

Article

All Flourishing [In Rural School–Community Partnerships] Is Mutual

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Abstract

On the opening page of *The Serviceberry* (2024), Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote: “all flourishing is mutual.” Channeling biomimicry, Kimmerer asks, “Can we imagine a human economy with a currency that emulates the flow from Mother Earth—a currency of gifts?” (p. 14). I ask a parallel question regarding school–community relationships: can we imagine school and community as members of an ecology of schooling in which mutual flourishing is the aim? Schools often silo from communities, and interactions tend to be transactional, even though partnership language is invoked. Drawing on a case study of a K-6 rural school with a place-based agriculture immersion program in Alberta, Canada, I describe elements of collaboration between school and community using gift as a lens to interpret interview transcripts and field notes. Mutual flourishing was a function of (1) the school being viewed as an extension of the community; (2) the recentering of place as a participant in school–community relations; and (3) a school–community ecology grounded in shared values and goals rather than structured arrangements. The findings re-frame partnerships from supplementary arrangements that schools enter into and wield to school–community *connections* or *kinships* that bind school and community into a reciprocal web of flourishing.

Keywords: rural schooling; school-community gifts; place-based education

1. Introduction: A Carton of Eggs

This paper was inspired by a carton of eggs. In January 2022, I was invited to Prairie Roots Community School (pseudonym, PRCS hereafter) to explore a research opportunity. PRCS was a new K-6 public charter school in rural Alberta, Canada. Charter schools are unique opportunities for parents and community members to initiate special programming. I will explain the regulatory environment in which they exist in Alberta in Section 2, but noteworthy at the outset is that PRCS was the first and still is the only elementary agriculture immersion program in the province. During my visit, I toured the barnyard and listened to the teachers and directors explain their vision for facilitating Alberta curriculum through a working farm. As a rural education scholar and former farm kid, I was intrigued. But what was indelible about that meeting is this: As our discussion drew to a close, the Board Chairperson gifted me a carton of eggs to thank me for my interest in studying their school and said, “You will become part of this community.” In twenty years of being a researcher, I had never encountered such an edict.

Over the course of the study at PRCS that gesture lingered. I have listened, observed, been a participant in the life of the school community, and indeed, feel I became part of it in an unexpectedly enduring way. I became particularly aware of what might have been



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meant by community in PRCS's context. PRCS received exceptional support and interest not only from locals but from the broader agriculture sector. Their school–community interactions embodied a dynamic of mutuality because PRCS was as much a contribution to the rural and agricultural communities as those communities were to the school. Thus, that carton of eggs prompted me to ask: What changes in our understanding and expectation of school–community partnerships when they are conceptualized through a lens of gift? How might the lens of gift shift our partnership intentions from transactions or instruments to opportunities for reciprocity and mutual flourishing?

In this paper, I reflect on the above questions, drawing on Indigenous scholar [Kimmerer's \(2024\)](#) notion of gift as articulated through her ecological example of the serviceberry, which we on the Canadian Prairies call saskatoons. In *The Serviceberry*, Kimmerer sees the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world in terms of a “web of reciprocity” (p. 22). She uses this ecological metaphor to critique market economy principles and to contrast them with assumptions of mutuality that underpin a gift economy. I consider how rural schools and their communities may exist in a similar dynamic of interdependence, gratitude, and we-ness. This is a departure from the market model of education, which compels educators to seek out community partners to compensate for an insufficient system, and where organizational goals remain largely siloed.

In the following, I review conceptual underpinnings of school–community partnerships, summarize scholarly work on gifts, and describe [Kimmerer's \(2024\)](#) gift economy. Finally, drawing on elements of gifting offered by Kimmerer, I provide my interpretations as “gift stories” to articulate PRCS's community collaborations and connections. In doing so, I aim to offer an alternative orientation to school–community partnerships, one that is characterized by acts of giving and receiving that ripple through a school community. This is an ontological conceptualization for rural school–community interactions that may be generative and hopeful, something educators and scholars of education may find timely during current polycrisis conditions ([Seravalli 2025](#)).

1.1. Conceptualizing School-Community Partnerships

In her book on school–community partnerships, [Hands \(2023\)](#) opened by taking the reader on an historical journey from the village school where local community members and parents were key educational decision makers, to the development of modern public education, which ultimately disenfranchised them. More than ever today, education systems face complexities regarding students' academic, social, and emotional needs that require resources and expertise beyond schools' capacities. The idea of the stand-alone school is no longer “tenable or effective” (p. 1) as [Anderson-Butcher et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest; student learning and school-based metrics such as attendance and graduation rates are inevitably impacted by external forces that create vulnerabilities in the student population (e.g., mental health, poverty). Collaboration with community partners has thus emerged as a necessity to address student needs ([Kanaan et al. 2025](#)). While the concept of the village school may have renewed appeal, it is not easy to recreate ([Chrzanowski et al. n.d.](#); [Hands 2023](#); [Medina et al. 2019](#); [Renbarger et al. 2025](#)). A fair amount of research has focused on factors, conditions, models, and frameworks to support the development of positive partnerships (e.g., [Bryan and Henry 2012](#); [Grant et al. 2025](#); [Hands 2023](#); [Morris et al. 2024](#); [Myende 2019](#); [O'Connor and Daniello 2019](#); [Shand et al. 2026](#); [Valli et al. 2016](#); [Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass 2012](#)).

Dominant approaches to exploring school–community partnerships include [Bronfenbrenner's \(1979\)](#) ecological systems theory and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence developed initially by [Epstein \(1995\)](#) and expanded by [Epstein et al. \(2025\)](#). Whereas ecological systems theory assumes student development is shaped by interactions

among nested systems (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono), the overlapping spheres of influence theory proposes that the school, family, and community are separate entities that may overlap to shape student learning outcomes depending on context, policy, and practice. Both lenses acknowledge that schools are merely one source of influence when it comes to students' learning and development. These theories treat schools and communities as institutions requiring intentional organization and coordination by the school, rather than as naturally occurring partners evolving from a relational standpoint.

Given the above theoretical assumptions and schools' increasing needs for material and human resources to address complex challenges, it is unsurprising that existing definitions and conceptualizations of school–community partnerships rely on instrumentalism. School–community partnerships have been defined in terms of “leveraging support, resources, and services” (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2022, p. 4) and “pulling and . . . mobilizing competencies . . . to contribute to the expansion of quality education” (Ngobeni 2025, p. 905). Definitions tend to emphasize the material and the structural (Morris et al. 2024).

A shared concern for the intellectual and social development of children and community vitality is foundational in some conceptualizations of school–community partnerships (Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass 2012). The prioritizing of “respectful alliances . . . [and] dialogue across difference and sharing power” (Auerbach 2012, p. 5) defines school–community partnerships in terms of social justice and democratic aims (O'Connor and Daniello 2019). A recent school partnership framework developed by Shand et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of setting up the conditions to facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships such as ensuring a good fit between schools and community organizations, establishing clear goals and ways to evaluate them, and creating multi-directional communication protocols to support a culture of collaboration. While attention to the quality of school–community partnerships raises the importance of a relational profile, the relationship itself is a means to an end focused primarily on how community agencies can fill gaps for schools, or how school connections can contribute to organizational goals for community entities.

Kania and Kramer (2011) offered a different view of partnership work from the non-profit sector. They argued that partnerships tend to operate on an objective of isolated impact as opposed to collective impact. They define collective impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda” (p. 36). They argued that nonprofit organizations typically come together after having independently defined a specific problem, banking on the resources of others to contribute to a pre-ordained resolution. The expectation is that partners will copy approaches by those who initiated the partnership, so that in the end, individual organizations remain unchanged, and each is concerned about impacts within their own sector. Oftentimes, organizations have the same goals, but turf wars compel them to take ownership of partnerships to justify their existence, rather than seek collective impact. Kania and Kramer emphasized that there is not much evidence to suggest that isolated impact is beneficial for supporting children in a comprehensive way.

Along a similar vein, although attention is paid to social conditions and equity imperatives for school–community partnerships, Bauch (2001) suggested institutional self-interest plays a central role. Defined by their potential to address scarcity or deficit within the school context, school–community partnerships have a strong task orientation. Community is invited to help schools achieve particular outcomes; as such, the relationship is transactional and time-bound even if reciprocity or shared purposes are intended. A dynamic in which the community is in servitude to the goals of the school prevails. Once a goal is achieved, partnerships may dissolve. Coppinger (2025) suggested most partnerships are not concerned with public value beyond the school and are therefore not really transfor-

mative. Given how rural communities are portrayed as having a particular spirit, sense of place, and localized, overlapping social networks (Wuthnow 2013), exploring how these conditions shape school–community partnerships is warranted.

1.2. Conceptualizing Rural School–Community Partnerships

Zuckerman (2023) noted that partnership research is conducted primarily in urban contexts (Cohen 2025; Cummings and Olson 2020; Damwah 2025; Hands 2023; Hands and Hubbard 2011; Holme et al. 2022; Sanders 2006, 2009) where schools and communities may be institutionally separate, spatially dispersed, and enjoy substantially greater economies of scale. These studies have contributed to a valuable body of empirical insights into urban-specific school–community partnerships, especially in terms of illuminating questions about voice, equity, and power in communities marked by myriad disparities and marginalization. The assumptions of urban scholarship, however, may not travel well into rural contexts. Rural schools are more likely to be entangled with their communities through layered relationships and porous boundaries. This makes school–community partnership development less about forging relationships and more about maintaining bonds or navigating tensions.

Further, rural schools face marginalization through different dynamics, namely spatial inequality (Baek 2024; Hooks et al. 2016), which emerges from epistemic structures such as urbanormativity (Fulkerson and Thomas 2019) and metrocentricity (Campbell and Yates 2011; Grubb 2017) rather than urban demographic categories that dominate the equity, diversity, and inclusion discourse. Urbanormativity refers to “a set of beliefs, values, and practices that place the worth of urban life above rural” (Fulkerson and Thomas, p. 163). Urbanormativity results in the portrayal of rural life and people not simply as different but defective. Metrocentricity puts “cities at the center of our thinking” (Grubb, p. 65), and similarly results in urban preferences. Urbanormativity and metrocentricity are parallel hegemonies that manifest in curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy. Indiscriminate implementation of placeless standardized curriculum, for example, can be a form of erasure of rural culture and identity (Eppley 2011). School closure policy embraces big school ideology reflective of cities. These realities and dynamics are virtually unrecognized. As Fulkerson and Thomas noted, while there are “countless studies in the areas of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality . . . rather than coming to the aid of marginalized rustics, intellectual [*sic*] are often quick to join in their demonization” (p. 4). A rural-specific conceptualization of community partnerships that is “tailored to place, purpose and situation” (Zuckerman 2023, p. 431) is needed to nuance this field of study, and validate partnership work in this context.

School–community partnership findings and conceptualizations emerging from urban contexts should not be uncritically applied to rural contexts where schools are integral to and deeply embedded within community life. Strike’s (2004) examination of small schools as a model for school reform is instructive for thinking about rural school–community partnerships. Although Strike was not focused on rural schools in particular, since many rural schools are modest in size, their argument has relevance. They described the purpose of education as to initiate students into their communities, and suggested that small schools are positioned to create synergy between a school’s vision and the aspirations of their surrounding communities. Strike’s thinking aligns with scholars who argue that rural schools should not attempt to imitate urban ones, but to “attend to [their] own place” (Theobald and Nachtigal 1995, p. 132). In this light, Bauch’s (2001) definition of rural school–community partnerships as ethical entities “built on social interaction, mutual trust, and relationships [to] promote agency” (p. 205) is relevant. Bauch viewed rural schools’ connection to place “as a curricular resource” (p. 211). They suggested it was natural

for rural schools and their communities to be driven by a moral purpose rather than an institutional arrangement. In rural communities, the school vision “shapes the discourse of the community” (p. 224) and vice versa. Therefore, as Strike argued, the whole community should be included as part of the educational enterprise through a “shared commitment to a vision of a good education” and the internalization of that “common core” (p. 231).

Moore et al. (2023) report of two studies conducted in rural Montana showed how local history can be a uniting force during times of community fracture. They explored how a museum and school collaborated to create an exhibit that featured vaccine development and its impact on health and disease in the local area, and integrated relevant curricula. The exhibit was a response to the isolation and unease created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings relate to Strike’s (2004) and Bauch’s (2001) argument that local communities can be a curricular advantage for rural schools. The importance of elevating local knowledge as a way to create a shared vision for education was central to the success of the partnership.

Zuckerman’s (2023) appears to be the only literature review on rural school–community partnerships. They identified recurring elements that define them, including collaboration on behalf of young people for the sake of their well-being, the application of positive youth development theory, schools as central actors, and relationships built on trust and reciprocity. Similarly, Casto and Sipple (2022) proposed that schools and rural communities often work together to create a “community-aware orientation [that] is focused on the full realization of individuals’ needs for the good of the community” (p. 140). Casto et al. (2024) created a rural school–community framework that captures the complexity of schools’ positioning in their communities. Their two-dimensional framework shows how schools have a continuum of economic and social impacts on communities, and therefore are central in preparing workers and citizens who can contribute to their community. This school–community conceptual framework taps into the various roles schools play in the community, but still hinges on institutional and fiscal strategies within the context of social objectives.

The key message in the scholarship is that rural schools are “more than sites of instruction; they serve as civic and cultural anchors for their communities” (Grant et al. 2025, p. 4). The above perspectives suggest that in rural communities, partnerships are not simply about mobilizing resources for schools that are lacking, but more, or at least additionally, about community sustainability based on existing relational capital. This orientation challenges definitions of partnership that have emerged from urban contexts and calls for conceptualizations that account for the place-based interdependence that characterize rural communities. In my review of the literature, school–community partnerships have not been viewed through the lens of gift, but based on my experiences with PRCS, I believe it is apt and may hold potential for advancing the conversation. I turn to literature on gifts next.

1.3. Gift Literature and Gift Economy

The construct of gifts and the gift economy stems back to historical times, not because it is a past or forgotten practice of ancient cultures as Hyde (1983) noted, but because the gift economy was a practice more suitable for small communities. Gift economies had more prevalence prior to urbanization and industrialization, but gifts and gift exchanges have been explored in contemporary scholarship in topics such as trust in business negotiations and relationships (Davies et al. 2010; Mathews 2017) and creativity (Hyde 1983). All gift writers seem to find their way to Marcel Mauss’s French essay published in 1924 (as cited in Hyde). I found my way to Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* through Kimmerer, and since Hyde builds on Mauss and other anthropologists’ work (e.g., Malinowski), Hyde served as my intellectual guide on the topic.

The most defining feature of gifts is that it keeps going. Hyde (1983) stated, “A gift that cannot move loses its gift properties” (p. 9). The preservation of the gift occurs through reciprocity, although not in a bi-directional, closed loop that contemporary gift-giving practices might assume. Rather, Hyde stated gifts involve “circular giving” whereby “no one ever receives [the gift] from the same person” (p. 19). Gratitude is also central to gift exchanges, but Hyde suggests it is a kind of “blind gratitude” rather than direct thanks one may offer when given a present. Because giving is circular, the most meaningful outcome is that the gift moves out of sight, allowing gratitude beyond individual recognition or personal ego. Hyde contrasts this with market exchanges that operate on the logic of scarcity and generate expectations of equivalence. Market thinking suggests, when something is given, this should be matched by something returned. The ultimate aim in a market paradigm is possession rather than continued circulation of gratitude through gifts.

Gifts seem to be a novel and underexplored construct in educational scholarship, beyond student giftedness (Lubart and Besancon 2026). An exception is Jacob et al. (2018), who argued that the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing in public education is a path forward for redressing historical injustices and creating “better relationships within the school and community” (p. 174). With its emphasis on connections to land and peoples, they suggest that Indigenous knowledges focus on relationality, which they view as a gift. The notion of gift is implied in Bolstad and Whatman’s (2016) report on a New Zealand case study. They explored adult perspectives on how micro-projects carried out between a primary school and the wider community, focused on mutually beneficial activities, including gardening, cooking, and sewing, capitalized on community members’ expertise—gifts, if you will—and led to enhancing a future-oriented education for students and strengthened community bonds. They found the projects created additional opportunities for “micro-enterprise initiatives, with benefits flowing both to the school and the wider community” (p. 14). The school–community partnerships focused on “deliberate care and consideration” for each other’s visions, trust and good will, and “shared values around the importance of community connection [and] reciprocity” (p. 16), which suggests that the use of gift in the title of their report was more than a semantic posturing.

Writing about higher education, Ruth (2018) used the idea of gift to critique neoliberal principles (Ruth 2018). Ruth (2018) argued that the commodification of higher education undermines its intellectual and relational core. Whereas higher education should be focused on the “pursuit of wisdom” (p. 219), neoliberal principles focused on customer satisfaction and deliverables turn learning into inputs (assignments) for which students expect outputs (grades). Turning to Hyde (1983), Ruth emphasized that the market view of education promotes a form of wealth (e.g., credentials) which is finite, but “gift giving expands” (p. 225). In other words, gifts endure because they move beyond individual possession. Like Ruth, Kimmerer (2024) references Hyde (1983) in her critique of capitalism. But, while Ruth aimed to restore relationships within human systems, Kimmerer reorients relationships within a broader ecology that includes the more-than-human world. Although I do not take up the more-than-human dimensions of her work fully in this paper, Kimmerer’s ontology is useful for thinking about how relationships themselves might be different, especially in an agriculture immersion context where connection to animals and the land is a foundational assumption. To think about school–community partnerships as moments of mutual flourishing can only be possible when gifts are understood as coming from and extending beyond to generate abundance.

1.4. Kimmerer’s Gift Economy

Even though I was unaware at the time, when a carton of eggs was placed in my hands, it was an introduction to seeing rural school and community partnerships through

a relational ecology, something that resembles a gift. It was my reading of *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* (Kimmerer 2024), that finally led me to this conceptual lens through which I could interpret what the gesture had begun to reveal about PRSC and its community relations.

The Serviceberry begins with Kimmerer filling her pail with saskatoons from her neighbor's bush, appreciating the songs of Cedar Waxwings and Robins as she picks. In the Potawatomi language, saskatoons are known as *Bozakmin*. In fact, "min" appears in the names of many berries in her language. This etymological "revelation" as Kimmerer writes, is that "min" "is also the root word for 'gift'" (p. 7). Kimmerer uses the berry motif to push against a dominant organization of our human and more-than-human relationships, what we know as the market economy. A market-driven person standing in a copse of saskatoon bushes views them as a commodity that can turn a profit, and sees them as an object that makes the purchase of more objects possible. The market economy sets up a relationship between humans, and humans and the natural world, in terms of extraction, individual ownership, accumulation, consumption, and depletion. The berries in a market economy travel a truncated journey.

By contrast, in a gift economy, the berries take an extensive trip with and among the human and natural world. As Kimmerer (2024) explains, the berries are not only tasty treats for humans, birds, and other animals. They are life-sustaining for the soil when they drop, decay, and enrich the Earth with microbes. The soil receives the seeds that birds drop, and the rain and sun nourish the seeds into plants that bloom for the pollinators. The farmer carefully tends the soil around the plants' roots. Viewed as gift, saskatoons evoke gratitude. "Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy . . . multiplying with every exchange", (p. 14) writes Kimmerer. A gift economy sets up a relationship based on cycles of giving and receiving, responsibility, and renewal.

In a gift economy, it is not things or money that create prosperity, it is the "the prosperity of the community [that] grows from the flow of relationships" (Kimmerer 2024, p. 34). Importantly, Kimmerer suggests "to name the world as gift is to feel your membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable" (p. 22). Gifts carry emotional weight and responsibility, and create connection. For instance, a saskatoon pie baked for an elderly neighbor who has been lonely makes both baker and neighbor feel happy. An enduring memory and bond forms between them, but the gift does not remain static. Perhaps the elderly neighbor knows another who might feel uplifted by an invitation to afternoon tea and a slice of that pie. As the pie gets eaten, bodies and spirits get filled. The gift lives on in shared abundance. The difference between the market and gift economies is stark, as Kimmerer notes: "A gift economy nurtures the community bonds that enhance mutual well-being; the economic unit is "we" rather than "I", as all flourishing is mutual" (p. 33).

I was inspired by Kimmerer's (2024) description of the gift economy because it offers a reinterpretation of school–community partnerships beyond instrumental logics in which they tend to be framed. A gift perspective suggests an orientation that aligned with how I saw PRCS as part of a community ecosystem or a system of relationships, rather than as a separate entity in need of help. Because the school's focus on agricultural literacy foregrounds relationships with land and animals, many partnerships at PRCS transcended an anthropocentric view, suggesting that other forces can unite schools and their communities. A veterinarian who offers to demonstrate ultrasonography on a pregnant cow, for example, has connected to the students through the cow. While students are learning animal health and science, the cow is also creating a future link between students and the cattle ranchers in the community with whom students might one day have the chance to share their knowledge in a grocery store conversation. It is not a memorandum of under-

standing that ultimately connects them. Thus, Kimmerer's description of gift economies as systems of reciprocity that includes the natural world resonated with the school's vision, and suggested a way of exploring school–community partnerships as ecologies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Researcher Positionality: Intimate Connections

It is common among rural education scholars to declare an intimate connection with rural place and culture (e.g., [Chalker 2002](#); [Parmar 2017](#); [Schulte 2016](#)). I similarly claim rural is my “dwelling place” ([Dwyer and Buckle 2009](#), p. 60). Being of Ukrainian decent, I have a cultural connection to both rural contexts and farming. I grew up on a farm and showed livestock as an 8- and 9-year-old 4-H club member. I taught secondary school in rural and northern Alberta, and have lived on an acreage in central Alberta for the past 12 years. Last summer I offered a course on integrating agriculture into the curriculum, which involved a weeklong immersion at the University of Alberta farm and Edmonton's river valley. My rural identity, values and experiences cannot be separated from my research and teaching identity.

Every year my dining room table is taken over by tomato and cabbage seedlings, zinnias and geraniums that later get transplanted into my garden and flowerbeds. Each spring, I plunk aspen, spruce, silverberry, and dogwood seedlings into the soil to regenerate the shelterbelt and support biodiversity. I let the deadfall lay and dying trees lean so that insects can find a home and the pileated woodpeckers can find a meal. I myself do not hunt, but am grateful for the venison my bow-hunting nephew shares with me so that I can live by the natural gifts of the land. I have a plot of about 50 saskatoon bushes, and a freezer plumb with frozen berries and a couple of pies ready for unexpected company. Given this, it is no surprise that Kimmerer spoke to me, even though I am not Indigenous.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained first for a pilot in February 2023, and then in September 2023 for the full study, which was officially completed in March 2026. Beyond institutional expectations, an ongoing ethic of honoring the community and its knowledge was ensured by following a community-based approach ([Ochocka and Janzen 2014](#)).

2.2. Setting: Welcome to the School/Farm

PRCS is as rural gets situated along a highway surrounded by grain fields, haskap orchards, egg producers, and sheep and cattle ranchers. PRCS is 10 km from a town of under 2500 residents and over 25 km from a city of more than 40,000. Where it is situated corresponds to a demographic definition of rural, supported by [Statistics Canada \(2001\)](#).

PRCS evolved as a public charter school in 2021. Understanding PRCS's evolution is important to the discussion of school–community partnerships because its history is rooted in the generosity of a local farmer who donated the land for the school over 120 years ago. The original school was part of the local school authority until April 2020, when it was voted for closure due to declining enrollment. Parents and community members lobbied the school authority to introduce agriculture as a strategy for attracting students, but the school trustees rejected the idea. Parents and community members took their vision and applied to the Ministry of Education to form a non-profit association to open a charter school.

Charter schools in Alberta are not private schools. Alberta has long supported parental choice in education and was the first province in Canada to introduce publicly funded charter schools in 1994 ([Riep 2020](#)). Charter schools operate under the *Choice in Education Act* ([Government of Alberta 2020](#)), the *Education Act* ([Government of Alberta 2012](#)), and the *Charter Schools Regulation* ([Government of Alberta 2019](#)), which requires them to conduct and share research on their innovations ([Government of Alberta 2022](#)). This is why I became

involved with PRCS. Charter schools receive the same per-student provincial funding as other public schools, do not charge tuition, and certified teachers deliver the provincial curriculum. They differ primarily in governance, being operated by a locally appointed Board of Directors rather than trustees elected during municipal elections. In this sense, the local authority of charter school decision making mirrors the village school concept.

When I began the study, PRCS enrolled over 80 students in K-6 and had a modest barnyard with two goats, two pigs, and a flock of chickens, supported by a few shelters and outbuildings. The school itself was a single-level building with one hallway. By the end of the study, enrolment had grown to over 200 students, the school had expanded to Grade 9 with a waiting list, and portable classrooms had been added. The PRCS farm has expanded with more animals, a security system and several solar-powered structures, including an outdoor classroom and greenhouse. I attribute PRCS's success to the way the school honored its agriculture community, and the connections that were developed to implement the vision.

2.3. Data Collection: Witnessing and Visiting

I did not set out to study school–community partnerships at PRCS. The idea of partnerships as a gift emerged during the larger study, which explored how an agricultural lens enhanced K-6 students' curricular learning, life skills development, and relationship with school (Stelmach, forthcoming). Data for that study included: 25 semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 2005) with parents, teachers, staff and community members, 52 face-to-face and walking interviews (Evans and Jones 2011) K-6 students, two teacher focus groups (Morgan and Hoffman 2018), a web-based qualitative survey (Braun et al. 2021) to which 29 parents responded, and over 40 observations (Flick 2023) in the school and community. Perhaps I leaned more on data generated from adults in interviews and the survey, and my observations in the school and throughout the community because my conversations with students focused on their learning experiences. Nonetheless, nuggets of insight came from student interviews; therefore, no data were ignored in the analysis. Given the way the collaboration developed over time as a relational inquiry, and with Kimmerer's framework as a guide, I am inclined to describe the methods as visiting (Tuck et al. 2023) and witnessing (Tracy 2025).

Emphasizing the importance of story in research, Buley (2016) wrote, "Learning journeys come in many forms and in unexpected times and places" (p. 105). Writing about visiting as an Indigenous feminist practice, Tuck et al. (2023) clarify that visiting is not a distinct research method, but rather, an ontological positioning or openness that "invites learning, [and] welcome[s] what we know to constantly shift from under us" (p. 145). Visiting is rooted in the cosmology of Indigenous communities; visits are received as gifts that come with a "responsibility to continue the perpetuation of stories facilitated through visiting" (p. 145). As a non-Indigenous scholar, I do not claim I adopted visiting as an Indigenous approach, nor do I assume the same ontological or epistemological positioning. Rather, I found resonance in visiting as a way to articulate how various encounters contributed to insights to inspire interpretations about school–community partnerships. A chat with community members at a volunteer tea, for example, was an unplanned instance when I heard stories about students' experiences at PRCS that made parents proud and deepened my understanding of how PRCS valued the community, and also how the community valued PRCS.

Witnessing is an alternative way to describe field observations. Witnessing accepts that fieldwork is a "fully embodied activity" (Tracy 2025, p. 85); I was not merely documenting actions and words, but using all senses to recall moments, and creating space for feeling. For example, I tagged along with the students when they were doing their chores, and

I talked to any community member, parent, tradesperson or business agent who came around to drop off supplies, fix equipment, or share expertise. I noted a longing in the voices when guests scanned the barnyard and said things like, “I wish my children could go to a school like this.” I had impromptu conversations with staff and others in the front office, and at events like PRCS’s open house, Christmas concert or special agriculture days. I heard pride in voices and saw gratitude in the misty eyes when people talked about what PRCS meant not only to the students but to the community. Witnessing these deepened the insights I developed. As Tracy notes, researchers “bear witness and participate *with* those they are researching and their lives” (p. 85), which embraces a “decolonial ethic” of data collection. Witnessing suggests I played an active role in the scene, perhaps shaping and reshaping it through my presence, but also making it possible for those in the scene to provide valuable insights.

Visiting and witnessing align with the elements of co-creation and circularity inherent in Kimmerer’s notion of gift. Furthermore, it fits with the community-based research principles (Ochocka and Janzen 2014) that were followed in developing and conducting the study. The study design itself came from a place of mutual flourishing; the school-university partnership assumed research *with* rather than *about* the school.

2.4. Data Analysis: Gift Stories

I analyzed field notes and interview transcripts using a qualitative method called Sort, Sift, Think and Shift (Maietta et al. 2021), which involves inventorying pulse, anchor and turning point quotes to construct thematic, narrative interpretations. The Sort/Sift approach is distinct from coding, which can have an atomizing effect when data are broken down line-by-line or speaker-by-speaker. Instead, I read interviews, survey comments, and my observation field notes holistically, first listing and then ranking pulse quotes that captured something that stood out and felt important. The ranked list afforded me to identify anchor quotes, which served as the foundation for potential stories and claims. For example, when a grade 5 student told me they reflected on a mural in the gym that depicts the family that started the school, it suggested to me an historical tie was central to how the school developed their agriculture focus. Turning point quotes were those that confirmed an understanding; they turned my thinking beyond description. A community member who talked about agricultural legacy, for instance, confirmed the meaning of the school exceeded standardized curriculum.

There were two processes for working with pulse and anchor quotes. First, I visually organized five or six quotes on a PowerPoint slide that reflected a contained idea. Next, I wrote memos that articulated the meaning that the quotes created together, which was a step towards interpretation. I gave these memos titles that reflected what I felt was the central claim. I call my interpretations “gift stories” which serve as analytic units through which Kimmerer’s articulation of gifts is explored. My interpretations illustrate how the school and community collaboration can be viewed as gifts kept in motion, how these partnerships reflect a relational orientation grounded in circular reciprocity, and how the school and rural community carry emotional commitment, connection, and responsibility to a common vision. A gift dynamic offers an alternative to transactional practices of partnership.

3. Results

3.1. First Gift Story: From Original to Enduring Gift

In the gymnasium at PRCS a wall mural pays homage to the farmer who first donated the land to start the school. The donor for whom the school was originally named served as the first Chairperson of the Board of Trustees. In the painting, the wooden school building and family is set in an agriculture landscape. PRCS’s charter document clearly articulates

their intentionality behind retaining the name and the location of the original school. By committing to history, the land is not simply property, but a gift from a previous generation. By focusing on agriculture, experiential learning and land stewardship in its charter, PRCS continues to honor the legacy of the donor family and the way of life that continues in the surrounding community. This is a time-honored partnership with the past that forms a bridge to the future.

The history of the school was not lost on students. A grade 2 student explained to me that PRCS was “one of the best schools because there [are] wonders about it.” When I asked what those “wonders” were, they said that the school had been around for 120 years and that it “started off with a little barn.” Even at a young age, they grasped the notion of legacy. A grade 5 student said, “I look at the pictures in the gym when I have a chance and I think about it lots.” Another grade 6 student described attending PRCS as a positive experience and that they would keep “all the memories from when [they were] here.” The students are part of an ongoing story of the school. The continuation of the original gift of land puts the school into a circulation of belonging and connection, extending the gift through students who will carry it forward long after they leave.

Because the school and land were owned by the former school authority, PRCS entered a lease agreement when it re-opened as a charter school. On the surface, the lease constitutes a conventional school–community partnership; however, PRCS’s decision to remain on the land reflects an ongoing commitment to the school’s history, something that mattered to the community. The principal emphasized, “This school has been in existence for generations and we want to continue. What can we do to get our kids to graduate and get their name up on the wall alongside their grandparents or great grandparents?” Pride of place builds a bridge between generations, which is itself a form of partnership. Seeing this decision as a gift gives the lease different meaning. As [Kimmerer \(2024\)](#) emphasized, gifts tie people and place together in a “web of reciprocity” (p. 22). In a web of reciprocity, gratitude is expressed through ongoing responsibility. PRCS came from gift, rather than a real estate agreement, and this means that even though the donor is no longer present, a responsibility to that relationship endures. The land and buildings are not treated as assets, but as a connection to the school’s roots and a commitment to continued stewardship. The land gift is symbolic in terms of legacy; it is both to and through the land that school and community are inextricably bonded.

Through the lens of gift, the partnership that PRCS now experiences is with the former school authority, the surrounding community, and the land itself. It is not a newly formed partnership emerging from deficit, but rather, an inherited relationship that contributes to the preservation of history and the creation of a future. A distinction between land as a gift and land as a transaction matters. Significantly, the gift of land continues in motion through the knowledge and skills the students gain from learning through agriculture, the potential contributions they make as future members of the local or global community, and the memories they will carry throughout their lives. Students also gain the gift of rootedness as the school’s longevity emphasizes the importance of the school in the community and therefore in their lives. The partnership between the school and community is relational, shaped by its past, lived in the present, and extended through enduring connections.

3.2. Second Gift Story: From Invitation to Connection

PRCS embraced an ethos of interdependence, collective ownership and shared responsibility with parents, community members, local organizations, and the agri-sector. Consider this teacher’s statement: “It’s nice to be able to reach out... We’ll have an army. That’s also instilling in our students that we’re not just doing it by ourselves . . . we aren’t just the school. We want everyone to be part of our story and our journey.” Describing

PRCS as more than “just the school” reflects an understanding that the school is embedded within the broader community, rather than institutionally contained. As one community member said, “Everyone has a stake in this.” It was clear that the agriculture focus created a commonality among people; the collaborative relationship between PRCS and the community can be thought to have emerged from the fact that, by its nature, agriculture creates a sense of solidarity and inspires contribution. A community member captured this in the following:

You’re all on the same playing field in that you’re fighting the weather, you’re fighting costs, you’re fighting to get the harvest off or get the seed in. And if one person gets rain, we all get it. You know what I mean? It’s not just, well, that’s too bad for them . . . You’re all working for the greater good of getting food to the market, providing for the people . . . [Students are] taught right from day one we have to support each other . . . And it’s just constantly reinforced. Looking out for the other, helping the other.

As the above quote emphasizes, in agriculture, no one works in isolation; the land and elements are not only a source of their livelihood, but they draw people into relationships of interdependence. Given this context, seeking and offering help is an expectation, rather than an exception. Contributions from the community, whether in the form of goods, services, or time, are not framed as transactions, but as part of a tacitly understood circulation of support grounded in shared purpose. In [Kimmerer’s \(2024\)](#) terms, this constitutes a web of reciprocity. Importantly, this reciprocity is not uni- or bi-directional, and students are not merely passive recipients. One parent wrote on the survey, “[PRCS] receives so much support from the community and local farmers and businesses because they believe in the school and the foundation that it is building up in the next generation. With that, [PRCS] has truly given back to the community by offering this type of unique education.” Another extended this idea to capture how all the contributions to PRCS could be viewed as gifts in motion: “[students’] sense of community will pay back into the community as they reach adulthood.” Students are learning the value of volunteering, experiencing the emotional rewards of belonging and contributing to something beyond themselves. They are also internalizing a responsibility to contribute, which demonstrates the ongoing circulation of a gift.

Unsolicited gifts circulated in everyday occurrences at PRCS, as noted in a staff member’s comment:

I have random people that I don’t even know emailing me, asking about how they could support. I have grandparents that come for a visit, and then they leave donations towards the egg program or field trips or projects.

Local farmers, tradespeople, business owners, community leaders, and volunteers had continual presence in PRCS. One day, a student’s uncle was called to fix the egg incubator. As he worked, students asked questions and demonstrated their agriculture knowledge. This informal partnership was more than manual labor. No hours were billed; no invoice was sent. Instead, the uncle reinforced for students the practical application of knowledge and gave them an opportunity to build confidence in interacting with adults who were not their teacher. Further, students observed the ethos of gift in action through the uncle’s volunteering. From the uncle’s perspective, sharing their expertise gave them a sense of contribution, not only because they solved a problem for PRCS, but also because they informally mentored students. Viewing such gestures through the lens of gift, it is possible to see how a single act can circulate and extend its benefits beyond an immediate task and result in mutual flourishing.

Even formal partnerships with PRCS transformed into gifts. As an example, a staff member shared this: “One day we got the propane for the barn. The gentleman came to deliver everything. He was like, ‘Ya, I’m delivering the tanks for free, and I’m also donating

1600 liters for free . . . I really like what you guys are doing here.” This generosity toward and appreciation of PRCS was reiterated in the parent survey by a respondent who wrote, “Everyone you speak to in the community LOVES [PRCS] and what they are about.” PRCS was described as “a cornerstone of the community” and that people were “proud to have a connection to the school and in turn fully support[ed] its mission and vision” (Survey Responses). When I asked a local farmer why they had donated animals to PRCS, they said that they believed in the kind of education that PRCS was offering, and that inculcating the values of hard work and commitment, applying curriculum to real life, creating a sense of community and unity in purpose would “give kids a grounding” to be contributing citizens. Another community member explained, “When there’s a vision that people relate to, that aligns with their values, and validates the community beyond the school, then they are willing to support it.” Through PRCS’s place-conscious focus, both ruralness and an agrarian lifestyle were legitimized. Joined by this, the school and community had a common purpose and mutual responsibility for each other’s flourishing.

Considering the above, partnerships were like gifts because relationships already had meaning, primarily because of the way the school’s place-based pedagogy honored the community. These accounts suggest that the support PRCS received was not a financial obligation, but a manifestation of the social obligation that accompanies gift giving. As Hyde (1983) noted, gifts do not require prompting but arise from a desire to contribute to a circular reciprocity. The school–community partnership was a relational ecology and kinship; both saw themselves as integral to the flourishing of the other.

3.3. *Gift Story Three: From Giving to Shared Abundance*

Perhaps the most indelible gift story involves PRCS’s annual fundraiser. Because PRCS did not receive provincial funds for its agriculture innovation, every year the school hosted a dinner with a silent and live auction. On the face of it, a fundraiser might be viewed as a financial transaction. But every spring when the event was held, it offered a compelling illustration of gifts circulating within the PRCS community, and emphasized how meaningful it was for the community to be part of PRCS’s success.

The evening was more than a mechanism for generating revenue; it was a highly anticipated community gathering and celebration. Over 500 tickets sold in under two minutes, signaling that participation mattered as much as monetary contributions, or perhaps more. Staff joked that their event was “like a Taylor Swift concert!” The auctions were made possible because of the generosity of local businesses. Tables of items lined the walls of the big community center. When I surveyed the silent auction, I noted bidders consistently offered well beyond the market value of the items. During the live auction, frozen chickens were not only sold for hefty prices but re-donated and sold multiple times over. Viewed through the lens of gift, the overpayment on the chickens could be understood as gifts in constant motion.

I have attended the fundraiser for four years now, and at each event, when I casually asked community members what accounts for the overwhelming support for PRCS, they expressed deep appreciation for the school’s focus on agriculture because it not only supported students’ academic and life skills development—it encouraged them to be rural ambassadors carrying the community’s values forward. Purchases were more than exchanges; the items themselves were incidental to the future flourishing of the PRCS community. One person noted there were families moving to the area just to “have a chance at getting their child in [PRCS]”, suggesting broader implications for community vitality. It was the shared commitment to agriculture that inspired people to participate and contribute.

More importantly, the gathering itself reinforced the interconnectedness and interdependence between PRCS and the larger community. The event amplified how PRCS and the community occupy the same circle of giving. The real value of contributions was not measured in dollars, but by the desire to be part of PRCS's vision. In this sense, PRCS was a gift to the community itself; people gathered not simply to help the school achieve its goals, but to affirm a connection to the school and others through shared acts of giving.

4. Discussion: Reconceptualizing School-Community Partnerships as Place-Based Gift Ecologies

What changes in our understanding and expectations of school–community partnerships when they are conceptualized through the dimensions of gift, including interconnectedness, gratitude, reciprocity, and a goal of mutual flourishing (Kimmerer 2024)? Exploring this question through PRCS, I argue that a gift lens disrupts conventional understandings of school–community partnerships as arrangements for resource exchange. Instead, a gift lens promotes viewing rural schools and communities as belonging to an ongoing relation of reciprocity in which all parties have contributions to make and mutual flourishing is an expectation. It also reorients practice by recentring place in partnership theory so that the interconnectedness of school and community reinforces a collective identity. In this light, schools and communities are synergistic ecologies rather than separate systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Epstein et al. 2025) requiring coordination. Conceptualizing these relationships as school–community *connections* or even as *kinship* may better reflect the interdependence, collective identity, and shared responsibility that make mutual flourishing possible in rural and other contexts.

Further, existing literature focuses on the processes, protocols, and conditions for initiating partnerships, and assumes services and resources in support of student outcomes are the ultimate aim of partnerships (Hands 2023; Morris et al. 2024; Shand et al. 2026; Valli et al. 2016; Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass 2012). Impact is localized, or isolated, as Kania and Kramer (2011) put it. In contrast, a gift lens emphasizes relational obligations toward and gratitude for connections that have been nurtured and become meaningful over time. When rural communities see their values, histories, livelihoods and identities reflected in schools, invitations to contribute are unnecessary as the assumption that both school and community exist in the same web prevails. Through shared commitment, reciprocity is diffuse and ongoing rather than bi-directional or measured in terms of equivalencies. The frozen ball of a meat bird moving from hand to hand constitutes a long journey of flourishing. When mutual flourishing is the operating assumption, relationships may be approached differently, moving away from competition, protectionism, egocentric pursuits characteristic of neoliberalism, and externally defined models of collaboration that try to fight against it. Further, if connections or kinship are a starting point, the reciprocal role schools play in communities is central, rather than peripheral. Current partnership conceptualizations tend to maintain a separation between school and community, unless or until the school has a need that the community can fill. Relationships may be neither the motivation nor the expected outcome in this frame.

Following from the above point, rural schools have long been described as the heart-beat of small towns (Wright 2007) and the “social glue” that makes community possible (Kearns et al. 2010). Along with the social, cultural and economic impacts that result when rural schools and communities collaborate to support each other's goals (Gill 2017), Haynes (2022) emphasized that in rural contexts “school–community partnerships foster a deep sense of belonging and pride among community members and . . . cultivate relationships between citizens that strengthen community cohesion and development” (p. 66). Considering how school closures tear at the social and political fabric of rural communities

(Corbett and Helmer 2017; Thompson et al. 2025) rural schools are best understood as an extension of community rather than a separate institution. At PRCS what emerged were not bounded partnerships or transactions, but relations to people and place that circulated across time. The land on which PRCS currently exists was not a completed transaction, but rather, served as an ongoing expression of gratitude and reciprocity. The land itself was the foundation for students' learning, sense of rootedness and belonging, and source of inspiration for the futures they are beginning to imagine. Kinship is an apt metaphor. This ontological shift addresses Coppinger's (2025) critique that partnerships tend not to contribute beyond the school; unless schools are viewed as having a role in the community akin to familial relations, collective impact (Kania and Kramer 2011) may not even be considered.

Grant et al. (2025) emphasized that rural schools serve as cultural and civic anchors in their community, yet rural frameworks (Casto et al. 2024) tend to overlook place conceptualizations of partnership. My exploration points to the value of place-based ecological thinking that considers how land or space itself actively shapes how people relate, belong, and participate in each other's vision. Place itself is a participant in the relationship (Kimmerer 2024), and plays a central role, keeping the gift in motion and retaining its meaning (Hyde 1983). Paradoxically, rural relationships are grounded in place, but also naturally in motion. In rural communities, nurturing and attention rather than initiation is the partnership work. The value of the school–community connection lies in the ongoing flow of relationships that exist *because of* place, rather than incidental to it or existing in spite of it, which is how a resource-focused perspective tends to frame partnerships.

Rural scholars have argued that a community-aware orientation (Casto and Sipple 2022) is essential for partnerships to serve the good of the broader community, but what emerged at PRCS was more than an awareness of community needs. Through agriculture and history, connections with the community were enduring; these connections were inseparable from place, people, and way of life. Strike (2004) emphasized the importance of aligning school and community with a common vision, but by teaching through agriculture, PRCS did more than align with the community; they embraced the community. Mutual flourishing was possible through this validation. In this sense, rural contexts are more than instances of unique contexts for partnerships. They offer a basis for reconceptualizing partnerships in a way that foregrounds spatial relations. PRCS illuminates the importance of developing a place-conscious vision with and for the school community, highlighting the potential for addressing spatial inequality. While culturally responsive partnerships have been emphasized in urban contexts (Ford 2011), rural-responsive school–community connections may offer insights into how relationships grounded in place can serve as a unifier.

5. Conclusions

The carton of eggs that launched my query about school–community partnerships as a gift signaled more than hospitality. I realize it was a subtle invitation to crack open the assumptions that undergird conventional ways in which partnerships are conceptualized. Through the lens of gift, I have suggested a shift to school–community connections or kinship, as this terminology privileges commitment to a shared vision and emphasizes the role of place, history, and livelihood as a dimension of authentic relationships. Rural schools like PRCS do more than provide an example of working partnerships; they illuminate how rural schools and communities benefit from an extensive web of relations. Though commonly positioned in terms of deficit, a gift lens recasts rural schools as abundant and worth examining for their advantages. Akin to Kimmerer's (2024) portrayal of Mother

Earth in terms of a gift economy, PRCS shows what is possible when relationships to people and place become the currency through which all flourishing is mutual.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

PRCS Prairie Roots Community School (pseudonym)

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