative constructions of their teachers, district leaders, parents and neighbors in school and around the dinner table.

A better way of dealing with conflict should be the imperative not just in Mountainville, but in other rural communities facing school-community discord to ensure that students are (1) not lost in a battle of competing narratives and vitriolic discord and (2) not forced to choose between supporting their teachers and their neighbors and families.

**Theoretical Conclusions**

The Community Fragmentation Model explains the origins of rural school-community conflict, particularly the ways in which the micro and macro contexts create the conditions for community fragmentation. Because of conflicting values and interests regarding education at the local level, individuals organize into coalitions that attempt to influence the educational policy and decision-making process. The model suggests that while more than two perspectives may exist around a given issue, groups tend to organize into two dominant oppositional coalitions in order to maximize political power and influence local educational policy. Perspectives other than those espoused by the competing coalitions may exist, but lack the power necessary to build coalitions or influence the conflict’s process or outcome. The political coalitions that do form
attempt to influence educational policy/decision-making through two processes: (1) formal negotiations and (2) the use of competing hegemonic narratives of community, around which these competing coalitions consolidate political power. In the latter process, school-community conflict is exacerbated, and some members of the community experience social exclusion. Conflict resolution can occur through successful negotiation in the formal policy/negotiation arena or through the consolidation of the majority of political power around a hegemonic narrative of the rural community.

While rural communities are unique in myriad ways, the common make-up of local control over educational policy, with the school board as the local policy-making body, means that similar manifestations of school-community conflict should occur in other rural communities. These similar manifestations of conflict include the propagation of competing narratives of community and the social exclusion of certain community members to consolidate political power because while micro contexts vary, diverse rural communities exist within similar macro contexts. Rural communities are plugged in to the same broad national discourse and debate regarding work, class, the value of teachers and their unions, and the purpose of education, all of which have implications for school-community conflict at the micro level.

**Implications for Practice**

The grounded theory and Mountainville case illuminate important implications for the practices of union leaders and board members, as well as district leaders during periods of school-community conflict. Leaders in these positions have the responsibility and ability to diminish and manage conflict in order to reduce the potential devastating effects of conflict on rural schools and communities. These implications for practice include: (1) containing conflict to the policy problem/issue at hand, as opposed to engaging in power struggles for complete power
in the community; (2) engagement with the local community on the part of educators and administrators to create coalitions intent on working toward solutions that benefit the students, district, and community.

**Union and board leaders.** Throughout this conflict, personal animosity and mistrust pervaded the formal negotiations space, particularly as individual members of both negotiating parties engaged in othering through the local press. As many respondents alluded, once individuals, especially from the negotiating teams, engaged in public relations warfare and personal vilification through othering, they reached a point at which it became impossible to negotiate in the same room. The incessant negative discourse resulted in greater polarization between the two sides and created a situation in which there was no room in the middle for compromise.

Principal Royal’s evaluation of the behaviors of both parties is salient to this discussion. He argued that both negotiating teams should have contained their arguments to that of dollars and sense. A clear focus on the financial component of bargaining would have alleviated the personal animosity that developed from rhetoric designed to discredit, devalue, and demonize the opposition. With a focus on finances, the negotiating teams would have been more likely to contain their opposing views to the formal negotiation space, or, at the very least, directed discussions in the informal arena to the topic of finances.

**District leadership and teachers.** Ineffectual leadership by the superintendent and other experts contributed to the demise of the formal policy/negotiations space in Mountainville. The district solicitor was hired from a Philadelphia law firm; the business manager was a consultant contracted by numerous districts in the region; PSEA representatives were from outside the district; and the superintendent lived in a much wealthier district in the county. While district
leaders and experts do not need to be from a rural community in order to lead a rural district effectively, it is my contention based on the findings of this case, that district leaders and experts must be political leaders able to build and maintain relationships with multiple constituencies interested in improving the district and community, which requires knowledge of and engagement with the community their district serves.

Superintendents are beholden to their school board majority because of the board’s ability to hire and fire (Lutz & Merz, 1992), making it difficult for them to manage conflict. It is even more challenging for female superintendents to maneuver politically challenging situations because they tend to receive less support than male superintendents (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). This is particularly problematic in conflicts surrounding teacher contracts. If a superintendent’s actions concur with the wishes of the board majority during a contract dispute, the superintendent is likely to generate hostility on the part of the teachers union, creating stressful working conditions in the schools. If a superintendent’s actions agree with the demands of the teachers union, she may find positive working conditions in the schools, but quickly be out of a job.

Superintendent Waters, like many superintendents, particularly those working with factional boards (Spring, 2005), did not possess enough political power to lead her school board’s actions and essentially became a “pawn of the power structure” (Spring, 2005, p. 173). She also lacked the power necessary to influence the actions of the teachers union in the formal and informal arenas. This was due, in large part, to the isolated nature of the superintendency, which makes it difficult to build a coalition of political support to promote the superintendent’s agenda. Two consequences of these power dynamics are that superintendents (1) tend towards conflict avoidance and (2) have difficulty surviving intense political conflict (Boyd, 1976, 1982).
Superintendent Waters provides an example of the failure of many superintendents to build a coalition of support necessary to gain enough power to either direct or successfully maneuver such conflict.

District leaders must build and maintain working relationships with both board and union leaders, as well as community stakeholders in order to survive conflict and work proactively to prevent future conflicts from consuming their local community. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) remind us that community stakeholders expect that their local superintendent will forge partnerships with community groups and improve community economic conditions. And, one way in which superintendents can increase political power is through the building of community coalitions of support (Spring, 2005).

District leaders, including superintendents, business managers, board solicitors, and other leaders of a school system need not be lifetime community members of the district in which they work. It is imperative, however, that these leaders immerse themselves in their district communities. They must assess the changing needs and tensions of the community, including the sources of these needs and tensions, such as economic and social contexts and local history. While district leaders, like other public school educators, adhere to professional norms, they must also recognize the values and interests that members of the district community have, including those regarding education. These leaders must understand the competing narratives that run through their rural community, so that they can engage in meaningful dialogue with divergent groups.

In the Mountainville case, obvious disconnects existed between district leaders and teachers and community members. The board solicitor and business manager appeared incapable of understanding the district’s financial situation and were accused by several respondents of not
taking the district’s best interests into consideration. The superintendent and the majority of teachers interviewed dismissed many community values as backwards and stereotypically rural and viewed their responsibility as one of educating Mountainville’s youth out of this community. Instead of building upon the pride students and community members have from their agricultural roots, the superintendent and teachers attempted to overcome what they viewed as inadequacies in the Mountainville population. With this relationship to the community, it is not surprising that Superintendent Waters was unable to effectively lead the negotiations process or that she failed to win the trust and respect of her school board majority, which represented these community values.

In Mountainville, the school district functions essentially as an institution of disembedding. It functions as a facilitator of youth outmigration and brain drain in a community experiencing decades of economic distress. The values of the district’s teachers and leaders are incongruent with those of the apparent majority of community members. Instead of a focus on the basics, the district prepares all students for college. Mountainville’s teachers and administrators have worked to make the district’s programs and goals like that of their cosmopolitan neighbors, ignoring and even repudiating the community’s rural identity. District leaders have, on multiple occasions, attempted to eliminate the agriculture program from the curriculum, though it is a symbol of this rural identity. The consistent disembedding function of the school district has created some real tensions between a largely working class community and its middle class teachers and administrators, who community members see as adding no value to the community.

This disconnected and oppositional relationship between Mountainville’s educators (teachers and administrators) and the rest of the community is not the only possibility for the
community and its school district. There are many avenues by which the two groups can come together in a spirit of mutual benefit. At the very least, there are opportunities through relationships and a political coalition can be built between educators and community members with a shared vision or common goals for the district and community. Building administrators hinted at signs of healing in the district. But, bridges need to be built between the district’s educators and community members, and there are many places in which these bridges can be built.

Mountainville has an active Future Farmers of America organization despite repeated efforts to eliminate the agriculture program. This organization provides a great place for the district and community farmers to come together. Students, with their advisor, might hold information on new farming techniques for area farmers, conduct studies of soil productivity and water quality on local farms, set up a farmers’ market in which local farmers can sell their produce, or utilize the defunct greenhouse on the school district property to work with community members on effective gardening techniques. The town of Mountainville has a local historical society, a local business organization, and a community organization devoted to maintaining a running/walking/biking trail along the river. These organizations can provide the district with partnerships aimed at improving the quality of life in Mountainville. Business, technology, and economics classes and student organizations might work with the local business organization and the regional non-profit community center to develop grant proposals and other projects aimed at revitalizing the town and attracting industry to the area. History and language arts classes and clubs can partner with the local historical society to stage district and community events aimed at teaching the community’s youth about the area’s rich history and its potential. Mountainville has several annual festivals, including a fall festival, in which there is no district
participation. These special events provide ample opportunities for Mountainville’s educators and administrators to make meaningful connections to the community the district serves.

District leadership can also build bridges to multiple community groups through open forums, town hall meetings, and by bringing in community liaisons to myriad district committees. The district might bring in representatives from environmental groups, various industries, agriculture and other government agencies, and so on, to provide information to community members on issues relevant to their lives.

Finally, district leaders should position the school district as the community hub in arenas besides that of athletics. For example, some of Mountainville’s recent graduates have started an alumni association, but the district has so far failed to truly capitalize on the potential partnerships it can develop with individuals in this growing network. The district can offer its buildings for community socials, potlucks, and meeting space.

In sum, district teachers and administrative leaders need to begin to build bridges between the school and community. They need to build networks of support and engage in meaningful dialogue with members of multiple community groups, including those who have historically devalued the work of the district’s educators. It is through the forging of these relationships that the Mountainville district and community will survive and progress. Mountainville’s teachers and district leaders must make their work and the school district institution relevant and valuable to the community. This will be a long, and at times, arduous process, but if the goal of Mountainville’s educators and community members is one of survival and mutual benefit, there is no alternative.

Implications for Rural Education Research

As I argue in the beginning of this study, too often Americans, including many rural education researchers, view rural communities as *Gemeinschaft*-like, rather than communities
equally prone to conflict stemming from competing values and interests. The Mountainville case illustrates the critical need for rural education scholars to study rural schools and communities from a more conflictual lens. When viewed as factionalized, political spaces full of tension and competing values, we can broaden the scope of rural education research in important ways. The Mountainville case, for example, allowed me to explore school-community relations as tenuous and fragile, highlighting the deep divides that can exist between rural educators and community members, as well as significant divisions that exist between community members resulting from social and economic divides, as well as local histories, and the importance of politically astute district leadership that can navigate these divisions and promote positive relations between rural schools and their sometimes factional communities.

Positive rural school-community partnerships don’t happen naturally. They require strong leaders who are capable of influencing policy decisions that benefit rural schools and communities. Rural education researchers should begin to view themselves not just as observers of consensus-based communities, but as capacity builders whose research can influence programs that train rural district leaders. These leaders must be able to generate and maintain positive relations between rural schools and communities and more effectively manage conflict when it arises.

New rural education research should also focus on ways rural leaders can manage the rebuilding of school districts and communities in the wake of devastating conflict. Though community rebuilding efforts are slow, complex processes, rural education researchers can engage in studies that offer insights into ways rural leaders can lead community efforts to identify values and ideologies that lead to competing narratives, as well as the assumptions that undergird these assumptions (Stephenson, 2010). John (2011) argues that community
development is impeded by conflict because it fractures communities and establishes lasting
distrust and animosity. Rural education researchers should work to understand the ways conflict
divides communities and disrupts existing social networks and relationships and explore
promising practices for rural leaders to guide community healing and development.
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Appendix

Methods

Rationale for Research Approach

This grounded theory study explores school and community conflict through the collective bargaining process spanning from 2005 to 2009 in a rural Pennsylvania school district. A qualitative approach was used to generate a substantive theory that will contribute to (1) an understanding of the origins of this conflict and the processes through which it was exacerbated and resolved and (2) how these new understandings of conflict origins and resolutions, in turn, help to generate insights into the nature of conflict in similar types of communities. A final goal of this research was to (3) determine implications of these understandings for the practices of union and district leaders and school board members in similar situations.

The exploratory nature of this complex process lent itself well to qualitative inquiry (Krathwohl, 2009). Using a qualitative approach allowed me to gain an understanding of the origins and processes of this conflict through naturalistic and humanistic means, providing the tools to study the phenomenon in its particular context and to study and interpret the personal dynamics between and myriad perceptions of multiple actors involved in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; McMillan, 2008; Merriam, 2002). Because this study explored the process of school-community conflict, instead of focusing solely on its outcomes, qualitative methods proved particularly useful (McMillan, 2008). Most importantly, qualitative inquiry allowed me to approach this understudied phenomenon inductively in order to generate substantive theory (Merriam, 2002).
Research Design

This research employed a grounded theory approach using case study methods. Grounded theory was useful for this research because the study was exploratory and inductive, with concepts emerging throughout the research process with the goal of generating substantive theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Krathwohl, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The generation of conceptual categories lies at the heart of grounded theory work, and its aim is to enhance “understanding of persons in their everyday lives—their routines, habits, problems, and issues—and how they handle or resolve these” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. ix), in accordance with my goal of approaching the conflict through an in-depth investigation of the words and actions of the people involved. Grounded theory provided an effective means to understand the complex phenomenon in terms of its process and the multiple contextual layers that influenced that process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It was a suitable approach for understanding the complexities of rural school-community conflict, and its application was critical to the construction of substantive theory that can be used to explain the origins and evolution of school-community conflict in this case.

The case study method was salient to this grounded theory approach because it allowed me to engage in “intensive description and analysis” (Merriam, 2002, p. 8) of the conflict and the actors that were involved in and affected by it. This process enabled me to fully explore the parameters of the conflict, including the words and actions of conflict participants, and the meanings that were attached to them. In school-community conflict, the lines between phenomenon and context are blurred, making case study work the most effective means of engaging with the data (Yin, 2009). Using case study methods allowed me to study the complex processes that occurred throughout the conflict (Merriam, 1998). Because this research focuses
on a conflict that ended in 2009, the use of historical analysis of primary sources proved necessary because observations were not possible (Merriam, 1998).

Commensurate with substantive theory generation, which is specific to a group or place, a single case was used for this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). “The construction of theory necessitates that an idea be explored fully and considered from many different angles or perspectives” (p. 56); the use of a single case created the opportunity to comprehensively explore this conflict from multiple, often opposing perspectives, which allowed for the generation of substantive theory.

A single case was also appropriate to this study because of the research’s revelatory nature (Yin, 2009). As argued previously in the chapter, scant research exists that investigates collective bargaining processes and conflicts at the local level, particularly school-community discord that arises from industrial-style bargaining. In the few instances that single cases of collective bargaining have been studied, these studies have focused on large urban districts, and have not explored the school-community conflict that can arise through the bargaining process nor the importance of community context in influencing this conflict. This case study considers community context an integral piece of school-community conflict surrounding collective bargaining, and centers on a rural school district with a history of tension. Because of my personal connections to the superintendent, union leadership, and some school board members, I was able to gain access and investigate a critically understudied phenomenon. Because I was able to establish trust and a positive rapport with respondents quickly, I was granted access not just to the processes of the case, but also to individual opinions and reflections regarding key details of the case across a wide spectrum of variance. These divergent, and at times, opposing
perceptions and reflections enabled me to generate new insights into school-community conflict surrounding collective bargaining.

While other districts in the region experienced work stoppages resulting from collective bargaining during this period, the discord in these districts did not pervade the community as it did in Mountainville and was settled much more quickly, as evidenced by regional newspaper reports. Additionally, these districts served communities that were more economically viable than Mountainville. Because Mountainville stands apart from these other cases in its high level of economic distress and the long-term pervasive and debilitating conflict it experienced, no regional district served as a viable case for comparative purposes. While it is probable that other districts and their communities outside the region experienced lengthy, vitriolic discord stemming from collective bargaining, time and financial constraints limited the possibility of exploring these possible cases.

Site and Sample Selection

The site was selected purposefully (Creswell, 2003) in order to explore a rural school and community that experienced conflict. Because I am an alumna of the district and have maintained ties with community members and teachers, the selection of this site also allowed me ease of access and assured more candid responses from participants (Maxwell, 2005). Interview respondents were also selected purposefully in order to achieve “representativeness” among multiple constituencies involved in the conflict, as well as a wide range of perspectives between participants, including diametrically opposing opinions, in order to develop theory (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 89-90).
Research Strategies

Because this research focused on a highly contentious conflict involving the superintendent, teachers union, and school board/community members, gaining permission from the superintendent to conduct the study was insufficient. In this case, it was necessary to obtain permission from both the superintendent and union leadership (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Initial contact between the researcher and superintendent was made via email, and contact between the researcher and union president was made via telephone. I gained access to school board members through the superintendent who emailed the members on behalf of the researcher and provided the researcher with contact information for willing participants. Once I was able to meet with willing board members, they, in turn, connected me with other board members, who may have been initially hesitant to participate. The union president sent an email to all union members, as well, on my behalf, and provided me with contact information. I used email to set up interviews with union members and school board members when possible. (A few school board members had limited or no access to the Internet. Telephone conversations were used in these cases.) Cognizant that “people most overtly reveal their perspectives on what is important to them” during times of conflict (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 100), I took care to establish a positive rapport with research participants on both sides of the controversy (Maxwell, 2005) in order to create an atmosphere in which they felt comfortable sharing their views and experiences.

Data Collection

I conducted unstructured interviews with initial respondents, and then semi-structured interviews using an interview guide as more data were collected and analyzed. I conducted 20 one-on-one interviews and one group interview with three participants over a period of seven months in 2010. Interviews typically lasted between one and three hours depending on the
willingness of the participant to continue conversations and time constraints. Three union respondents’ interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes because the interviews were conducted during the school day. Interviewers were asked to describe their experiences, perspectives, opinions, and reflections about the collective bargaining process and conflict, including discussions of the negotiations process (for respondents directly involved), opinions on causes of the conflict and events that exacerbated it, impetus for individual and group actions, impetus for contract settlement, and reflections on personal words, actions, and experiences. The unstructured and semi-structured nature of the interview allowed natural conversations to develop with the focus of collecting pertinent data. The interviews were tape recorded with prior consent of the participants, and transcriptions were used for data analysis.

Initial participants included the district superintendent, local union leaders, and vocal teachers union critics, in order to gain an initial range of participant narratives and perspectives. Through a process of theoretical sampling, a broader range of union participants, building-level administrators, regional union representatives, and school board members were interviewed. In sum, ten union members, seven current and former school board members, two building-level administrators, three regional union representatives, and the district superintendent were interviewed.

In addition to interviews, external district and union communications were analyzed to gain greater insight into the values of both groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), and local newspaper articles, editorials, letters-to-the editor, and commentaries were analyzed to gain further insight into the values, opinions, and beliefs of the multiple groups and individuals involved in the conflict, as well as the strategies they used to gain support for those values, opinions, and ideologies. Communications and some newspaper documents were given to me by
participants. Other newspaper documents were accessed through the Newsbank database when possible and through microfilm and email communications with newspaper reporters when articles were unavailable through the database. Memos were created to highlight emergent concepts and affirmative and discrepant data in these documents.

Data collection began approximately six months after the teacher contract dispute was settled. Because this conflict generated intense emotional responses for participants, the delay in data collection strengthened the case because it provided study participants the opportunity to reflect on the conflict. While some interviews were still emotionally charged six months after the resolution, all participants were able to reflect on individual and coalition roles in the conflict’s escalation and tentative resolution, as well as the conflict’s aftermath.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed throughout the collection process and after its conclusion. Data analysis during early collection drove the selection of later interview participants and questions, as I attempted to discover and saturate important concepts\(^\text{18}\) that would lead to theory generation. Data analysis occurred through the simultaneous processes of open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)\(^\text{19}\), in which I coded each interview individually for concepts and then made connections between these concepts through pattern and theme matching. Connections were made through a process of memo writing, in which I asked questions and made comparisons and contrasts about the content of interviews and documents. Examples of conceptual categories that emerged during this process included: memory, constructions of other, class, and power.

\(^{18}\)Corbin and Strauss (2008) define concept saturation as the “process of acquiring sufficient data to develop each category/theme fully in terms of its properties and dimensions and to account for variation” (p. 195).

\(^{19}\)In earlier editions, these techniques were explained as separate processes; however, in the third edition, Corbin stresses that, in fact, these processes occur simultaneously.
In addition, I analyzed the data for context and process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analysis for context revealed the importance of the broader economic downturn, in addition to local contextual issues, to this conflict. Through analysis for process, I was able to recognize important points at which the conflict turned or was exacerbated, as well as the critical point that determined contract settlement. Initial coding took place on paper copies of interviews. These were stored electronically using NVivo8 software, which was also used to aid higher level analysis. Memos were created in this program, as well, to create an audit trail, guide my thought processes, make connections, and indicate data saturation.

Finally, I integrated the conceptual categories into a substantive theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that can be used to explain the conflict in this case.\(^{20}\) The identification of a central, or core, category—the concept to which all other concepts are related—(Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was essential to this step in the data analysis. An initial central category was identified but later discarded as ineffective in explaining discrepant data. In my initial integrative memos, I theorized that class was the central category in explaining this conflict. Much of the conflictual rhetoric centered on differentiating oneself from the opposition based on class, and the two coalitions appeared largely to fall along class lines. However, through the process of theory refinement, I discarded the initial central category of class. There were a few key players in the conflict who did not fit this category well. For example, several of the leaders of the school board coalition (opposed to settlement with the teachers) were upper middle class community members in professional or government occupations. My inability to resolve this discrepancy led to a new central category—competing hegemonic narratives of community—that takes these discrepancies into account and is a better explanatory category for understanding school-community conflict in this case. This new central category incorporates the use of class as

\(^{20}\) In previous editions, this process was named selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
a rhetorical device used to socially exclude the teachers from the rest of the community, as well as the use of other discourse aimed at consolidating power through the politicization of community identity. Once this core category was identified, all other concepts were related to it, including class, memory, work, and the purpose of education to create a “unifying explanatory scheme” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 104) in the grounded theory.

**Researcher-Interviewer**

I am an alumna of the Mountainville Area School District, have a master’s degree in educational administration, planning, and social policy, and served as a teacher in a neighboring school district from 2003-2007 with a dual certificate in secondary English and K-12 reading specialist. I had five years of teaching experience before entering a doctoral program in educational leadership, and during my teaching tenure was involved in a local school-community conflict centering on book censorship. I moved back to the Mountainville area in Summer 2010.

This description is important because when the researcher is the interviewer, the researcher-interviewer’s background has the dual potential to create biases in data collection (Brott & Meyers, 2002) while increasing the researcher’s sensitivity to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To diminish bias, I intentionally selected participants with a wide variance in their perceptions of the conflict, including respondents with life experiences and perceptions that lie in stark contrast to my personal background, in order to mitigate this potential issue. The selection of participants and use of open-ended interviews, which relied heavily on respondents’ personal perceptions, experiences, and opinions related to the conflict, provided ample variety to overcome the possibility of bias. The unique perceptions and opinions of the participants contributed to a wealth of robust, divergent data that strengthened the study, and, through the significant amount of time spent actively engaged with the data, I increased my sensitivity to the
perceptions and opinions of the diverse research participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My background as a former student of this district and as a teacher in a rural district both enhanced my “sensitivity to concepts in the data” and my ability to “discern important connections between [these] concepts” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 34).

Validity and Reliability

Validity. Corbin and Strauss (2008) contend that “objectivity in qualitative research is a myth” (p. 32); and in grounded theory, it is impossible to be devoid of bias (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, qualitative research is not concerned with eliminating all researcher bias; instead, it is concerned with understanding how the researcher’s bias may impact the study and avoiding any negative consequences that may arise as a result of that bias (Maxwell, 2005).

Several measures were taken to minimize bias, as well as other threats to validity. First, the use of multiple sources of data—interviews with various respondents, in addition to document analysis, provided for triangulation. Internal validity threats were diminished through the extensive amount of time spent in the field conducting interviews (approximately 30 hours), the collection of rich data through intensive interviews with complete transcriptions, and member checks with respondents (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 1996, 2005). According to Maxwell (1996), “the most serious threat to the theoretical validity of an account is not collecting or paying attention to discrepant data, or not considering alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena you are studying” (p. 90). Because this study employs a grounded theory design, the design takes into account discrepant data in order to validate, revise, and further explore the emergent theory, minimizing this threat.

Reliability. I had experience in interview techniques, including the semi-structured interview prior to this study; additionally, I had experience in analyzing qualitative data,
including interview transcriptions and documents, including the utilization of NVivo software, thus increasing reliability. Reliability was also ensured through data triangulation, peer examination, and the use of memos throughout the analysis process, which created an audit trail (Merriam, 2002).

Limitations

Because this is a qualitative grounded theory study culminating in substantive theory, the research is analytically generalizable as opposed to statistically generalizable (Yin, 2009). That is, the research is generalizable to the theory as opposed to the broader population. Future research that generates replicated findings would strengthen the theory.

The conflictual nature of the case created some limitations to this study. I engaged in dialogue with participants about a conflict that still produces strong emotional responses for individuals, appears to have created deep divides between individuals and groups, and resulted in powerful personal attacks on particular union and school board members. Because this research took place in a “conflict-ridden setting,” some potential participants were unwilling to participate, though these potential respondents did not provide reasons for their refusal (Maxwell, 2005, p. 100), including certain leaders of the teachers union and school board. While their viewpoints are missing from the analysis, the researcher attempted to overcome this limitation through interviews with participants close to these leaders and through analysis of newspaper documents in which these leaders were interviewed to gain an understanding of their opinions.

References


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