MAKING MEANING OF SCHOOL CLOSURE

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examines the personal and psychological effects of the closing of a school on school employees. Through an investigation of the literature, records of the participant-researcher’s own experience, and a series of personal interviews with school employees who experienced closure or near-closure, this study addressed the primary research question, "How do school employees personally experience the closure of their employing school?" A grounded theory approach and purposive sampling were utilized in research design. The experiences of students in the school or their parents were not examined, nor were the causes for or factors influencing the decision to close. Similarly, the legal, financial and procedural aspects of closing a school were considered only insofar as they affected school employees’ personal experiences. Through a process of open coding, findings emerged which led to implications regarding: leadership in context; grief response; job loss concern; and shaping professional identity.

The primary context for the research is an American independent school, where the researcher worked for seven years until its closure in 2013, although data from employees of three other schools is included in order to capture as wide a variation in data as possible. This is currently the only known study that examines the personal experience of school closure in independent schools in the United States. Generalizability may therefore be limited by the relatively small data set, but it is expected to add to a growing body of literature on the personal experience of school closure.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study examined the process of school closure and school employees’ reaction to that process. The experience of one school that closed, represented by several former employees including myself, comprise the primary focus. Data from employees of three other schools which also faced the possibility of closure, but which experienced different results, are also included. Through qualitative research methods such as interviews, memos and reflection, I analyzed the process of school closure (or near-closure) as it was experienced by school employees in order to understand the meaning that people ascribed to their experience.

*Meaning* in this sense is defined as “the construction of an account or recital of an event, or series of events, either true or fictitious, that serves to organize or structure life” (Cacioppo et al., 2005). The focus of this study also incorporated the other connotation of the word *meaning*, that of significance or importance. Thus by focusing on meaning, we can appreciate both the gravity of the events described and their function as a catalyst for organizing a mental view of life. By understanding the meaning of school closure for those affected by it, we can gain greater insight as to how to approach the human factor in a skillful, organized fashion rather than the guesswork that many schools are forced to engage in currently.

There is currently very little academic literature on the topic of school closure,
and the literature that does exist focuses primarily on causes of closure, or procedures to follow in case of closure, rather than human reactions to it. Thus this study is expected to be of value to those in similar situations not only because of the nature of the topic, but also due to the relative lack of literature in the field on this topic. To this end, the research questions are: (1) How do school employees experience the process of school closure? 2) What can their experiences teach us that might help us better understand that process for others in the future? and (3) Are there better and worse ways to close a school, from the perspective of those employed by it?”

**Context**

Academy of the Pacific (AOP), a small independent school in Hawaiʻi was founded in 1961 as a way to address a critical but underserved need in the educational landscape. The school’s founders believed there was a need for a school that served students from other independent schools whose academic performance had begun to slip. They established a small school in which individual attention to each student was a guiding principle. Sometimes there were behavioral issues accompanying—or masking—the academic issues, often a result of the students’ own frustration at their circumstances. Such issues could lead the previous school to dismiss the student, leaving families with few options and a feeling that they had nowhere to go. For
countless students and their parents over a span of decades, AOP was the place that met the needs of such families; a place where students who were lost found a welcoming home.

Just as movement between one’s original school and AOP was necessary, it was considered normal for a student to attend AOP for a year or two and then, after establishing an improved track record in behavior or academics, to return to the previous school. In fact, AOP was originally founded to serve the middle grades only, on the assumption that attending the school would rehabilitate a student so as to return to their original school for the high school grades. Eventually AOP added higher grade levels as well so that some students, having grown accustomed to AOP’s small size, personal attention, and welcoming environment chose not to return to their previous school, and stayed all the way through to graduation. Over time, AOP’s program and organization evolved (e.g. moving to a new campus, adding grade levels, changing the school’s name from the original, Honolulu Junior Academy). Yet throughout all these changes, the school remained true to this core demographic: AOP was the school for those students for whom school had not “worked” elsewhere.

Despite this history of filling an important need, in June 2013, with enrollment having dwindled to sixty-three students and only about thirty having committed to return for the following year, AOP’s Board of Trustees voted to “cease academic
operations.” Although a skeleton crew of three staff members remained employed for one more year to settle affairs and dispose of the school’s physical property, students were no longer enrolled and all other employees were laid off. After fifty-two years serving the needs of sometimes desperate students and parents, in fact being referred to by some alumni as the place that “saved their lives,” Academy of the Pacific was closed.

I joined the staff of AOP in 2006 and worked there for seven years until the school closed. Although at the time of the closure I was the longest-tenured administrator, several of my faculty colleagues had served there longer than I had; two had been with the school over twenty years and had seen it at its zenith of nearly 160 students in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the closure was not necessarily a surprise given that the school’s financial health had been declining steadily for the previous several years, this decision to close was nevertheless a shock to the school’s employees because of the change that it signified.

Furthermore, guidance for AOP employees facing the prospect of school closure was scarce. For example, comments about not knowing what to expect, anxiety over lack of information or slowness in delivery of information, and observations such as “no road map” or “no playbook” were common. Some of my colleagues expressed that they would welcome even bad news rather than feel like they had no way to know what to expect. Many simply wanted an answer to the question, “Is the school going to close or
not?” and then, later, when the decision had been made, they wanted an answer to their ensuing question, “Now what?” If my colleagues and I had had even a slightly greater understanding of the process we were going through, perhaps the related anxiety and stress could have been correspondingly reduced. Thus the need for, and focus of, this study emerged.

**Intent and Scope**

Because the research for this study occurred primarily after the decision to close was final, the decision to close was not in question. The focus therefore was on how school employees reacted to it, were affected by it, and later reflected on the results. Factors influencing the decision to close are discussed but only as they appear in retrospect to those affected by it. School employees’ beliefs about causes of the school’s decline and failure are included but from a perspective that surveys those beliefs from the overall standpoint of personal reactions to the closure. This study does not attempt to describe precisely how and why the school closed, nor to prescribe how to avoid school closure altogether; but rather to offer insight as to how to deal with school employees affected by closure, both during and after, should it occur.
Research Design

This study examined Academy of the Pacific as a case study exemplar whose experience may represent those of other closed schools. Given the sporadic and often sudden nature of school closings, as well as the lack of a reliable way to contact former members of an organization that no longer exists, attempting to assemble a representative sample of the larger population of such schools would have been impractical. Furthermore, due to the variety of contexts and missions of these schools while operating, and due to the myriad causes of school decline and closure, such representativeness would have been extremely difficult to define and therefore to achieve.

Nevertheless, the circumstances of several other schools, including another one where I was employed, are examined. The purpose of doing so was to strengthen an argument for generalizability to the extent possible by contrasting the experiences of people in these schools with those at AOP. By identifying differences between the schools, I have intended to delineate more clearly the limits of generalizability from one case to another. Because the literature in the field of school closure was comparatively sparse, this study offered a few more data points in what I hope will be a growing body of literature in the field.

As an employee of the school, I was affected directly by the closure. My own
research memos, written as events were unfolding and in combination with my own memories, have served as data. In fact, they served as the only data attainable that were created contemporaneously with them. All other data for this study existed only in retrospect at the time of data collection and writing.

Other people formerly employed by the school were interviewed several months after the school had closed in order to provide multiple perspectives on the same events as a source of data triangulation. According to Maxwell (2013), the concept of data triangulation means “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings” (p. 128). This concept was useful because it “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systemic biases . . . and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128).

Direct personal interviews proved to be the best available method for gleaning data of such a personal nature. Surveys, journal entries or questionnaires would have lacked the flexibility of a two-way conversation with research subjects; through interviews I was able to delve further into unexpected points raised by the interviewees, as well as to discard or ignore altogether those questions seen as irrelevant by them.

To ensure the greatest triangulation, however, research subjects were chosen to represent a wide cross-section of those with a professional affiliation with the school. All were school employees but they were employed in various positions throughout the
school organization. Some also had the additional perspective of parents—these included employees whose children had already left AOP at the time of closure and those whose children were still enrolled. A wider sample of parent reactions would have been illuminating but would have been beyond the scope of this work, which is intended to focus on outcomes that intersect both the professional and the personal realm.

The interviews were transcribed and coded through a process of open coding, whereby categories emerged. Ultimately, conclusions were drawn from where and how categories clustered. It is perhaps not surprising that there was a fair amount of overlap between research participants in the themes that each saw as important. Yet the differences—in perspective, in priority, in meaning—were telling. We can gain greatest insight through an examination of both the similarities and the differences in various peoples’ reactions to school closure. It is toward precisely this type of insight that this study is aimed.
Chapter 2: Review of literature

Overview of the Literature and Rationale

Research on school closure is relatively scarce when compared to nearly all others areas of school operations such as pedagogical, financial, or organizational matters. Still more scarce was literature on the topic of school closure as it was personally experienced by those affected by it. This research focus emerged from my own experience and that of my colleagues, as well as from consulting literature on school closures. When my school closed it seemed as if no one knew what to do or what to make of it. Upon researching this topic, the lack of a broad literature base soon became apparent.

Publications on the topic of school closure often concentrate on procedural or decision-making concerns: research on the indicators of a school’s financial health which may lead up to a school’s closing (Davison & Davison, 2009; Hawk, 2008; James et al., 2008); how to make the decision to close a school (Gow, 2009; Raze, 1985); and logistical procedures to follow when doing so (Bassett & Wilson, 2009; McMilin, 2010). This ‘how-to’ literature would obviously be useful in closing a school but it generally said little about how to address the human element contained within it. Other applicable literature came from research on the larger topic of change in schools. Since closure is the ultimate form of change for a school, this literature is also germane to the
topic of school closure. However, the closure of a school is a change of an entirely different kind, not only a matter of degree. Though school personnel will react similarly to those in schools undergoing other changes, the degree of the change in a closure is magnified by its finality. Thus school closure as a personal experience of change can reasonably support its own specific line of inquiry.

Beyond school change literature is literature from the field of psychology on the topic of change generally, especially that of grief and loss, the typical responses that accompany major life changes (Marris, 1986). This study will document the experience of school closure, an extreme form of change in a school, which can trigger such feelings of loss (Evans, 1996) and a grief response often not unlike a personal bereavement, in that there is a discernible process that closure survivors undergo which closely matches that of the grief engendered by bereavement (Doka, 2001).

As Bathgate (2005) comments, “So much to do with school closures is anecdotal. . . lacking empirical research and . . . there are too many variables to allow for much comparison between studies” (p. 18). Common sense tells us that this can be explained, at least partially, by the nature of closure itself. That is, once a school is gone there is simply very little left to study. Further, my personal experience showed that those working in a school immediately prior to its closure—when the need for data is arguably greatest—have little time and attention available for careful gathering of thoughtfully
selected data points or reasoned consideration of them. It is my hope that this study will add to this still-nascent body of knowledge around school closure, and build a base of recommendations and insights that may inform others, thereby reducing the need to “reinvent the wheel” if undergoing closure. The example schools illustrated in this study, although they are necessarily anecdotal, can contribute to the larger data set of school closure, thus building the knowledge in the field.

**School Closure Indicators**

An examination of the possible indicators of a school’s potential for closing is useful in setting the context, as well as in defining the uniqueness of each case of school closure. One such study was that of Hawk (2008) “School Decline: Predictors, Process and Intervention.” In this study, Hawk (2008) presented a comprehensive model of the factors that influence the process of school “decline” which often leads to closure. Hawk’s research concentrated primarily on the context of a declining school (i.e., preclosure); specifically identifying the factors present in a decline scenario and attempting to isolate and describe the various attitudes, actions, assumptions, etc., exhibited by various constituencies, as well as the organizational interventions and external forces that may affect a declining school. Thus, Hawk (2008) has given us a way to more clearly understand the factors at play before and during closure.
While Hawk’s (2008) research focus was different from that of this study, some of Hawk’s (2008) findings overlapped with the findings here. For example, Hawk (2008) included a section in her findings titled “The potential for personal responses to help or hinder” (p. 157-167), which contained some of the same “personal response” themes as the reflections from research participants in this study. As Hawk (2008) mentioned, “Individuals developed ways to rationalise what was happening that enabled them to cope and to continue working without becoming too stressed” (p. 164). This finding was similar to the some of the data gathered from research participants in this study, who commented on how their own identity, values and job performance as an educator were shaped by the closure experience.

In a similar vein, McManus (2012) presented “What Dead Schools Can Teach Us,” a useful analysis of schools in the past century that experienced this decline process resulting in the schools’ eventual closure. McManus’s (2010) findings showed four primary categories for reasons that schools have closed: “missions that lose potency and timeliness, unsuccessful leadership transitions, financial collapse, and lack of strategic planning” (p. 30).

It is appropriate – and perhaps all the more poignant – to note that AOP exhibited all four of McManus’s categories. Three years before its closure, AOP hired a new Head of School, and in fact, in the nine-year span from 2004 to 2013, AOP was led by three
different heads, an extraordinarily high turnover rate for independent school leaders. During that time, the school faced steadily declining enrollment and, due to its heavy dependence on tuition income, resultant financial difficulties. Thus the school decline process for AOP, once begun, seemed to escalate and gain momentum with each year until, perhaps inevitably, the Board made its decision to close the school in June 2013. Since all four of the conditions identified in McManus’ article were present in the closure scenarios examined in this study, and since each of them was mentioned specifically as important by research participants, these factors can be said to have influenced the closure experience for school employees.

In addition to the works illuminating the indicators of school decline or closure was Gow’s (2009) article “Knowing When It’s Time: Closing an Independent School” which offered advice on making the decision to close a school, organized around three themes: the legal, the practical and the emotional. He underscored the lack of guidance available for school people in this scenario, stating, “each school must face its destiny more or less alone” (Gow, 2009, para. 5). In such a setting, school employees tend to feel “more or less alone” since everyone involved in the school at every level is in uncharted waters, and few of them know anyone to whom they can reach out for advice. This is confirmed by my own experience during AOP’s closure.
Personal Experiences of School Closure

Despite its paucity, literature on the personal experience of school closure does exist. One of the most pertinent was Bathgate’s (2005), “School Closure–A Case Study.” This was a participant-researcher account of the experiences of students, parents and teachers at a school that was closed by order of the local department of education. Her primary research question was, “What is the impact of school closure on the various elements of a school community and is there a way to close a school and minimise this impact?” (Bathgate, 2005, p. 8).

Bathgate’s study was obviously germane but differs from this study in some important ways. The most important difference is that, as a public school, Bathgate’s school was subsidized financially by a state government. Although the decision to close Bathgate’s school was made based on factors that included financial ones, there seemed never to be a doubt that the school could rely on its expected budget to carry it through the appointed term. In fact, Bathgate (2005) mentioned a feeling of surplus in the school’s final year: “There was, if anything, an oversupply of physical resources and plenty of money” (p. 165-6).

At AOP, finances were certainly a contributing factor in the decision to close. In this case, the school’s financial health was widely cited as the deciding factor. The financial strains leading up to closure were significant concerns in their own right, and
a cause for concern for employees. This added a greater degree of financial stress to the context of a declining school than Bathgate’s school faced, with all the attendant personal reactions one might imagine.

In addition, Bathgate’s (2005) faculty research subjects were contractually guaranteed employment through reassignment within the department: “When this school was closed however, its resources, including some staff, were redeployed to new schools” (p. 10). This was not the case for AOP employees. When this school closed, its employees were very much on their own in finding a way forward. As Bathgate (2005) comments: “The fact that this was a closure happening within a government school where all the teachers and administrative staff were guaranteed new jobs probably helped the staff deal with the situation better than if the closure meant they were out of a job altogether” (p. 161).

On the subject of personal experience of change in schools, the psychologist and school consultant Robert Evans, in his book The Human Side of School Change (1996) has done outstanding work that applies psychological principles in school settings. In this work Evans did not mention school closure specifically, but rather change more broadly. He explored the phenomenon of change in schools from a psychological perspective. Based on his own observations and work in schools, and drawing on his background as a psychologist, Evans examined the little-studied and under-appreciated
area of personal responses to change initiatives in schools.

Basing a central premise of his book on the work of sociologist Peter Marris (1986), Evans (1996) stated:

Marris makes a compelling case that life depends on continuity and that change usually means loss. In virtually every significant transition of any kind, acceptance and adjustment prove far more difficult than anticipated for all concerned: whether a change is planned or unplanned, personal or professional, welcome or unwelcome. (p. 25-6)

As Evans pointed out above, whether school people view the change embodied by school closure as planned or unplanned makes little difference to the fact that it is a profound change and to the typical human response to change. Similarly, whether they experience the loss of their job as purely a professional matter or take it more personally as a major component of their personal identity, the response to change generally follows the patterns outlined by Evans. The same holds true whether employees view the closure as welcome or unwelcome. Some of my research subjects, although they did not say they welcomed their specific closure, did nevertheless reflect on some positive outcomes it brought about, albeit in hindsight. Thus it may be said that both welcome and unwelcome closures are represented here. In any case, Evans has shown that there
is a direct link between change and loss, a point that serves as a central premise of this work.

One primary principle from Marris, utilized by Evans and important for this work, is the concept of the “conservative impulse” which Marris (1986) explained as “the tendency of adaptive beings to assimilate reality to their existing structure, and so to avoid or reorganise parts of the environment which cannot be assimilated” (p. 4). If a change is too profound to be assimilated readily, the conservative impulse drives people to choose instead the “avoid or reorganise” option.

Evans (1996) used this principle to explain why change is so often resisted in schools by the very people charged with carrying it out, arguing that ultimately this resistance based on the conservative impulse represents an adaptive advantage: “Because our capacity to cope and adapt depends crucially on our impulse to seek meaning, to fit new experiences into a familiar pattern, our resistance to change is not only inevitable but also constructive, fundamental to learning, essential to adaptation” (p. 27). The closing of a school represents change of a different order of magnitude than most changes in schools; it is not simply a new way of doing business but a fundamental overturning of the most basic premise, the premise of the school’s existence. Thus, the same principles that Evans identified as important in any school change will certainly be present in a school that may close, or that has already closed.
School employees’ “resistance” in this case is not so much the type of active (or passive-aggressive) backlash against a change such as a new pedagogical approach that teachers may argue against or ignore. Rather it is more a failure to adapt by failure to assimilate. Those affected by school closure commonly have very little pre-existing structure or corresponding world outlook into which this change can readily be assimilated. Thus, during the months leading up to AOP’s closure and immediately following the decision, it was commonplace to hear comments such as “no roadmap” or “no playbook” and when asking colleagues about their future plans, the most frequent response was simply, “I don’t know.”

Also on the topic of school closure as it is personally experienced, Morton (2009) constructed a phenomenological study using a social constructivist approach. As he explained, “Social constructivism argues that knowledge is gained through the interpretation of personal experiences among groups of people . . . [It] provides a way of knowing for communities as they work collaboratively to construct meaning” (Morton, 2009, p. 14). The phenomenology lens “helps explain relationships between culture and an individual’s preference of sense making within his or her environment” (Morton, 2009, p. 15-16).

Morton’s (2009) conclusions connected teachers’ experiences to the experiences of death and dying, and more generally to the experience of loss (p. 66-71; p. 75-76). In this
context, communication before, during and after the closure process was emphasized as a major mitigating factor; it was one of the recommendations Morton put forth in concluding his study. He noted that his research participants mentioned communication as “a major factor in the closing process. Many participants share[d] that if this would have been a priority of the district, it may have improved the process” (Morton, 2009, p. 72). Yet he also noted that, “even with communication, the closing of a school would create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear” (Morton, 2009, p. 76). Therefore, Morton (2009) emphasized the need for school leaders to communicate as part of a larger process of “providing support for teachers” (p. 78).

This larger process is what Morton (2009) referred to as an “organized process for school closure” (p. 77). His study contained a quote by one of the teachers: “Mr. H summed up the feelings of many colleagues by stating that, ‘It was like driving a ship without a rudder’” (p. 65). This particular quotation is strikingly similar to those I heard (or said myself) as my school was closing. Thus Morton (2009) focuses on the responsibilities of those in leadership positions to acknowledge and address (e.g. by intentional communication) a significant emotional component of school closure:

Teachers experienced a range of emotions during the school closure process. An emotional difficulty experienced by teachers is one of the themes concerning the closing of a school that emerged (p. 75). . . . In order to meet the needs of
teachers, superintendents and boards of education members must be more knowledgeable about personal emotional needs of teachers involved in a school closing. . . . These processes like the stages of death and dying need recognition and nurturing if an individual is expected to endure the closing of a school (p. 78).

The specific role of leadership in the context of a school closing was the subject of Youck-McGowan’s (2013) Leading Through a School Closure: Principals’ Insights. Her study therefore had direct bearing on the present study, albeit in a narrower scope. Youck-McGowan’s (2013) study was focused on:

leadership characteristics that enhance principals’ ability to lead through the unique context of a school closure process . . . the context of a school closure creates a unique form of change for principals to lead through; thus, principals should apply certain leadership characteristics that may enhance their ability to lead effectively through a school closure. (p. ii)

Thus, one of the effective leadership considerations identified by Youck-McGowan (2013) was “principal as emotional barometer” (p. 94), a set of personal traits that includes the ability to “foster relationships” (p. 95) and “support people” (p. 103). In her study, Youck-McGowan (2013) illustrated the personal experiences of school closure
from the standpoint of a school leader responding to the needs of the people in the organization.

Youck-McGowan's (2013) argument depended heavily on the premise that school closure is a unique context of change within a school, and from this premise she also argued for the existence of an emotional reaction to the change:

- Leading through a school closure is different than leading instructional change...
- leading a community through a school closure process is an emotionally laden, complex change. It has layers of uncertainty and grief (p. 1). . . . For a school community . . . the rapid change of their school being closed and the dramatic change of removing all students and resources from a school make school closure a revolutionary change. School closure is a unique change context for principals.
- The rarity of school closures and the dramatic nature of the change can elicit a strong emotional response of the community. This is unfamiliar [sic] form of change for principals. (p.14-15)

The uncertainty and grief mentioned by Youck-McGowan (2013) certainly appeared in my data as well; many of my research participants mentioned feelings of uncertainty connected with school closure and uncertainty factored prominently in my own experience as well. Similarly, the process of closure experienced as a process of grief was a predominant finding of this study.
Similarly, Patterson (1994) chronicled the leadership challenges faced by a school head in the final months of a British school that was closed. She noted, “the emotions everyone feels are those of bereavement – shock, anger, denial and grief” (p. 1). Patterson (1994) described her own reaction, as well as those of her staff members and those of the students and parents. The emotions she described varied by individual or by group of course, but they are all ostensibly negative, and taken together, they painted a picture of communal emotional crisis.

Bassett and Wilson (2009) of the National Association of Independent Schools noted that, “a school closing for some faculty . . . will be comparable to a ‘death in the family’” (para. 4). This is stated as a fact; one condition among many to prepare for in the overall procedural quandary that school closings produce.

The presence of concepts similar to death and grief explains why there was also an expressed need for closure in the psychological sense, attained through some type of ritual or ceremony to formally end the association with the school. Several of my research subjects commented on the need for psychological closure in my interviews several months after the school closed. Those who had worked in other schools that did provide such closure mentioned its importance. Those from AOP, however, reaffirmed the importance of such a ritual by expressing disappointment at not having had one.

This need is mentioned in the literature as well. For example, Bassett & Wilson
(2009) assert, “careful planning for the end of the school year celebrations is necessary” (para. 13). The subjects from schools that did close mentioned the importance of some kind of ritual to gracefully and formally bring to an end people’s emotional association with the school, to coincide with ending their physical, literal association with it. Patterson (1994) also made note of several ceremonies at the end of that year, characterized as “emotional but necessary rituals” (para. 14). Gow (2009) acknowledged that employees of a school about to close feel strong emotions. He suggested “having counseling help readily available as well as just making room for plenty of ‘human contact time’” (Gow, 2009, para. 14). Along these lines, Gow also advised that:

Final events and rituals will have special significance, and wise leadership will acknowledge the grieving aspects of the closing while making all possible efforts to make the finale as much of a celebration as possible. Sorrow, blame and anger—all part of the grieving process—will last for some time. (Gow, 2009, para. 15)

Gow (2009) also included a telling summary from former NAIS president Patrick Bassett on the topic of how to go about school closure, “‘we seldom do it right because there’s so much emotion attached to it’” (para. 4). It is clear that there is a tension surrounding school closure; uncertainty clouds the process in everything from communication to procedures to human relations, yet these aspects of a school’s
existence could benefit all the more from any attention and clarity that may be possible. This study was conceived in the context of such tension.

**Grief Literature**

Other applicable literature came from outside the school context, and indeed from outside the field of education generally. Much was gleaned from the field of psychology, particularly research in the areas of grief and loss. In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the world to the concept of stages of grief through her book *On Death and Dying*. This concept has now become a standard in the field of psychology. It has been refined in the intervening years, and applied to myriad contexts. Although her ideas have been substantially reviewed, reinterpreted, elaborated, or even discarded since her original publication, Kübler-Ross’s (1969) contribution to the field has been foundational. Kübler-Ross (1969) identified the following five stages as common among terminally ill patients: Denial and Isolation; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; and Acceptance. The current study does not mean to imply that the magnitude of grief associated with one’s own imminent death is similar to that associated with school closure. Yet despite this difference in degree, the two are similar in kind. That is, in both cases the victims are aware that a drastic life change is coming soon, bringing with it a sense of finality that they perceive will affect their relationships with others close to
them and the way they had understood the world to that point.

Smith (1984) applied Kübler-Ross’s stages to a school closure. In this article, Smith (1984) stated, “In many ways, the closing of a school can be likened to the death of a close friend or relative: It’s a major change, it’s accompanied by sadness and regret, and it has an unsettling finality” (p. 31). He provided an example for each stage, illustrating how it may be manifested in the context of a “dying” school. For example, for the “Denial” stage, he observed, “Announce you’re closing a school, and the local community’s reaction is likely to be, ’No, not our school!’ Denial and contradiction are the automatic, instantaneous, almost involuntary reactions” (Smith, 1984, p. 31).

Similarly, for the “Anger” stage, he stated, “You might even hear threats: ’We'll go to court’. . . . You also can expect a 'save our school' group to organize against any consultants or committees involved in the decision” (Smith, 1984, p. 31). Smith’s application of Kübler-Ross's stages to a school closure is illustrative, particularly so because it supports the idea that grief is a natural reaction to closure.

Dixon (1997) also applied Kübler-Ross’s concepts to a school setting. Set in a small primary school in Australia, Dixon’s research explained reactions to organizational change (not necessarily closure) as grief reactions. As reviewed by Bathgate (2005), “Dixon’s participants experienced, to varying degrees, all the stages of grief identified by Kübler-Ross–fear, denial, bargaining and guilt” (p. 25). Thus the
stages of grief model serves a useful purpose in understanding the grief reactions that may occur in a school change context, and is useful when conceiving of closure as a form of change.

Not all of the literature in the field of grief, however, has followed a “stages” model. For example, Doka (2001) stated, “Despite the popular embrace of stages, most of the new models have avoided the language and assumptions of stage theories” (p. 32). Doka (2001) continued to outline other schools of thought in the field of grief psychology, especially as they show how the concept of grief can be expanded to include settings beyond death:

Grief now is understood as a reaction to loss, not limited to a reaction to death. This understanding, in fact, was integral to the field from its onset. . . . My work on disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989), addressed the wide range of losses that engender grief, stressing that the very lack of recognition of grief experienced in such losses complicates grief. Rando (1993) in her classic, The Treatment of Complicated Mourning, spends considerable time discussing tangible and intangible losses that create grief reactions. This shift is a critical one since it allows the application of the study of grief to areas such as divorce or job loss. (p. 31)

Further, Doka (2001) anticipated the findings by stating, “Niemeyer (2001) has
emphasized that the reconstruction of meaning represents a critical issue, if not the critical issue in grief. . . . This concept that growth can be a possible outcome of grief is stressed in other current work” (p. 32).

Niemeyer, in the work cited above by Doka and in other publications (Niemeyer, 2000; Niemeyer, 2001; Gillies and Niemeyer, 2006) elaborated further on modern grief theories, collectively referred to as “constructivist,” which emphasize meaning reconstruction in the face of loss. For example: “Constructivist theories propose that the process by which bereaved persons question, find, and make sense of their bereavement is central to the experience of grief” (Niemeyer, 2000, cited in Gillies & Niemeyer, 2006, p. 37). Similarly:

Our goal in this article will be to review this literature in order to advance a model of bereavement as an active process of meaning reconstruction in the wake of loss (p. 32). . . . We propose that the effort to find, create, or reconstruct meaning is the core element linking these theories (Niemeyer, 2001a; 2005). . . . People engage in three major activities by which they reconstruct meaning in response to loss: sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Niemeyer, 2001b; Niemeyer & Anderson, 2002). Implicit in this view of meaning reconstruction is the proposition that adaptation to loss frequently involves constructing a new reality, in which survivors’ assumptive worlds and their view
of themselves are forever changed. (O’Connor, 2002-2003) . . . (Gillies & Niemeyer, 2006, p. 36)

The experience of loss and the subsequent process of grief are explained by Gillies and Niemeyer (2006):

Traumatic events and losses can shatter a person’s “assumptive world,” the network of cognitive schemas that bear on the benevolence and meaningfulness of the world and the worthiness of the self. To the extent that losses undermine these assumptions, leading us to believe that the world is malevolent, that life is meaningless, or that we ourselves are unworthy or undeserving of good things, they cause us profound distress (p. 34). . . According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), the most important process in successful cognitive adaptation is finding benefit in the experience. (p. 35)

The changes brought about by the process of grief can be seen as a form of growth. As Gillies and Niemeyer (2006) stated:

Constructivist theory posits that by reconstructing meaning in our lives in response to a loss, we necessarily reconstruct ourselves (p. 37). . . The key meaning making processes proposed in the model are sense making, benefit finding, and identity change. By these processes the bereaved engage in meaning reconstruction, through which preloss meaning structures may be reviewed,
reevaluated, renewed, and/or rebuilt. According to the model, the reconstruction process produces new postloss meaning structures through which the bereaved come to view the world in a new way (p. 54). . . . The focus of this constructivist model, then, is on meaning structures and the process by which they operate and transform our experiences. (p. 56)

This constructivist view of grief, along with the specific processes it delineates, was extremely helpful in understanding my research participants' reactions to their school closure experiences. Many mentioned specifically the ideas of benefit finding and identity change, for example, as outcomes of their experience. Thus the understanding of school closure as a form of bereavement is supported.

**Place Attachment**

The concept of place attachment, also borrowed from psychological literature, was pertinent to this study as well. Put simply, the concept refers to the psychological significance of a place, and the resulting attachment one may feel to it. Altman and Low (1992) surveyed their own and previous research on the topic. They explained the concept of *place* as: “Place, in our general lexicon, refers to space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes” (Altman & Low, 1992, p. 5). Building on the personal and group significance of place, they remarked that:
Places are, therefore, repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people are attached (Altman & Low, 1992, p. 7). . . Extending this idea, one can infer from many writings that place attachment may contribute to the formation, maintenance, and preservation of the identity of a person, group, or culture. (p. 10)

Under these premises, then, it is not difficult to see that the closing of one’s workplace can affect one personally on an emotional level, due to the nature of the social relationships that exist in a work setting.

Similarly, Read (1996) used the concept of “place theory” in his study of Aboriginal Australians’ attachment to places of significance. While the central thrust of his work was not directly connected to that of this study, Read’s premise about the significance of people’s psychological attachment to places was valuable. Read’s explanation of the varying interpretations of the concept of home was illustrative:

It can be a focus of memory, a building, a way of mentally enclosing people of great importance, a reference point for widening circles of significant people and places. (Read, 1996, p. 102)

The concept of place attachment was explored further in Read’s book, but our concern here is with the notion of attachment to a place as a “focus of memory” or “a way of
mentally enclosing people of great importance."

Given this concept, it is not difficult to see that one’s school workplace may be of great emotional significance to school employees, and therefore separation from it may prompt a reaction on an emotional level. On the topic of workplaces specifically, Read (1996) mentioned: “Men and women, then, are likely to grieve for the lost places which were most familiar to them. Women mourn lost houses more frequently than men; men more often grieve for their lost workplaces” (p. 118). Gender differences aside, we can see that the loss of any significant place, including a workplace, can trigger a grief reaction.

Later in the same work, Read (1996) posited further that, “Grief for dead places seems much more analogous to grief for dead people than professional carers have allowed. . . . We need a second Elizabeth Kübler-Ross to advance place-bereavement as a continuing theme of contemporary distress” (Read, 1996, p. 198). That is, he advocated for a construction of the concept of grief that takes place into account. The current study was informed by place attachment theory, particularly as to how the concept of place as a focus of relationships can be a significant factor in the experience of grief.

**Summary**

This chapter surveyed the research literature underpinning this study.
The first section explored research on the subject of school closure as experienced by those involved. Although literature with such direct relevance as this was relatively uncommon, the literature that did exist supported the findings of this study. Therefore, case studies of several exemplar situations can add to the growing data bank on the topic. This type of academic literature provided an essential framing of the problem of personal experiences of school closure.

We also looked at other literature from schools: literature that explains the factors influencing the closure of schools, such as leadership, mission and finances; and literature that deals with the subject of change in the context of schools more generally. Hawk (2008) and McManus (2012) illuminated the factors that contribute to a school’s demise, and their interplay in context. These factors were present in my research setting as well.

The work of Evans (1996) situated findings from psychology in the context of schools. His work, based in large part on the work of Marris (1986) demonstrated that change is often experienced as a form of loss, and which often triggers responses akin to grief. Further, Evans (1996) demonstrates how the conservative impulse first described by Marris is a foundational strategy employed by human beings who work in schools as they construct meaning from their experiences.

Additionally, we have examined other literature from the field of psychology,
outside of school contexts, particularly in the areas of grief research and the topic of place attachment. Research on the process of grief helps us understand teachers’ reactions to school closure, namely that it is experienced as a psychological loss and that the grief process helps people reconstruct their worldview under changed circumstances.

The concept of place attachment adds the notion that grief may be triggered not only by the loss of a person, but also by the loss of any place of importance. Because people naturally imbue places such as work settings with meaning, losing one’s connection to such a place can be experienced as a loss, which can trigger grief.

This comprises the lens through which the data were examined, evidence was determined, and conclusions were drawn. These served further as the basis for recommendations given at the conclusion of this work.
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

Overview

This chapter outlines the methodological design of the inquiry intended to answer the research questions for this study. It explains the data collection method chosen and the selection of research participants. The section concludes with a discussion of the coding and categorization process consistent with a grounded theory approach, and potential threats to validity.

Research Design

This qualitative research study was conducted as a collective case study (Stake, 2005, p. 445) with one school as the primary example, and several former employees of that school were interviewed to illustrate how the responded individually to the same collective experience. The experience of several other schools was included as well, in order to contrast the different forms that school closure may take, although fewer interviewees per school were available to be interviewed.

Research participants were selected purposefully; those affiliated with my former school workplace, Academy of the Pacific (AOP), were selected to represent a range of different positions, and therefore, perspectives on its closure, while those from other schools were selected because their experiences regarding school closure differed from
those at AOP in significant ways. Specifically, non-AOP participants were selected because their schools also faced closure and either avoided it or, in one case, went about the process in a dramatically different way, “winding down” the school over several years. The goal in selection of all participants was to represent a wide variety of closure scenarios and reactions to them.

Data were collected by interviewing participants in person, with the exception of one interview that was conducted via telephone. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into written documents that were then shared with participants for their review and feedback. Most interviews were one-on-one, with interviewer and interviewee, but in one exception, I interviewed three former AOP school employees together as a courtesy to them, but each person had a chance to answer each question individually as a safeguard so that the group context would not preclude any one individual from answering. Interviews were conducted with a set of common questions, but not every question was necessarily asked in every interview, based on the nature of the respondent’s previous answers and the flow of the conversation. Thus there are some commonalities among nearly all responses because they were responding generally to the same questions, but the tone of each respondent’s answer could vary from one interview to another.

Codes were developed that represented similar qualitative themes in the nature
of responses, after first grouping responses into large categories that represented the broader content of the responses. For example, the larger category of “Leadership” included several subcategories such as “Leadership–Style,” “Leadership–Example,” and “Leadership–Communication,” each of which represented a qualitatively discrete grouping. Code categories were analyzed for frequency of response on both an individual and whole group basis, with the most frequently mentioned categories forming the basis for the conclusions in the next chapter.

Case Study Method

According to Yin (2009): “A case study is an empirical inquiry that . . . investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Similarly,

In general, case studies are the preferred method when (a) ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009, p. 2). . . . In brief, the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. (Yin, 2009, p. 4)

The closure of AOP and the alternative closure scenarios presented by non-AOP
research participants in this study met the qualifying conditions stated above, befitting a case study approach. This is particularly true as regards the idea that boundaries between context and phenomenon are blurred; it is not inaccurate to say that in studying school employees’ reactions to school closure, context and phenomenon are inextricably intertwined. In fact, one can even say that context and phenomenon influence each other to a great degree. For the purposes of this study, it was not necessary to separate context from phenomenon, as it was not separated in the minds of interviewees, and their view as a whole is what was solicited.

Likewise, an important goal of this study’s research design was to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). While it may be arguable that interviewing employees after closure has occurred was not studying the phenomenon precisely “within its real-life context,” school people's views and conclusions in retrospect are in fact part of the process. Indeed, viewing the closure process in hindsight allowed interviewees the time to have drawn conclusions about their experiences, as well as having gained greater insight into the causes and effects of phenomena and reactions (e.g. how the trajectory of their careers was changed as a result). This allowed for interview responses to be not only holistic but also meaningful.

Following Stake (2005), this study was organized as an instrumental, collective case study. The term *instrumental case study* is used by Stake (2005):
if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to
redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive
role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. . . . The case may be
seen as typical of other cases or not. (p. 445)

The schools discussed by research participants in this study were selected for precisely
these reasons. They are intended to provide insight into an issue, in this case, the
general phenomenon of school closure, and it is hoped that they will facilitate our
understanding of that issue on a scale wider than only the specific schools mentioned
here. Similarly, I have followed Stake’s (2005) definition of a *collective case study*:

> A number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon,
> population, or general condition. I call this *multiple case study* or *collective case
> study*. It is instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the
> collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common
> characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, with redundancy and variety
each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them
will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still
larger collection of cases. (p. 445-6)

Again, as above, it was presumed that understanding the specific cases in this research
study would lead to a broader and deeper understanding of a “still larger collection of
cases,“ namely, other independent schools that may face closure. The schools in this study, and the school employees interviewed, were all selected for their “redundancy and variety.” They all faced the prospect of closure, and most of the employees, with two exceptions, did experience it. These exceptions are included deliberately, to show how personal reaction may or may not differ when the school facing closure either avoids it or succumbs to it eventually.

There is, of course, a pragmatic aspect to consider also, since the primary case under study was the school where I, the researcher, worked. Because this setting provided the context for my professional practice, and because this research inquiry was intended to illustrate, explain, or enhance some aspect of my own professional practice, including AOP in the study was not simply practical but necessary. Therefore, the wide sample of participants who were former employees of AOP served the purpose not only of providing an in-depth look at this particular school, but also of providing the greatest possibility of including either confirming or discrepant data, when compared with my own experience.

**Research and Interview Questions**

How do school employees personally experience the closure of their employing school? Can the negative effects of school closure be mitigated? If so, how? To build to a
A thorough understanding of this issue requires investigation of a number of foundational questions.

The major lines of inquiry in support of the main question involve the objective and subjective processes experienced by school employees. For example, in describing the objective processes well enough to understand personal perspectives, questions were included regarding what happened before, during and after the closure, as well as questions about how employees were informed, and how the actual shutdown occurred. Similarly, in describing the subjective processes experienced, I asked research subjects about how they felt during various stages of the process, whether they could reconstruct their perceptions at the time and whether those perceptions seem accurate with the passage of time, as well as whether they would do anything differently if they could change something about their experience.

These questions set the stage for a deeper understanding of how such processes affect people’s lives, and how they derived meaning from the experience. Please see Appendix B for a list of research questions.

**Selection of Research Participants**

I have chosen to use the term *research participants* instead of *research subjects* because the former term better represents the nature of a common experience viewed
through multiple perspectives, which is the setting for this study. The primary research participants were those associated with the school as employees, i.e. those people who formed part of the school’s organizational structure, rather than its customers. Although the perspective of students and parents is no doubt valuable, the focus of this study is specifically on the experience of those responsible for operating the school. Examining data provided by those people who were in a privileged position to witness or experience the closure of a school firsthand is far more useful than a statistical probability sample. Altogether, eight former AOP employees were interviewed, a significant portion of the total of twenty-one. Because of the small population size, a representative sample cannot necessarily be constructed. Thus a purposeful sampling of individuals who have undergone school closure, or who have avoided the threat of school closure, is most appropriate.

**Researcher as Participant**

As an AOP employee myself, the research also included my own observations and reflections. This researcher-as-participant role afforded me dual perspectives, not only in the data collection phase but also in generating theory from the data. To guard against the potential validity threat of researcher bias (see p. 50), these reflections were
compared with the data collected from other school employees as a way of triangulating the information in each data set.

**Research Participants from Academy of the Pacific**

This is the school where I worked from 2006 until its closing in 2013. Obviously the closure of this school affected my professional practice very directly. In fact, this is the reason for this study; I wished to understand the process that my colleagues and I went through, to draw any conclusions that might benefit other school people who may experience something similar. Although the school is now closed, my own recollections and those of many of my interview subjects are situated in the context of this school when it was operating and shortly after.

However, I did interview other people who were in similar situations so as to describe a range of processes that may occur and in so doing, to find any common characteristics. Two of my research subjects worked at different schools in the past, both of which schools nearly closed but managed to avoid doing so. Contrasting their experience with those of AOP employees was important to the task of generalizing AOP findings to other, similar situations and thus to define the external generalizability of the AOP case study. Both convergent and discrepant data serve this purpose.

Y. L. – As a school leader, Y. L. interacted with AOP’s Board of Trustees when it
was in the process of making its decision, and he served as a conduit of information for faculty, staff and parents. His insight was valuable because of his perspective that equally represents two levels of stakeholder: those responsible for making the decision to close and those most directly affected by it. Additionally, he, like other employees, faced the prospect of being unemployed due to the closing.

C. K. – AOP’s school registrar and parent of an AOP alumna. C. K.’s history with the school began as a parent in 2005 and continued shortly after her daughter graduated in 2010, when C. K. became the school’s registrar. Thus C. K. had the perspective of both parent and employee. Her parent perspective, however, reflected a time when the school was more solvent and served primarily to provide a check or contrast against data she provided from her perspective as an employee, which was the main focus of this study. Additionally, C. K. brought insights as a former employee of a different (non-school) business that closed. Thus she went through the closing of her employing entity twice, in a school and a non-school setting. The comparisons and contrasts she was able to make were useful in determining generalizability of the AOP case study outside of the AOP setting.

H. R. – an AOP administrator whose job provided him with frequent daily interaction with students. Hired one year after I was, H. R. was the second-longest-tenured administrator on staff when AOP closed. H. R. and I both worked at the school
during two turnovers of the school headship, thus we worked with three different school heads in our six- or seven-year span. Moreover, H. R. and I had frequent interaction in the course of a typical day. Therefore, comparing H. R.’s experience and insight against my own was useful in order to discern any differences in perspective that could be illustrative.

A. J. – AOP’s business manager. When the school was closed, A. J. was retained by the Board of Trustees to remain in her position for one year as the Board deliberated and eventually decided what to do with the property. During that transition year after the school had closed, A. J. continued the school’s essential operations such as making sure the physical plant was attended (with M. J., below), facilities rentals, and coordinating visits by and/or answering inquiries from various stakeholders. A. J.’s perspective was important since she was still present after the official closing and the transition of the campus into the next phase of its life with a different organization.

M. J. – AOP’s facilities manager. Like A. J., M. J. was also retained for a year in his previous job to maintain the school’s physical plant and to coordinate with the Board as they pondered the future of the campus. M. J.’s perspective, like A. J.’s, is also important because he was one of only three people whose employment continued beyond the school’s official ceasing of academic operations in June 2013. (The third person was the school’s former development director, who was retained for six months to help with
public relations and to settle affairs with funders. She was unavailable to provide data for this study.)

N. S. – the school’s former food service manager. His incorporation in this study was fortuitous; he happened to be on campus when I interviewed others and he volunteered to join a group interview. After the school closed, N. S. continued to rent kitchen facilities from the school in support of his part-time catering business, and therefore visited the campus occasionally during the year before the campus was taken over by another organization. As an independent contractor, N. S. was never employed by the school directly, but when the school closed, his primary means for making a living was taken away, much as it was for employees. In other words, although he was not an AOP employee, N. S. nevertheless lost his job when the school closed. As a contractor, however, he would have had more freedom to engage in other business activities; therefore the effects of the closing could possibly have been mitigated in his case. This proved not to be the case in reality, but interviewing him afforded me the opportunity to compare his experience with that of other employees.

Research Participants not from Academy of the Pacific

As mentioned above, individuals who have experienced the closure of other schools, or the avoidance of closure, were interviewed as a way to triangulate data and
to create robust findings. The following people were interviewed, who had no connection to AOP.

W. M. – a colleague in the field of education who did not work with me at AOP. Early in his career, W. M. worked at a school that was in danger of closing but, through a number of interventions, was able to avoid doing so. He remembered much of the episode, and shared stories about it with me outside of a research context, when he learned that my school was facing closure. His perspective offered a look at the reactions of someone facing a school closure but who did not see the possible loss of his job become a reality, although it was a strong possibility for a time. These data were a useful contrast with data from AOP stakeholders.

H. E. – another colleague in education who did not work at AOP. H. E. was head of a school that was in danger of closing and technically did close when it merged with a larger, more established school ten years ago. When the two schools merged, the school of which she had been the head ceased to exist as an organization with its own separate identity. During this process, H. E. experienced many of the same reactions as those at AOP, particularly those in positions of responsibility similar to hers. Merging is yet another potential outcome of the process under study and merits examination to identify any differences in the experiences of school people.

S. J. – a former colleague of mine with whom I worked at a different school in
another state. After I left the school in 2004, the school was notified by the university of which it was a subsidiary that it would be closed the following year. This news came as a shock to teachers, parents and students, who felt they had been given no previous warning, although the possibility of closure had been looming over the school for a number of years, even while I was there. Following a concerted effort by parents, the university subsequently modified its plan to allow the school to be closed on a longer timeline, over a three-year period rather than at the end of that year. S. J. was on staff for the announcement of closure, as well as for the implementation of the multi-year wind-down plan that allowed students who were enrolled at the time of the decision to graduate. This is another variation on the school closure model, which is a valuable source of data due to its combination of similarities and differences with AOP’s closure.

**Grounded Theory Approach**

The methodological approach known as grounded theory originated in Glaser and Strauss’s 1967 work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Since then it has gained relatively widespread acceptance and is widely used in qualitative research. According to Dick (2005), “grounded theory, Glaser style, is an emergent methodology” (p. 2). That is, the method expects theory to emerge from collected data as it is considered, rather than expecting the theory to be formed prior to data collection, with the role of data
simply to confirm or disconfirm the theory. I followed this approach in this study, since:

Grounded theory begins with a research situation. Within that situation, your task as researcher is to understand what is happening there, and how the players manage their roles. You will mostly do this through observation, conversation and interview. (Dick, 2005, p. 2) . . . What most differentiates grounded theory from much other research is that it is explicitly emergent. It does not set out to test a hypothesis. It sets out to find what theory accounts for the research situation as it is. (p. 4)

Since my research in fact did begin with a situation that I wished to understand, this method of qualitative study was appropriate. Since the phenomenon of school closing had not undergone a wide theoretical investigation in the literature, there were few existing theories available to test, even had I intended to do so. Therefore, this study was constructed in order to develop a theory from the data gathered.

**Codes and Categories**

Using a process of open coding, I reviewed the audio files and transcripts of interviews and noted the major points made by each interviewee. The codes that emerged were categorized by a major and minor category. For example, major categories included: Concerns, Indicators, Interventions, Leadership, Mission and
Outcomes. Minor codes were combined with a major code to produce combinations such as: Leadership–Vision; Mission–Clarity; Concerns–Loss of Job; and Grief–Ritual. Theoretical saturation (the point where adding any new codes does not add any useful distinction) was reached with fifty-one major and minor combinations. Not all individuals mentioned every one of these combinations, but taken together they represent the range of responses from all individuals and contain a great deal of overlap from one respondent to another.

Individuals’ responses were sorted via codes into categories, and a median number of responses was computed for each code combination that occurred in that individual’s responses. Each particular code combination was also aggregated among all respondents, and a median value was computed for this pool as well. Those codes that were above median for the aggregate pool of all responses, and which were also above median for any particular individual respondent were considered highest priority. Likewise, discrepancies such as above-median responses for the total pool that were below median for specific individuals, or vice-versa, were also carefully scrutinized. Please see Appendix D for a listing of codes and categories.

Category combinations (major and minor categories) that appeared more frequently than the median either on an individual or group basis formed the majority of the findings that emerged in data analysis. These combinations themselves were
organized into broader themes by virtue of sharing some similarity or overlap. Therefore, these themes formed the basis for the conclusions presented in the final chapter of this report.

**Validity and Validity Threats**

This study’s design included safeguards against the possibility of validity threats. These threats were carefully considered and the research decisions made in design were made with these possibilities in mind. Maxwell (2013) likens general, vague discussions of validity in qualitative research to “magical charms that are intended to drive away evil” (p. 123). Therefore, in designing this study, attention was given to “decide what specific validity threats are most serious and plausible, and what strategies are best able to deal with these” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125).

One such possible threat is researcher bias. This term refers to the subjectivity of the researcher, which may lead to assumptions or predispositions of which the researcher may or may not be consciously aware. Specifically, this may take the form of “the selection of data that fit the researcher’s existing theory, goals, or preconceptions, and the selection of data that ‘stand out’ to the researcher” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Because this study was based primarily on my own research setting, I may have had unexamined assumptions that could have influenced which data I collected or my
interpretation of the findings. To avoid this, I was careful not to focus only on data provided by my interview subjects that was consistent with my own experience, but rather, I looked for data that differed from it. The inclusion of interviews from people in three schools other than the one in which I worked was a deliberate design decision in order to lessen the chances of inadvertently assuming the entire phenomenon of school closure always took the same form as that experienced at AOP. In some cases, the differences were a matter of degree rather than of kind. For example, an interviewee may have described feelings of loss surrounding school closure (as I would have) but it was necessary to probe deeper to find specific examples to illustrate how acutely it was felt, or in what ways this was manifested.

Because I already knew most of my interview participants it was also necessary to guard against reactivity or reflexivity. These terms are used in qualitative research to refer to “The influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Although I was formerly the direct supervisor of some interviewees, a potential validity threat of self-censorship by interviewees was possible. In other words, it was possible that they could have answered in a way they thought I “wanted to hear.” However, this possibility was expected to have been minimal as there would have been nothing for interview subjects to gain or lose by offering their honest opinions, since we no longer worked together.
Similarly, because the research participants had gone through an experience very similar to my own, I was careful not to lead my subjects to a tendency to commiserate, that is, to try to shape their description of their experience to what they perceived as my experience. This is another form of reflexivity; the safeguard was to ask neutral questions, to which there was no particular, expected answer.

More important, however, was the fact that I was involved in the situation under study. Given the nature of the study, there was no way to remove all possible influence on the study of myself as researcher, combined with some potential influence of myself as former colleague. Those possible influences were minimized as much as possible by the measures described here. The degree of influence that remained was acknowledged and accounted for.

It is important to note, however, that given the nature of the situation under study, the fact that the researcher was also a participant is not only unavoidable, but in fact desirable in some degree. As one of the school employees affected by AOP’s closure, I had a long-term involvement in the research setting typically afforded to few researchers. Since I worked in this school setting for several years prior to and including its closure this association over time allowed great familiarity with the context. This familiarity enhanced the research process because I was able to understand many of my research subjects’ descriptions of their circumstances on a more thorough level than an
outsider would have. For example, many of the follow-up questions that were asked in interviews were based on my understanding of the context of those responses.

Because my primary data collection method was oral interviews, I also incorporated member checks. Maxwell (2013) described this technique and commented on its importance:

systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying. This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on. (p. 126-127)

After the initial interview was transcribed, I sent the transcript to each interviewee for their reactions. If they felt they had been misquoted or if anything seemed misrepresented, they had a chance to correct my data. Please see Appendix C for a copy of the correspondence I sent with transcript documents for research participants’ review.

Finally, as noted above, the purposeful selection of other interviewees who had gone through similar—but not exactly the same—experiences was useful in generalizing data and in exposing any potential validity threats. Through careful selection of research subjects, I assembled not only a core group of data surrounding the closure of one school (AOP), but also another group of data representing other possible variations
on AOP’s outcome for the sake of contrast. Doing so constituted a form of data
triangulation: “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings”
(Maxwell, 2013, p. 128).

All these measures were intended to strengthen the internal and external
generalizability of my data. These terms refer to the validity of conclusions that may be
drawn from the data within the case itself (internal) to parts of the situation not directly
observed or addressed, and from the case under study to other cases (external). Per
Maxwell (2013), “A key issue for internal generalizability is to adequately understand
the variation in the phenomena of interest in the setting or group of people studied” (p.
137, emphasis in original). Many parts of the research design, from selection of
interviewees to the open-endedness of questions, were geared toward eliciting
maximum variation of responses.

As to the external generalizability of the data and conclusions presented herein,
despite designing the study so as to avoid undue claims of external generalizability, it
cannot also be said that any such generalizability has been demonstrated definitively.
This is due to the case study nature of the design, and the small data set that these data
represented in the wider pool of school closure scenarios. It may well be that the
findings here do prove later to represent the broader range of closure scenarios, but it
could just as easily be the case that they do not. With so few data examined for this
study and the few others like it, there is simply no way to draw unquestioned conclusions until further research in this field is conducted. However the external generalizability can be left to the actual reader to determine if he/she experienced similar views. That is, there may be some level of external generalizability, albeit to an individual. Yet all this is not to say that this study has little value:

In fact, the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability in the sense of being representative of a large population . . . it may provide an account of a setting or population that is illuminating as an extreme case or ideal type . . . the generalizability of qualitative studies is usually not based on explicit sampling of some defined population to which the results can be extended, but on the development of a theory of the processes operating in the case studied, ones that may well operate in other cases, but that may produce different outcomes in different circumstances. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137-8, emphasis in original)

Therefore, although precise external generalizability may not have been possible from this study, it was hoped that with the possible threats to its validity identified and accounted for, there would still be some value for the target audience. As Yin (2009) stated, “survey research relies on statistical generalization, whereas case studies (as with
experiments) rely on *analytical generalization*” (p. 43, emphasis in original). It is in this analytical generalization that the greatest value of this study lies.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter will present the common themes that emerged from this study. After coding transcripts, responses were analyzed for frequency, and then cross-referenced between the pool of all respondents and each respondent individually. Those with the greatest representation among the collected data are reported here, organized around general themes that can be tied to themes in the literature. The primary themes that emerged included: leadership in context; grief response; job loss concern; and shaping professional identity.

Leadership in Context

The context of a school closure is a unique, unprecedented form of change in a school; therefore those in leadership positions may need to adjust their leadership styles or actions to fit the uniqueness of this particular circumstance. As Youck-McGowan (2013) summarizes: “School closure is a unique change context for principals. The rarity of school closures and the dramatic nature of the change can elicit a strong emotional response of the community” (p. 14). A school closure is by definition not “business as usual” so leadership should adjust accordingly, in order to clarify the situation for others as well as to support (or at a minimum, not work against) school employees’
reactions to it. Many respondents remarked on their expectations for those in leadership positions, whether the leaders themselves were aware of these expectations or not and whether those expectations were fulfilled or not. This theme was prevalent among responses regardless of the respondent's own position within the school organization.

Given that a primary component of a closure context is an emotional reaction from school employees, it may not be surprising that respondents mentioned an ability of leaders to recognize the human reaction. For example, when asked his opinion on the type of leadership style best suited to a closure scenario, S. J. commented, “Not any type of leadership style, I don’t think, except one that conveys compassion and empathy and understanding. . . . You would have to lead with empathy and recognize that there were people that . . . are truly going through a certain degree of pain.” S. J. further commented on the necessity of having a leader in this context; he acknowledged that in the role of emotional touchstone, a leader may also have the responsibility to deal honestly with colleagues, even if the reality is unpleasant: “the mistake that we made largely because we were leaderless is, we allowed people [for] far too long to hold onto hope and different dreams and what that meant [was] instead of dying once, we died three or four times.”

As a school leader who successfully avoided closure through eventual merger with another school, H. E. reflected on her view of a leader’s responsibilities to navigate
and manage the prevailing emotional climate and to subvert her own personal view to this obligation:

I think the ability to work with different groups and trying to understand what needs they have is important. And because we were in such a tenuous, potentially explosive time, it was really trying to keep in check my own response to things. So I, even though I was really upset . . . I couldn’t [let it show] because I had to be able to negotiate . . . even though my own faculty [members] . . . were very brittle; they were worrying about their jobs, about their future. Acknowledging the difference in context among different schools and the correspondingly various demands on a leader Y. L. said, “I think it has to be case by case because schools are different.” Reflecting on his role in AOP’s closure, he recalled his own emotional reaction, cognizant of his position of leadership:

Well, the anxiety piece for me for AOP wasn’t about me losing my job. It was more ego-driven, it was more of . . . I wanted to be the savior, I wanted to be the person that, you know pulled together the right team . . . and [to] take the school out of that pit and make them okay again.

Yet Y. L. also acknowledged the responsibilities of leadership that occurred in this setting:

So, when it became obvious that it wasn’t going to happen, then the next piece
had to come into play. . . . Anybody can just let it [a school] close, but it takes a real leader to close a school and that meant the bigger responsibility to the people—the students there and the people that were the employees there and to the alumni . . . and to the board members. All the people who had a[n] . . . emotional or actual physical tie to the school.

Exemplifying the “emotional or physical tie to the school,” C. A., a former AOP employee recalled her judgment on the leadership actions (or lack thereof) during AOP’s closure. She reinforced the need for those in leadership positions to be emotionally in touch with the school community:

My reaction was nobody listened or no one who could do anything about it listened. I, till today, continue to blame specific people because I still don’t believe the school needed to end. I think the school ended because there was a lack of vision and a lack of heart again from the people who could have made decisions. There’s a lot of heart involved in that school, but not necessarily with people who had say. And, the people who did have say . . . for whatever reasons, they seem to have taken their hands off the wheel and the damn thing ran into the ground with people on it.

This demonstrated that leaders must know their context and their people. Participants agreed that empathy, expressed as a receptive, listening attitude is an important
expectation of school leaders in closures. This ties in with Youck-McGowan’s (2013) conclusion that an important leadership characteristic is for the principal to act as an “emotional barometer”: “A truthful understanding of people’s emotion enabled the principals to provide appropriate support to help the community to work through the emotions associated with the change” (Youck-McGowan, 2013, p. 94).

Clearly school closure is a unique challenge for those who work in a school, but it places a unique set of contextual expectations on those in leadership positions. Without sensitivity to how employees are processing the concept of closure, school leaders might exacerbate problems, or they may find themselves blamed for the closure, even well after the closure has taken place.

**Grief Response**

A major theme arising from the interviews was that human reactions included a significantly emotional component, typically involving negative emotions, and which most closely resembled a psychological response to loss. In fact, several research participants openly likened the school’s closing to a death. For example, A. J., who stayed on at the school to handle finances for a year after the closure explicitly stated: “you’re sad to see everyone else leave and they’ve all now moved on with their lives but we’re still here maintaining everything and it’s kind of a slower death process.” This
comment echoes Smith (1984):

In many ways, the closing of a school can be likened to the death of a close friend or relative. . . . These five progressive stages are almost unavoidable. I believe they are as natural for the death of a school as for the death of a friend. (Smith, 1984, p. 31)

Related to the idea of death and grieving, the need for some type of ritual associated with grieving also emerged in the data. This is supported by the literature as well. For example, Gow (2009) noted that:

Final events and rituals will have special significance, and wise leadership will acknowledge the grieving aspects of the closing. . . . Sorrow, blame, and anger—all parts of the grieving process—will last for some time (para. 15).

A grief ritual allows the bereaved to formally say goodbye, and provides an arena for those affected to console each other. Some school people who participated in this study acknowledged this need. For example, when H. E.’s school merged with another school, the entity it had been ceased to exist. She recalled a deliberate decision to include a closure ceremony for students and faculty as her school’s last year drew to a close: “So we went through this very well-thought out . . . process of helping them to bring closure to the community that they had known . . . to ceremoniously remember the school and leave it.”
Whatever ritualized or ceremonial actions may occur, they are generally considered an expected part of the grieving process, and a step toward eventual *closure* in the psychological sense. The absence of such an opportunity is therefore noticeable. As Marris (1986) mentioned,

*Above all, if we deny grief, we deny the importance of the meaning each of us has struggled to make of life. Loss is painful because we are committed to the significance of our personal experience. . . . we cannot refuse to recognise this bereavement in others, without contempt for their sense of life.* (p. 103)

This statement, of course, speaks to the denial of actual grief itself rather than the denial of a ritual for the expression of grief. However, the two are so commonly and so closely intertwined that the need for a grief ritual seems to be an intrinsic part of the grieving process for many people. Thus, denying the bereaved an opportunity for some type of grief ritual is akin to, if not seen as the equivalent of, the denial of the grief itself.

C. A., an AOP employee with a background in psychology, recalled her frustration at not having any kind of grief ritual associated with AOP’s ending, and she viewed it with a psychological and personal lens:

*It should have been handled more personally and personably. . . . I would have valued a series of gatherings with my colleagues. . . . I would have liked to have had more closure for those of us who—*it was kind of like a battlefield for years, so
we got packed off and shipped out without any sort of closure . . . it’s scary, but that wasn’t what bothered me. It was that missing piece. . . . There would have been leis; there would have been tributes, you know, like that. There would have been food, you know just like a grieving. There would have been like a proper kind of funeral–any funeral model would have done. Instead, it was, “Uncle’s dead and you don’t get to see the body and we’re not having a service. . . . Figure it out on your own.”

When AOP was closed, the school year ended only a week before. Students had already left for the summer, and faculty members were finishing meetings to conclude business for the year. We (school employees) knew that the board’s decision was imminent, and we included in the proceedings some planning should closure be the outcome, such as recommendations for families about other schools that might be a good match for each student. The final decision to close was announced to faculty on a Friday, the last day of these meetings, and the last contractual day of work for teachers for that school year. That meant that there was literally no time remaining in the school’s last year for formally recognizing or acknowledging the fact that it was the last year. Time had simply run out. The faculty, as a result, had no opportunity to come together in grieving. These circumstances, captured so precisely in C. A.’s comment about individual employees left to “figure it out” were reminiscent of Gow’s (2009).
commentary on the lack of guidance for schools: “each school must face its destiny more or less alone” (para. 5). So too must each member of a closing school’s faculty.

**Job Loss Concern**

Not surprisingly, research participants mentioned their concern over losing their job as a predominant feature of their recollection of the school closure experience. Yet many responses went beyond the simple fear of financial distress, and illustrated how interviewees viewed their job in the context of their overall identity or their social relationships. In this way, their responses illustrated how their employment at the school was understood on a psychological level, and therefore how losing that employment disrupted the meaning schemas by which school employees construct their worldview.

Of course the concern over the loss of one’s job was natural; when the school closed nearly everyone lost their livelihoods with it. But the full impact was an intensely personal matter for each person. As W. M. recalled his thoughts upon learning that his school was considering closure, “I’d never been unemployed and I thought I could be in a real mess. . . . [I thought] ‘I can’t be in a position where the school fails.’ I went home to my wife that night and said I didn’t realize it was that bad. And I told my wife, “We can’t be without a job. . . .” I got a brand new baby . . . school closings change lives.”
This change to one’s life was a primary concern for those affected by school closure, even to the point that school people may find themselves in the unfamiliar position of having to prioritize their own needs above the needs of others. Several participants noted that their priorities, normally on students first, shifted out of necessity. This change was probably all the more noticeable for its contrast with a typical educator’s mindset. As H. R. noted, “I think most people try to ride it out and think about the kids and their best interests but . . . I think everybody got to a point where they said, ‘I need to look out for myself.’”

Similarly, S. J. reflected on the fact that as a body, the faculty at his school focused on minimizing the impact of closure on students, but individually each person had a responsibility to him- or herself:

At the same time though, there was the inevitable, “I’ve got to figure out what I’m doing . . . I’ve got thirty more years left in my career, and I have to find . . . some place to go. . . .” That was always present.

School leaders may acknowledge the intensely personal struggle their faculty will undergo caused by a closing. H. E. stated that she worried about her faculty, even prioritizing them over her students:

They were worrying about their jobs, about their future. . . . My first thought should have been about the kids, but it wasn’t. If we were to close, my first
thought was about the faculty. And, you know, those are faculty members who were our colleagues, who are friends, with families, and I was so worried that if we were to close the school, where would they go? So, that was my first thought because I know that for the students in the school, they would have found some other place to go. . . . But it was the faculty I was so worried about.

This reversal of priorities caused by a concern for safeguarding one’s own career underscores not only the degree of change and loss that is potential in a school closing, but also the unique nature of the change context. Although other school change initiatives may cause teachers to feel threatened (Evans, 1996, p. 28-37), they seldom carry with them such a real, direct and obvious threat to one’s career. Because of this threat, educators can find themselves in unfamiliar territory, not only because their jobs are in jeopardy, but also because their usual modus operandi is now reversed. In some cases, this can add a sense of guilt to the already potent mix of worry, anxiety or fear that may be present. H. E.’s comment that she “should” have worried about the students over faculty encapsulates this predicament. Thus the significance of the data that emerged in this study surrounding concerns over the loss of one’s job lies in both its prevalence among participants, and its power to illustrate the unusual circumstances of a closure, and the correspondingly atypical responses of educators.

Losing one's job also entails severing relationships with those with whom one
has worked. The concept of place attachment is rooted in the relationships that people attribute to a place. That is, people may become attached to a physical place not so much for a literal, concrete reason, but rather as the setting in which significant personal relationships occur. Recall how Altman and Low (1992) described the concept of place attachment: “Places are, therefore, repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people are attached” (p. 7).

Losing one’s job, then, can mean that place attachment plays a role in how people understand their own reaction to the loss. They may find themselves missing the place and, by extension, the people previously contained therein, because these relationships were a source of personal meaning for them in the past. As research participant C. K. noted:

when I ended up at AOP, it became like another little family for me and [losing] that was really sad. The thought of losing all of my friends because of it being such a small school–you’re not just comrades here, we’re friends, and I think that’s what was hard for me.

C. K.’s comment pointed out that unemployment carries with it a connotation that is more than a purely financial one. School employees may find themselves anxious before a closure, or wistful after one, because the loss of their job means the loss of a web of
meaningful relationships, in addition to the loss of a paycheck. Given all this, it was understandable that the theme of concern over the loss of one's job was prevalent among the data collected for this study.

**Shaping Professional Identity**

In data analysis, the categories “Outcomes–Lessons Learned” and “Outcomes–Shaping Professional Identity” were the remaining categories that received significantly frequent mention, and which directly addressed the personal experience of school closure. Each category, combined into one theme here due to their natural overlap, illustrated how the participants felt they were changed in their professional outlook in a way that was brought about by having undergone the experience of closure. In many cases, participants went beyond simple cause and effect in terms of their career to reflect further, in a more philosophical sense, on how the experience shaped them into the type of educator they became as a result. This represented a combination of professional and personal outcomes; a synergistic, second-order effect that in many cases still informs their professional practice. For better or worse (and in many cases, both) those who experienced a school closure viewed it as a significant, even seminal, influence in their development as educators.

For example, Y. L. related some of the doubts he faced while in a leadership
position during his closure and how that experience has informed his subsequent leadership practice:

I’m a little bit gun shy [now] because I’m saying to myself, “Oh God, if I now preside over another school that has some challenges, I don’t want to watch another school go down.” . . . And, that [the past closure] haunts me and will haunt me now because I think . . . “[Are] there things I could have, should have seen then?” . . . And so, not being successful with the first school, that leaves you with some . . . doubts. . . . I do think that probably I was able to come in [to a new position] and see things with a more experienced eye than others. . . . So, I think maybe I’ve changed a little bit of my view of management, of saying, “I need to be the person that has to bring some of the bad news.”

We can see from the comments above that although Y. L. underwent significant self-doubt sparked by the closure experience, that it also had the effect of rendering him now able to “see things with a more experienced eye.” This outcome has value, in the sense that it informs and strengthens his current professional practice. In fact, Y. L. even rated the overall experience as positive despite the distress it caused:

I would have to say that overall, it had to be positive because I learned a lot. But, I would say that it took its toll on me emotionally, physically. There were tons of days when I was not sleeping well at night . . . because I kept thinking there must
be something else I can do.

This theme was common among research participants; several of them related that although the closure experience was unpleasant at the time, it gave them a perspective that they might not have otherwise gained. Other participants also viewed this new perspective as a positive benefit. For example, S. J. reflected on his practice today, and how he feels it is informed by his prior experience undergoing closure:

I think that it gave me a larger perspective and I think I tend not to overreact on negative things because there’s nothing worse that can happen. . . . When we [at the current school] have a bad year with enrollment or we have a bad teacher or a difficult set of families, basically I think that’s a little bit easier to put into perspective having been at a school that closed outright and you lost everything.

This larger perspective mentioned by S. J. and other research participants included not taking things for granted. Some connected that realization with how they approach their practice now. For example, S. J. also noted:

I think it provided some degree of perspective. . . . In many ways I think that you take for granted a lot of things. Having been at a school that closed, I realize that, you know, these things can go away.

In a similar vein, W. M., whose school successfully avoided closure, but only after a period of uncertainty as the school went to the brink of possible closure, stated:
I’ve faced the red line and so I have a little bit more urgency; I don’t take admissions for granted. . . . You don’t take for granted that . . . an independent school is going to exist no matter what. You’ve got to be good.

W. M. went on to point out that he still keeps this lesson in mind today, many years after his near-closure experience.

Similarly, H. R. noted, “I think the school closing also opened my eyes up to the fact that things can happen to anybody.” As a result of this, H. R. kept a focus on continuously developing his skill set so as to be better prepared if he should face the same situation in the future: “The take away from it is to always keep working on getting better and keeping up to date with professional development so that you will always have the skills to be employable as things change and evolve.” Identifying this lesson as “the takeaway” shows that H. R. carried this with him afterward, and it affected how he viewed his own career path. Since “things can happen to anybody,” it was important to H. R. to be prepared at all times, and he consciously avoided lapsing into complacency. This attitude has affected his career already, and seems likely to continue to have an effect on how his career develops.

Clearly those who have experienced school closure (or near-closure) carry with them the lessons they have identified as results of that experience. In many cases, these lessons have been used for the positive benefit of school employees after the closure,
even though they recognized the costs associated with it. The participants interviewed here demonstrated that there are potential positives that may arise as a result of school closure. Interestingly, an observation even further along these lines was made by Y. L., who projected the possible secondary beneficiaries of the wisdom that “surviving” a closure can bring:

In some ways a board would do well to hire someone who has gone through this process and really has learned from it. . . . they might do well to hire that person because that person is more seasoned, you know, than someone coming in who hasn’t had to deal with those things.

Here Y. L. demonstrated that he found the good in his experience, but has generalized this observation as to how the experience might benefit others as well.

Although none of the participants interviewed expressed that school closure was a wholly positive experience, it is important to note that none of them saw it as wholly negative either. They were able to articulate some positive benefits that resulted, even if those benefits were unforeseen, not deliberate, or psychically costly.

**Summary of findings**

Taken together these four areas—leadership in context; grief response; job loss concern; and shaping professional identity—comprised the primary themes that related
to the personal experience of school closure which were mentioned most frequently among all interview topics, and which were mentioned by multiple research participants. Please see Appendix D for a list of codes corresponding to topics mentioned and their frequency. The data supplied by my research participants in these areas thus represent the process of school closure as it is experienced by school employees.

In looking at these four thematic areas together, we can see that the process of school closure affects employees’ lives in multiple ways. Naturally, they worry about losing their jobs. The demands of leadership in such a context are not only more exaggerated but also different in kind from the demands of leadership in other forms of school change. And although school employees may be affected profoundly by the loss, even demonstrating symptoms of grief, there are lessons to be learned that contribute to one’s professional identity. Some of these lessons lead those who have experienced closure to feel as if they have gained a sort of benefit, often in the form of an enhanced perspective on their career as educators and how they approach their own practice. Describing this process explicitly, and in the terms of those who lived through it, helps us to understand the meaning, mechanisms, and significance of this process.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter revisits the primary purpose, context, and research questions of this study, and then presents the answers to the research questions as conclusions drawn from the data. The chapter also contains recommendations for those who undergo school closure. In addition, this chapter includes a reflection on the effects of this research and my own school closure experience on my own professional practice. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for further research and an overall closing summary.

Purpose and Context

The study’s purpose was to gain a greater understanding of the process of school closure as it is experienced by school employees. It was conceived as I experienced the closure of the independent school where I had worked. During that experience, my colleagues and I found that there was very little guidance available; although we were experiencing it together, we each felt that we were very much on our own. This study exists in the hope that it may provide such guidance to others who may undergo school closure. Although not every detail of each closure scenario may be predictable from one
closure to another, giving others some idea of what to expect in the school closure process is a potential benefit of this study.

Discussion

I have focused on a primary research question, “What does school closure mean to those school employees who experience it?” This question intentionally uses dual connotations of the concept of meaning because both are present and relevant – the idea of significance or importance as well as the idea of an organizing principle underlying one’s view of life. Indeed, the closure of a school is certainly significant for those who work there, and it forces them to re-evaluate their worldview. The answers to this question lead to further insight useful for answering secondary research questions such as, “Are there better and worse ways to close a school, from the perspective of those employed by it?” and, “What can their experiences teach us that might help us better understand that process for others in the future?”

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this study was to expect an emotional reaction to school closure. School change contains the threat of loss. Loss, whether potential or actual (and in the case of school closure it certainly can be a mix of both), typically engenders reactions that can resemble grief (Marris, 1983). These reactions to loss are natural due to the conservative impulse, first posited by Marris.
(1983) and adapted to school settings by Evans (1996). As Heifetz and Linsky (2002) proposed, “People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss” (p. 11). All research participants interviewed for this study expressed that they felt some form of fear or anxiety associated with their school closure experience, and all included in their comments a significantly emotional component. Indeed, few data supplied by research participants did not address the emotional landscape of a school employee faced with closure.

The concept of place attachment explains that many people view a significant place as a symbol for the network of relationships contained within a particular setting (Altman & Low, 1992; Read, 1996). Therefore, when the literal setting is threatened, so too are the relationships contained therein, representing a threat of significant loss. Research participant C. K.’s comments about the workplace being her “family” and “the thought of losing all of my friends . . . I think that’s what was hard for me” illustrate this concept pointedly.

This sense of loss, due to its pervasiveness and finality, may be considered similar in nature (if not in degree) to experiencing a death. In fact, several of my research participants overtly likened the closure process to a death, and this analogy is illustrative when explaining school employees' psychological responses to closure (e.g. Smith, 1984). Seen in this light, a grief response is natural. The process of grieving is a
way for people to come to terms with loss when an actual death occurs, and when the primary source of one’s professional identity is lost, the impact can be similarly profound.

In looking at the psychological literature in the area of grief, the constructivist views elaborated by Niemeyer and others were helpful. The three tasks associated with grief in this view—sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Gillies & Niemeyer, 2006; Niemeyer & Anderson, 2002; Niemeyer, 2001b)—were all demonstrated to be present in a school closure scenario, both by research participants in interviews as well as in my own experience. For example, participants’ comments about not taking things for granted in their careers reflected the identity change component of the grief process. Similarly, my own experiences of wondering what would happen in the early stages of closure reflected the sense-making task. Despite the relative lack of success in making sense of the process, it was still the process that was the primary concern for me at the time. In fact, this entire study may be said to be born from—and indeed part of—the sense-making task associated with my own response to school closure.

Important to consider along with this recommendation was the idea that school closure was a profound form of change; in fact it was the most profound form of change a school can undergo, since after this change occurs there is literally nothing left of the school. Every school employee’s professional circumstances are guaranteed to be
altered, a permeation of influence that even the most radical changes in instruction, school design, etc., rarely attain. School leaders, often well-versed in leading school communities through change, should recognize that this degree of change is an order of magnitude greater than many of the changes they may have undertaken in a school before, though these may have been quite significant themselves. Concepts such as resistance to change, place attachment, and grief are helpful in understanding the process by which school employees experience school closure.

Given that employees may react emotionally, and that this reaction may be significant in scope, corresponding to the large scope of the change that closure represents, it is important not only for school leaders, but for all school employees to understand that feelings of confusion, uncertainty, anger, blame, confusion, or guilt are natural in the context of closure. The exact combination or extent of these feelings may not be predictable on an individual basis, but they are consistent enough among those who have undergone school closure that we can consider them typical, even if they feel unnatural or abnormal to the employees at the time.

For example, feeling as if one must look out for one’s own welfare, even over that of students, is inconsistent with most teachers’ usual practice, yet it may occur in a closure context. As noted previously, many of my research participants observed that they were consciously aware of their own concern for themselves more so than they had
been in their previous professional practice. Other examples of the emotions that may occur were found in participant C. A.’s comments regarding her anger over her school’s closure, and who she continues to blame for it. Those undergoing school closures would be well advised to prepare for emotions that may be intense, even surprising.

Regarding the secondary research questions, the literature and data from this study show that there is no procedurally right way or wrong way to close a school that will apply in all situations. Due to the innumerable circumstances that may exist, different in proportion or interplay from one school to the next, and the similarly innumerable circumstances that may exist from one person to the next as employees experience closure, as reflected in the variety of responses from research participants, it is not possible at this point to prescribe a standard “recipe” for a school closure process. Given that the research participants in this study experienced closure or near-closure in varying circumstances, and given that they also failed to demonstrate an unmistakable consensus as to what conclusions they drew from it personally, or what they felt should have happened, it is clear that outcomes can vary.

Given this lack of obvious consensus, another conclusion of this study is that a “right versus wrong” conceptual dichotomy or even a linear continuum of “better to worse” is not particularly helpful when considering school closures. Using the data from this study as represented in the conclusions above, it may be more helpful for
school employees to address the closure experience from a philosophical, even more than a procedural, standpoint. Giving priority to conceptual issues such as, “Are our people being supported emotionally?” during the process can help procedural matters resolve themselves in a humane way, as a result of an orientation toward the personal experience first. Doing so could alleviate some of the stress, fear and anxiety that may accompany the experience. And relieving these feelings, even if only somewhat, can go a long way toward helping people renegotiate their lives. Because a “lack of recognition of grief . . . complicates grief” (Doka, 2001, p. 31) and because “we cannot refuse to recognise . . . bereavement in others, without contempt for their sense of life” (Marris, 1986, p. 103), those school employees undergoing the process of closure can benefit from an understanding and acknowledgement of their own personal experience of closure, including their sense of loss and the corresponding process of grief it can trigger.

Despite the emphasis on the psychological distress caused by school closure, however, some good can come from the experience. This was another important conclusion that emerged from this study. Nearly all of my research participants expressed that their experience with closure was a formative influence on the type of educator they had become since. The experience had the power to shape one’s professional identity, often bestowing upon closure survivors an enlarged perspective
on the work of education, as well as enhanced skill sets due to having one’s skills tested by unusual circumstances and possibly strengthened as a result. Thus interviewee W. M.’s comment about not taking his school’s reputation for granted, that “you have to be good” exemplifies how one can emerge from a closure experience stronger as an educator. Similarly, H. R. noted that he would advise those facing potential closure to focus on broadening their skill sets for maximum employability, and cited his own willingness to do so as a primary reason he was able to gain new employment immediately after AOP’s closure.

Recommendations

Based on the literature, the data collected for this study, and the conclusions drawn from them, it is possible to make recommendations for people associated with other schools that may face the possibility of closing. These recommendations are:

(1) That schools or groups of schools assemble and analyze as much data as possible from schools that have already closed, for the purpose of understanding the process as clearly as possible. Currently, research and data associated with school closures are scarce. Therefore, the primary recommendation of this study is to gather more data on the topic.

This data should be available to all schools in a common association, both closing
and not. Because there is currently no organized data bank for school closure data, it is recommended that state, regional or national associations of independent schools develop something to meet this need, and that schools nearing closure can access this data bank. This could be as simple as adding data fields to the National Association of Independent Schools’ DASL data bank (formerly StatsOnline) for such items as closure status or financial indicators that may predict closure, or as in-depth as compiling narrative stories of closure for use by those experiencing it.

It is understandable that closing or closed schools will have varying abilities to provide closure data, but any data schools can provide can be valuable to other schools in the future. Schools in pre-closure status will not have time to undertake their own full-fledged research study of other schools first; they need—and deserve—the benefit of lessons learned by those who have gone before being available to them when they need it. For example, a continuously evolving set of “best practices” exists for nearly every other aspect of school operation; could not such an assembled set of practices (granted that the term best is problematic if used as a blanket term applied to all closures) benefit those in schools undergoing closure? This set of practices can only be built if schools make the effort to contribute data, and if organizations such as independent school associations make the effort to consolidate and analyze these data.

(2) Another recommendation for school people that emerges from this study is to
view closures in terms of congruence with a school’s circumstances, not a right way and a wrong way. Because a significant portion of the issues surrounding closure involves procedural matters, and because there may in fact be correct and incorrect ways to implement individual procedural actions in a school closing, it is easy to fall into a pattern of thinking that there is a correct way to close a school. In fact, one of the assumptions underpinning the research questions of this study is that we may discern from the data ways to mitigate negative outcomes of closure (i.e., to do it better). When viewing the process as a whole, however, judgment becomes much more subjective. As the stories from research participants illustrate, positive effects of closure are typically interspersed with negative ones, making it difficult to assign a summative value judgment.

It may therefore be better to view the specific closure scenario as better fitted to the school’s particular circumstances or not, rather than better or worse in an objective, absolute sense. As we can see by contrasting the examples of S. J.’s school with the example of AOP (i.e., a two-year wind-down process vs. an announcement after the school year was completed), even regarding a seemingly straightforward question about how much time to allot between announcement and closure, there is a range of possible outcomes and both approaches had their share of drawbacks; neither of these examples outshines the other as clearly superior. Therefore, we must reject such
questions as, “Is it better to close a school quickly or slowly?” because they assume there is an objectively correct answer. We must think instead that there are only subjectively correct answers.

S. J.’s school had the time and resources available to allow the closure process to take place over a two-year period. This allowed both students and teachers some time to make other arrangements for their futures, an obvious benefit for the sake of continuity in an education or in a career. In contrast, AOP’s closure was much more sudden. This timeline certainly did not allow school employees as much time to seek new employment, nor families as much time to seek enrollment elsewhere. Yet, given that only about thirty-five families had signed contracts to re-enroll for another year, had a subsequent school year taken place it would likely have had a dramatically different look and feel compared to the previous year. The trustees who made the decision to close reportedly took this into account when making their decision. Because the school would have been virtually empty, it would have been difficult to enroll enough students in many class sections to make them viable, thereby reducing choices and dampening the overall quality of education provided to those students who did choose to re-enroll. Although this meant there was far less transition time to make other arrangements for students and employees alike, the trustees felt this consideration was secondary to considering the education the school would be able to provide. Thus, the
decision to close on this timeline was felt to be the best decision ultimately, given AOP’s unique circumstances. Other schools will similarly have to take all factors into account when deciding what is best given a particular school’s unique set of opportunities and pressures.

When data on school closures begins to accrue more significantly, we may then be able to define terms such as “better” and “worse” by clearer or more objective criteria. We may even be able to develop the predictive power of these data, leading to prognoses for schools ranging from possible to likely candidates for closure. Until then, however, this research demonstrates that the only metric a school can use to judge the efficacy of its closure is its own situation.

(3) A related recommendation is that independent schools create a general template for the closure of independent schools. As the previous recommendation illustrates, it is unrealistic to expect the process to be standardized in its specific details. Yet as this study demonstrates, employees of a school undergoing closure can be expected to have some common concerns, and multiple closing schools will likely face some of the same issues, broadly construed. As Gow (2009) observes, “One simple issue that faces schools on the brink of closing is that there is no established methodology for going through the process, despite the fact that each year brings a scattering of independent school closings” (para. 5).
Many public school districts already have some type of guidance in place for closing a school. When schools are determined to meet certain criteria, they become candidates for closure, and if the decision is made later to close the school, there are often government-mandated procedures to follow which provide a general framework for schools to follow in their process. Although such frameworks may not address all variables, at least they can serve as de facto templates to which schools can refer.

Independent schools should have similar guidance available but due to the variability of circumstances among independent schools (e.g. finances, facilities, or timeline) this guidance should draw upon general principles to inform the closure process rather than prescribing specific actions to take. For example, a simple checklist of questions to consider (as opposed to specific answers to be arrived at) such as the needs of students, parents, and employees, in addition to the financial, administrative, and legal dimensions would be helpful.

A set of independent school closure guidance could be strengthened if independent school associations considered the closure of a single school the responsibility of other members of the association too, and broadened the concept of the process to make it shared and collaborative among people from outside the school as well. For example, associations could assemble teams of experts from other schools, who have experience of some aspect of closure, to serve as consultants for schools
facing closure to help school administrators see the process through. These teams could coordinate with the closing school to provide expertise and support. Since each closing school “must face its destiny more or less alone” (Gow, 2009, para. 5) the availability of those who have been there before would be not only reassuring but also of practical benefit, in terms of efficiency of decision-making and procedural knowledge.

Ideally such a team would be able to give advice not only on how to close but also how the school might avoid closure before it reaches the point of no return, or, failing that, how to know when it has reached that point. That is, devising a shared, collaborative process to close a school would be even more beneficial if it could encompass a process for deciding whether to close a school in the first place. This struck me as one of the most difficult parts of AOP’s process; in fact, when the school first began to explore the idea of closing, it was immediately met with a series of other questions such as: On which factors should we base the decision? Where can we turn for help? Whom can we contact who has experience in something like this? Whether in making the decision to close or in receiving assistance during the actual closure, in every respect the closing school can benefit from collaboration with those who have experience in such matters since individual schools are unlikely to have faced these particular circumstances before.
It would also be helpful if a generally recommended closure process included some kind of self-report from the closing school. This type of inquiry could be based on a short list of reflective questions covering important topics from financial indicators before closure, to procedures followed during closure, to rituals observed afterward. These rich data, supplied by schools themselves, could then serve as the basis for associations to better understand the closure phenomenon. Ideally, this study would be undertaken before the decision to close is final, when the school is still in some kind of potential closure status, so that school people, aware of their own priorities and concerns while the process is unfolding, can communicate the relative significance of these to others in the future.

Effects on Professional Practice

Because this study was undertaken as an action research project situated within and informed by my own professional practice, it is appropriate to reflect on how my practice was affected in turn by the study. Before beginning, I expected that my research would prove cathartic to some extent, especially because when people asked me my opinion on AOP’s closure, I usually responded that I didn’t really know how I felt; that I hadn’t really processed it all yet. My research provided me with some insight, which I have aimed to share in this document, but it has not given me “all the answers.” I now
realize that it would have been naïve to expect definitive answers regarding such an investigation into human emotional processes and understanding, the process of making meaning from a life event.

Yet some things have become clearer, and I have been shaped as an educator by the experience. Before this study, I would have been largely unaware of how my professional identity, the way I go about my work, was influenced by my experience of closure. For example, I now have a more urgent sense of the need for schools to deliver on their value proposition to families, and this informs my work since then. I often make a conscious effort to view my work as families might view it, and ask myself whether they would feel that their expectations are being met. Or, as my participant W. M. put it similarly, “we have to be good at what we do.”

Similarly, as a school administrator, I appreciated the implications for school leaders that emerged from my research. In the closure I experienced, and in those scenarios my research participants recounted, there was a clear emphasis on leadership decisions and actions. I saw school leaders wrestle with tough questions that had no easy or obvious answer, and be held responsible, even if retroactively, for their response on behalf of the people in the school they led. This has made me more cognizant of the responsibilities of leadership in a school setting. For example, I saw how the absence of any type of closing ritual was held against those responsible for implementing AOP’s
closure, and this has underscored for me how important it is to be in touch with a faculty’s emotional needs as part of the pastoral aspect of school leadership.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Based on this study, further research is warranted to address both the inherent limitations of this study, and to expand on it in areas beyond its scope. Several suggested questions for further research are:

1. “How do the experiences of school closure at other American independent schools differ from those represented here?”

The conclusions of the present study are based on a relatively small data set. Schools studied in the previous literature on school closing are all government operated and as such differ in significant ways from an independent school. For example, although faculty members at other schools represented in the literature may have had concerns about losing their jobs, and may in fact have become unemployed through the circumstances of closure, in general this was a rare occurrence. In the case of an independent school, however, losing one’s job as a result of school closure is essentially a foregone conclusion. Therefore other research studies of independent schools can address a previously underrepresented element, namely, the concern for loss of one’s job, which emerged as a primary finding here.
(2) “Which quantifiable factors can be identified as influencing a school’s decline or closure?”

Another area for further research in this area would be to design a similar study based on quantitative methods. Although currently little data exists specifically related to school closure, if a data bank were to be compiled, a quantitative study of this data would be a logical next step. In analyzing inherently quantitative factors such as financial and admissions indicators, for example, perhaps a series of quantifiable benchmarks for these data could be derived. Were closure decisions to be made based on actual quantitative data, it could be a tremendous benefit for schools, particularly with respect to quantifiable metrics such as enrollment or finances. Currently these decisions are made with only some reference to critical data (indeed, as much reference as is possible usually) but often based on anecdotal evidence or simple “gut feel” for the implications of quantitative variables. Davison and Davison (2009) of the National Association of Independent Schools have taken a similar approach to schools’ overall financial sustainability in their publication Affordability and Demand by deriving national benchmarks so that schools have guidelines against which to compare their own data. It could be incredibly helpful for a school in distress to be able to answer not only the question, “Which numbers should we be watching?” but also, if the situation becomes more critical, “How bad is it?”
Taking a quantitative approach a step further to a statistical analysis of school closure data might even go beyond deriving the importance of categories and the benchmark points for each. Assuming the data pool were large enough, perhaps we could even use such data for prediction. For example, it would be helpful to examine the effect size of interventions that schools undertake in attempts to avoid closure along with the statistical \( p \) value of the results (the likelihood of the outcome having happened by chance). Schools could then be better positioned to direct resources into the areas that have been shown to have the greatest positive return on investment. This research could address the question, “What is the quantifiable range of operability for independent schools?”

Similarly, in terms of applying quantitative approaches to the study of school closure, it would also be useful to see a study that applies a systems dynamics approach to the process of school closure. If we were able to see the interplay of various factors in a causal loop diagram, for example, this also could better inform school decision makers at a critical time. Such research could address the important research question, “How and to what extent do the various circumstances and processes present in a school closure scenario influence each other?”

(3) How does the “ecosystem” (i.e. market) of which a closed school was a part adapt to its absence?”
A third potential focus of future research involves the lens with which researchers may view schools—namely, as organisms occupying a unique niche in an educational “ecosystem.” Reed (2013) made a fascinating point in introducing the “schools as ecosystems” metaphor. As he stated:

Schools just like ecosystems are dynamic organisms and decisions made about one school community would have long-lasting effects in that community. . . . Close one school down and what impact will it have on the educational, social and economic sustainability of the community and city-at large” (para. 5).

Reed’s context was public schools and his usage of this metaphor viewed schools as one “species” in the ecosystem of a neighborhood or a community. However, I believe it could also be a useful image for independent schools within a market area to think of themselves as comprising an ecosystem made up of all the independent schools in that market.

We could consider mission differentiation between schools as an analogue to taxonomic species differentiation. That is, if missions differentiate various independent schools from each other, then when a school closes it must leave a gap, an unfilled niche, similar to a species becoming extinct within an environment. Can this gap be identified? Can it be filled? Is there overlap with other schools that can suffice? How is the ecosystem affected on a macro scale? In AOP’s closing, for example, several people
from other schools remarked to me that AOP had for years filled an important niche among all the schools in the area.

Continuing the metaphor even further, if a school moves into some kind of candidate for closure status, could it be added to a type of “endangered species list” and therefore entitled to some type of protected status or subsidy for its continued existence? A study that frames schools as a species within an ecosystem would be a fascinating outgrowth of studies such as this one. This study examines the effect of the closure on individuals within a single species (school) but a study examining the effect of the loss of the species on the overall ecosystem could be an important companion to this study and others like it. Metaphors aside, it would be important for a future study to examine what happens after a school closes. Most of the current literature examines the phenomenon before and during the actual closure; therefore a study that investigates second-order effects after a school closes would provide an important perspective.

Closing Thoughts

In my closure experience I watched good people with good intentions doing the best they could, and saw that sometimes, things still did not work out the way they wanted. As we have seen from the data collected for this study, the school closure
experience can trigger a process that requires a restructuring of one’s “assumptive world.” Yet I and others like me have emerged from the experience the better for it. We have moved into new phases of our careers armed with the knowledge that life will go on, and often with a broadened perspective and an enhanced sense of professional identity. I hope that this study will provide some reassurance to those facing a school closure that, although the experience may be confusing, frustrating or discouraging for those affected, life will go on for them too. If this study can make that process any clearer or easier, then it will have served its purpose. It is my hope that readers of this study will benefit from it as they make meaning of school closure.
Appendix A: Research Participant Consent Form

University of Hawai‘i
Consent to Participate in Research Project: “Making Meaning of School Closure”

My name is Josh Watson. I am a doctoral student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH), in the Department of Educational Foundations. As part of my graduate program, I am undertaking research on the topic of school closure (please see project description below). I would like to request your participation in this study by discussing your professional experience with me and/or providing data that is related to the topic of the study. If you decide to participate, your participation is entirely voluntary and subject to the conditions described in this document.

Project Description: The study will examine schools in crisis, schools that have closed, and schools that have successfully avoided closing through restructuring or redesign, in order to develop and contribute to generalizable knowledge, for the benefit of schools that may face similar circumstances. The intent of the study is to identify the reaction of school employees to the experience of school closure or potential closure. The knowledge gained through this study could be helpful to a number of schools in practical terms, and is intended to contribute to the academic literature on independent schools in general.

Project Description - Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate, I will meet with you at least once for approximately 30-60 minutes, preferably in person but by phone/email as necessary, with a likelihood of at least one follow-up discussion of approximately the same amount of time. With your permission, I will record the discussion using a digital audio-recorder so that I can later analyze the information from the interview and/or quote you accurately in the final research product. The recordings will be stored in a room that will be locked when unoccupied. When the project is complete, all recordings will be deleted. If you would like to preview a copy of the questions that I will ask you, please let me know.

Benefits and Risks: There may be no direct benefits to you individually in participating in this research project, and no form of compensation is offered. However, the results of this project are intended to help others at independent schools in similar situations. I believe there is likely no risk to you in participating in this project, personally or professionally. Disclosure of your responses in the final research report is not expected to place you at risk of criminal or civil liability, nor to be damaging to your financial
standing, employability, or reputation. If you are uncomfortable or stressed during by any portion of our meeting, we will skip the question, take a break, stop the interview, or you may choose to withdraw from the project altogether.

**Confidentiality and Privacy**: During this research project, I will keep all data from the interviews secured. Only the researcher and either of two project advisors will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

After I complete the final research product (report) I will erase the audio-recordings. When I report the results of the research project, I will not use your name, your school’s name, or any other personally identifying information unless you specifically grant written permission to do so. I will provide you a copy of the final report at your request.

**Voluntary Participation**: Participation in this research project is voluntary. You can choose freely to participate or not to participate. In addition, at any point during this project, you can withdraw your permission without any penalty or loss of benefits.

**Questions**: If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor via the contact information provided below. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai‘i, Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007 or by e-mail at uhirb@hawaii.edu.

(continued on next page)
University of Hawai‘i  
Consent to Participate in Research Project: “Making Meaning of School Closure”

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign as indicated below and return it to the researcher. Please feel free to keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Signature(s) for Consent:

By signing below, I agree to participate in the research project “Making Meaning of School Closure.” I understand that I can change my mind about participating in this project at any time by notifying the researcher or faculty advisor listed below.

Permission to make audio recordings (please check one):

☐ Yes, the researcher has my permission to make audio recordings of our conversations, subject to the terms specified in this document.

☐ No, I do not give permission for audio recordings.

Confidentiality (please check one):

☐ Yes, I authorize the researcher to use my name and/or other identifying information in the final research product, which may be published or otherwise shared with a public audience.

☐ No, I do not authorize the researcher to use my name and/or any identifying information in any research product, nor to share my identifying information in any manner with anyone.

Your Name (Print): __________________________________________

Your Signature: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________

Contact phone number(s): __________________________________________

Contact email address: __________________________________________
Researcher contact information:

Researcher: Josh Watson, University of Hawai‘i College of Education, jcwatson@hawaii.edu; (808) 595-6359; (808) 284-5480

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nathan Murata,
University of Hawai‘i, College of Education
nmurata@hawaii.edu; (808) 956-4714
Appendix B: Research/Interview Questions

University of Hawai‘i Committee on Human Studies
Attachments to Application for Exempt Status for Human Subjects Research

Project title: “Making Meaning of School Closure”
College of Education, Ed.D. program

Questions/Topics for Discussion:
1. Please describe your experience with a school in crisis.

2. Did the school close? Why or why not? If your school survived the crisis period, which factors seemed to contribute most to its survival?

3. Please describe your professional experience after the school crisis period. How was your career affected by this experience?

4. What did you learn from the experience?

5. Do you know of other schools or other individuals that have faced similar situations? In what ways is that situation similar to or different from what you experienced yourself?

6. Please describe the factors/issues that were most important to you during your experience with a school facing closure. After your experience, which factors/issues would you say were most important?

7. In your opinion, were there any actions the school’s leadership should have taken but did not, or did take but should not have? Is there a particular leadership style or set of leadership characteristics that you feel are particularly suited to a school in crisis?

8. What advice might you give to someone working in a school that may close?

9. Looking back on your experience now, do you think it was a positive or negative experience? Why?
Research Questions

Major Question #1 – What objective processes do school employees experience in connection with a school closure?

Related questions:

• Please describe what happened when the school where you worked closed or almost closed.

• What happened before the school closed?

• When and how were you informed that the school would close? How did you feel at the moment you learned of the closure?

• What steps were taken by you or others in connection with the school’s closing?

• After the school was closed, what happened to you? What did you do next in the immediate term? What did you do in the longer term?

Major Question #2 – What subjective processes do school employees experience in connection with a school closure?

Related questions:

• Can you identify anything that you think might have been a cause of the closure?

• If you or others could have done anything differently as the school was in the process of closing, what would that be and why?

Major Question #3 – How do these processes affect people’s lives?

Related questions:

• In what ways have you changed personally as a result of the school closure? Why do you think those changes occurred?
• In what ways have you changed professionally as a result of the closure? Why do you think those changes occurred?

• Were there any good things that came about as a result of the closure?

• Was the overall effect of the closure positive or negative for you? Why?

• What advice might you give to someone who works at a school that may be closing? To someone whose school has already closed?

• What lessons did you learn in connection with this experience?
Appendix C: Interview Transcript Check Cover Letter

Dear (name),

Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed for my dissertation research. Your contribution is valuable to me and I would like to be able to use some quotes from you in my final paper. Attached please find a transcript of our interview session. I am sending this to you as a form of “member check” in which you have the opportunity to tell me whether what is written there accurately conveys what you said and/or meant. You will notice that the literally transcribed written version of a conversation reads very differently from a polished written work. This is normal; please be assured that any quotes that make it into my final paper will be quoted in such a way that the context and meaning is clear.

Please feel free to look over the attached transcript and let me know if there is anything there you’d like me to amend. Of course you may also tell me if there are parts you would like me to make sure not to include in my final paper too.

I can send the audio file of our interview also, so that you may compare the written version with the audio version if you wish. You will undoubtedly notice several parts noted in the written document as "Indiscernible." Please be assured that if I have left these parts uncorrected, they are not expected to be included in my final paper. Thus the likelihood of being misquoted via these sections is slim. You may wish to listen to the audio for these sections anyway to clear them up, as is your prerogative.

Please let me know whether there are any edits you’d like me to make. When those have been done, or if you don’t see the need for any, I would like to get some kind of “all clear” from you stating that you are aware what’s on the transcript and that you don’t feel anything is inaccurate. It’s my hope that this process is not unnecessarily burdensome for you; but it’s necessary as a matter of ethics and good-faith appreciation for your help with my project.

Thanks very much,

Josh
Appendix D: Code Categories and Frequencies

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Average 7.47
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