

# We're Small Enough to Close but Big Enough to Divide: The Complexities of the Nova Scotia School Review Process

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*Through interviews conducted in the fall of 2013 and winter of 2014, this paper presents a portrait of the various issues faced by community activists in fighting to keep their small rural schools open amidst constraints, most notably, provincial budget cuts and low enrolment numbers in rural areas. At the same time, school board members seeking to close small schools in rural areas faced their own sets of constraints. Participants were asked to discuss: their experiences in the small schools review process, their suggestions for policy design and implementation, and their notions around what small schools mean to rural sustainability and future economic development. Throughout these interviews, the participants from both contexts highlighted the struggles they faced during the review process and the impact of school closures on their children, their communities, and themselves. In addition to metrocentric (Green & Corbett, 2013) assumptions faced by the activists in the school review and closure process, there were additional issues concerning the configurations of people with different orientations as they attempted to participate in a democratic dialogue within the school closure process.*

*Cet article présente, par le biais d'entrevues ayant eu lieu à l'automne 2013 et l'hiver 2014, un aperçu des divers enjeux qu'affrontent les activistes communautaires dans leur lutte pour maintenir ouvertes leurs petites écoles rurales dans le contexte de contraintes, notamment les compressions budgétaires du gouvernement provincial et le faible nombre d'inscriptions dans les milieux ruraux. En contrepartie, les membres des conseils scolaires voulant fermer les petites écoles dans les milieux ruraux faisaient face à leurs propres contraintes. On a demandé aux participants de discuter des éléments suivants : leurs expériences lors du processus d'examen des petites écoles; leurs suggestions quant aux nouvelles politiques et à leur mise en œuvre; et leurs idées sur le rôle des petites écoles dans la durabilité rurale et le développement économique à l'avenir. Tout au long des entrevues, les participants des deux contextes ont souligné les luttes qu'ils ont affrontées pendant le processus d'examen, ainsi que l'impact des fermetures d'écoles sur leurs enfants, leurs communautés et eux-mêmes. Les participants ont évoqué, en plus des suppositions « métrocentriques » (Green & Corbett, 2013) auxquelles ont dû faire face les activistes pendant les processus d'examen et de fermeture, des enjeux impliquant les configurations de gens avec différentes orientations qui tentaient de participer au dialogue démocratique au sein du processus de fermeture des écoles.*

## **Introduction: The Context of Rural Education in Nova Scotia**

Outside the urban centre, Nova Scotia is suffering from declining enrollment in most schools across the province because a large part of the population has had to migrate west to find work. The raw demographics of rural communities across the province paint the picture of an expanding demographic crisis. According to a recent report conducted on the state of Nova Scotia's rural economy:

The evidence is convincing that Nova Scotia hovers now on the brink of an extended period of decline. Two interdependent factors—an aging and shrinking population and very low rates of economic growth—mean that our economy today is barely able to support our current standards of living and public services, and will be much less so going forward unless we can reverse current trends. (Ivany, 2014)

At least two rural communities have recently dissolved as towns and other jurisdictions are considering the same. With more of the population leaving than entering, rural communities in Nova Scotia seem to be under siege. However, looking strictly at the numbers, what is not evident is the vibrancy and resilience of many of Nova Scotia's small rural communities and the need for schools within their centres.

Throughout the years, many Nova Scotia provincial governments have developed school review processes aimed at “solving” the cost of keeping schools open amidst declining enrollment; however, none has developed a rural education strategy. If declining enrollments are forecast for at least the next 10 to 20 years as the demographic analysis suggests (Ivany, 2014), it is safe to say that the province needs not only a school review process to deal with this issue, but also a strategy that aims to take a serious look at the state of rural education, including: the cost of keeping schools open, the cost (both financial and physical) of bussing children long distances into other communities, programming issues in rural areas, school building maintenance, and community economic development.

The link between rural community development and schools is implicit. A community development/sustainability position is one that community activists take up strongly within the school review process; yet, this is the position that the school boards have studiously avoided, in part because of the way their mandate is defined. The trouble with the current governance structure is that it effectively supports the separation of school and community. Could schools actually be the key to long-term rural sustainability or are there much larger issues at play?

A recent report on the Rural Economic Development Strategy for Nova Scotia argued that:

after a decade or more of slow economic growth, and with an aging and shrinking population, Nova Scotia is on the verge of a significant and prolonged decline in our standard of living, in the quality of our public services and amenities, and in our population base, most seriously in the rural regions of the province where more than two-fifths of our population now make their livings. (Ivany, 2014, p. 4)

The report, chillingly entitled *Now or Never* stresses that:

we cannot take the continued stability of Nova Scotia's population base for granted, with rural communities facing the most serious challenges. And to the extent that the economy relies on people to sustain it, we cannot take for granted our current levels of employment and our standards of public services and amenities as population growth falters. (Government of Nova Scotia, p. 14)

A significant concern for those living in rural communities is the loss of their schools, because they believe that if schools are closed the ultimate effect is to retire the community. This is a concern not significantly addressed in *Now or Never*.

Parents of school aged children, who live in a province that mainly consists of coastal and narrow, rural roads, combined with unpredictable weather patterns, worry greatly about the physical safety of bussing students long distances outside of their home communities. Parents also worry about the emotional safety of their children on long bus rides without adequate supervision. As is the case across Canada, Nova Scotian educators are working to address the problem of bullying amongst students in provincial schools. Because they believe strongly in the physical and emotional dangers of long-distance transportation of children and youth to more distant larger schools outside of their communities, small schools activists are even more concerned by the threat of school closure. Beyond this, those living in small rural Nova Scotian communities know that it will be a hard sell to get families to move to a community without a school. Many activists chose to live in their communities strictly because they could guarantee their children the advantages of what might be called a “small school factor” (Corbett and Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006). All of the small schools activists I spoke with discussed these concerns amidst: the stress of living under the constant threat of school closure, the worry for the community as a whole, and the role the schools have to play in a rural economic development strategy.

Not one parent participant believed that closing their school was a good idea for the children or for the community. All parent and community participants highlighted the immense and important role the school played in the vibrancy of the community. On the other side of the fence, school board members and representatives were tasked with budget shortfalls and a mandate to consolidate or close schools, deal with buildings that have fallen into disrepair, and navigate complex community responses to possible school closures. It would not be fair to say that the board members and board administrators did not understand the importance of a school housed within a rural community. Most expressed wrestling with closure and review decisions in which they felt they had little say. Both groups discussed feelings of powerlessness amidst the school review process. However, the very nature of the school review process as it currently stands produces a breeding ground for hostility and divisiveness. This situation constitutes an excellent example of what Rittel and Webber (1973) characterized as a “wicked problem.” In every interview conducted, the words “us” and “them” were prominent, and everyone highlighted an adversarial process that pitted people from differing contexts against each other. In addition to a wicked problem, this situation can be also be seen as a legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975), in that equally well-reasoned ethical positions work in opposition to each other. Both parties feel that they are doing the “right” or “true” thing. However, I believe this illustrates how in a postmodern society, there is no such thing as an absolute truth; issues are much more complex, requiring a great deal of dialogue and understanding.

### **The School Review Process**

In 2006 and 2013 the Nova Scotia provincial governments declared moratoria on school closures, bowing to the pressures they were facing from the rural communities under threat. In 2013, the provincial government faced significant public pressure from community activists and concerned Nova Scotia citizens and decided to halt the review process, thereby placing any school closure decisions on hold until further notice. The Minister of Education acknowledged

that the existing process was flawed and planned to use this moratorium as a way to seek alternative strategies and policy to address the issue. Shortly after this moratorium took effect, Nova Scotia experienced a change in the provincial government. The new government initiated a public review of the school review process province-wide in early 2014. A committee was formed and led by Robert Fowler, a former Deputy Minister and former (defacto) Mayor of a rural town in Nova Scotia and long time government bureaucrat. In mid 2014, Fowler produced a discussion paper around what he felt were the issues with the current school review process and released this document to the public as part of a consultation strategy (Ivany, 2014). As part of this research on the Nova Scotia small school review process, I travelled to the public consultation meetings to hear what rural community members had to say on the topics of school review and school closure. What I heard was not surprising and varied little from region to region. In each region of the province, local citizens voiced their concerns about the closure of schools and highlighted the importance of a school in a rural community as being key to economic development.

### **Methodology**

The first objective of this research project was to establish rapport with community members and board administrators and to gather preliminary data on the remaining rural elementary schools in Nova Scotia with an enrolment of 100 or fewer students and to invite participation from communities that have small, rural elementary schools. In the first phase of the project, another University-based researcher and I identified and contacted representatives of the targeted schools to invite participation in the project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both community activists and school board members and staff from each region of the affected areas. In these interviews, I engaged regional school board members and officials as well as community activists in a process of review and reflection on current policies that relate to small rural schools, notably, school review and closure policies.

This project is a qualitative study that draws on grounded theory for thematization and categorization of data. Theoretically, the study is located in post-structural analysis of the rural that seeks to problematize essentialist, immobile/premodern, and productivist notions of rurality (Woods, 2011; Heley & Jones, 2012; Bell, 2007; Bell & Osti, 2010; Corbett, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010b; Jackson, 2010), space and place theory (Lefebvre, 1990; Soja, 1997, 2010), and Actor Network Theory (Law, 2004; Latour, 2005; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011) and investigates the development, operation, and interaction of multiple networks that contest the importance of small, rural schools. This project draws on an interpretive framework through which we are interested in understanding how actors operating individually and collectively make sense of their social worlds. We are also sensitive to the postcolonial critique of qualitative research (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai-Smith, 2007; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) that argues for reciprocity and the full participation of individuals and communities involved in this research.

My role in this research was as an observer. My co-researcher and I conducted 50 interviews across Nova Scotia with school board officials and community activists. Each interview took approximately one hour and a standard set of interview questions were used, ensuring that each group was asked about the same topics. The data were recorded on an audio-recorder, transcribed, and returned to participants for their approval. As discussed earlier, I also attended multiple public hearings across Nova Scotia. These hearings were not used as a source of data but rather to help me understand the context in each region before engaging in the semi-

structured interview process. The Acadia University Research Ethics Board approved this project and each participant was required to sign a consent form and was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in the research reporting.

### **Small Schools Activism**

Among the many concerned citizens I interviewed, were the members of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative (NSSSI), a locally formed organization committed to protecting, strengthening, and maintaining small schools province-wide. In 2012, a group of community activists from communities around the province came together in a one-day summit, which led to the creation of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative (NSSSI). This grassroots activist body has worked, since that time, to promote a policy dialogue around the “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) or divergent “modes of existence” worldview controversies (Latour & Porter, 2013) concerning small rural school review and closure process in the province. This policy dialogue resulted in suggested strategies to keep the schools operational, most notably, the idea of the creation of schools as community “hubs” (Clandfield, 2010) as a model to keep the schools open, functional, and key to community development and rural revitalization. The goal of the NSSSI is to establish an approach that would require schools to begin a long-range planning process around space and sustainability that involves the community in decision-making. Services and programs can be incorporated into the existing school structure that will help keep the building viable and economically sustainable, thereby ensuring that the school survives as a local educational institution. Most of the small schools activists with whom we spoke favoured this idea as a way to keep their schools and develop their communities. However, not all small schools activists fit within this model and remained outside of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative, struggling to find other ways to keep their schools open. I highlight the case of Eastern Consolidated School next to provide a sense of the growing complexities of school review/school closure in communities with declining populations and infrastructures.

### **The Case of Eastern Consolidated School**

In going through something like the school review closure study you just get this feeling like because you're rural you don't matter. And they do some things just enough to keep them in line with policy, but at the same time you can so easily see that there was no concern for the community, community members, or the students. The bottom-line was dollars and it was building-based because that's what they can show the dollars and cents for. But they don't have a dollar and cents value on the children and the community itself. And the board's saying, well it's not our job to save communities and that type of thing. But you really get the feeling like they think you're a bunch of nobodies in the backwoods that, you know, it doesn't matter what you say. They present you [with] what their alternatives are, and they go through the process of you coming back with your response, and they humored us. We feel like they humored you by listening. Some didn't even do that. They carried on conversations during the meeting that had nothing to do with this. And then settled down with what was exactly the outline in the beginning anyway. There was no deviation or any change in what their baseline was to start with. They would give us a lot of false information or wouldn't give us information like that we asked for. And we waited and waited and ... (Parents from Eastern Consolidated School, January 10, 2014)

Eastern Consolidated School, an elementary school in Northern Nova Scotia is in a unique

predicament. The community used to be a centre of activity, situated amidst a major thoroughfare leading in and out of the province; however, a provincial government decision several decades ago to reroute the main road has essentially cut the community off from tourism and thoroughfare. Sarah (a parent) explains that this “wasn’t a normal population decrease for the school because a greater influx of people moved to get work [...] there were about 5 service stations through here and restaurants and the whole bit, and that is just all now gone.” Eastern Consolidated, like many schools in rural Nova Scotia is struggling with declining enrollment and currently serves a population of less than 50 students in their school. At the time of the main road closure, the school lost at least 14 families with school-aged children from the area.

The current definition of an “isolated school” in Nova Scotia is that the school must be at least a 30 minute drive away from its nearest neighbouring school. Eastern Consolidated does not meet this criterion by 2 minutes and, as the participants we met with explained, this is without any cars or tractors on the road in front of you. During the last school review process, Eastern Consolidated was recommended for closure by the school board and it was determined that the current student population would be split between two schools in other communities, effectively dividing the school population in half. Sarah explains:

They are literally taking the main highway down through the middle and any side roads off on one side went to [one school] and the side roads off to this side went to [the other school]. And I guess if you’re in the middle you can just pick because the bus was going by.

It is important to note that the communities in which these schools are located feed into different regional high schools that are widely considered to be rival schools. There is a worry that this will further divide the community as these children reach high school age.

Throughout the school review process, the parents of students at Eastern Consolidated have been met with what they believe are inaccurate numbers, a lack of transparency about the process as a whole, and a refusal to be heard by their elected school board. The members of the School Advisory Committee (which later became the School Review Committee) came together to draft their response to the impact assessment report that was provided to them by the school board. They talked about going through the report “with a fine-tooth comb” and struggling to find supporting information, which they claim was held (or withheld) by the school board. When asked for the information used to support the initial impact assessment report, the board replied that they could not distribute this information because if they gave it to one community, they would have to give it to all the others under review.

Another issue within the school review process was that the facilitator was a board employee. At one point, during a public meeting, the participants were told, “You can’t dispute any of this; it’s not disputable; you’re not allowed to have information” As frustrations grew, the School Review Committee kept asking for more information from the facilitator. In a research interview, the participants discussed the many issues they have with the process of closing Eastern Consolidated. They believed busing was one of the major detrimental factors associated with school closure. They also discussed their frustration and argued that misinformation was handed out to community members; for example, when they were finally able to obtain information from the board on bus routes, they noticed that one of the routes had the bus travelling on a road that was impassable, measuring only 12 feet wide with no ditch. At this point, they reached out to the Department of Transportation for help, who provided them with maps to assist in strengthening their argument to the school board.

Highlighting one of the deficiencies of the current school review process, participants talked about attending meetings where board members speak and the community members listen and then later attending meetings where community members speak and the board members listen, neither of which allowed for any conversation. They talked about presenting their case to board members at these meetings and feeling like they were simply being positioned as an emotionally invested community that does not want their school to close instead of the board members listening to the issues they were presenting. As the school review process is focused on an analysis of efficiency, the communities are left trying to position themselves and their contexts in ways that show the breadth and depth of their specific issues with little time and resources given.

A major problem for the parents at Eastern Consolidated comes from their school's impact assessment report, a joint assessment conducted by board level Educational and Operational services to review the physical condition of the school, which lists them as scoring 48.5/100 for structure and programming. Jane points out "so this means that the board has effectively looked after us 48.5%?" Her argument here is that the maintenance of the school is the responsibility of the school board, and so the community is penalized by the board for its own failure to maintain its facilities. Jane went on to say that "we got zero on the roof, but children are still in there. I mean you would think the roof would be caved in. You're left wondering why they're even allowing anyone in the building in the first place." In light of the impact assessment, the School Review Committee asked a local roofer to come out to the school and provide an estimate for repairs. He found that the issue was simple, easily fixed and would cost a few thousand dollars. This was much less than the figures quoted by the board for a full roof replacement. The School Review Committee brought this information to the board and was told that any structural work would have to be completed by union staff and the figure quoted by the school board was accurate and based on union rates. The School Review Committee was then reprimanded for allowing a community member on to the roof without adequate permission.

In a final desperate attempt to save their school and be heard in this process, the School Review Committee at Eastern Consolidated School is relying on the words of the former Minister of Education to reverse the closure decision:

The board members are not getting a full picture, or not getting it all or getting true information, then they're making decisions on false information. That's what we're saying, if the process is flawed—the Minister of Education says the process is flawed—how is the decision not flawed? So we're saying nullify that decision because it was based on a flawed process to begin with. (Sarah, January 10, 2014)

The case of Eastern Consolidated School is complicated and fraught with emotion, frustration and mistrust. Our research team reached out to the board office for their perspectives on the issue but we were not granted an interview, so this paper provides only one side of the story here from this specific region. The final decision to close Eastern Consolidated was made in late June of 2015 when the community's proposal to turn the school into a multi-service "hub" school was rejected by the school board along with proposals from two other small rural communities. Another school board administrator from another region in Nova Scotia sums up what she believes are some of the challenges that rural boards are facing in that the school boards serve all of the students in the region. Looking at services provided board-wide and financial constraints, many administrators feel that their hands are tied when it comes to balancing the needs of all communities. Linda states,

If there were lots of money we probably wouldn't be having these conversations because we could maintain all of the buildings, boards could let other agencies use the space free of charge, cover all the cleaning costs, you know, have single grade classes of 3, provide guidance services and speech language, all the services that are needed, and have them close to their home community. So it's fine to say it's not primarily about funding, but when all is said and done, if there were a limitless pot of money we could provide in every community in the province all of the services are needed. So that's a pressure. (Linda, School Board Administrator, December 17, 2013)

The majority of school board representatives believe that consultation and collaboration are two very distinct issues and many spoke about the struggles getting to a collaborative process. The consensus is that that it is imperative to establish a level of trust between the board and the community; however, obtaining that level of trust is something the boards have currently not been fully able to establish.

I have highlighted the immense amount of work involved by the School Advisory Committees and School Review Committees in preparing responses and reports in relation to school review and school closure and it is important to note that the current process is similarly taxing on board staff. School Advisory Councils and School Review Committees are volunteer organizations established by the Nova Scotia Education Act. These councils/ committees consist of parents, staff, community members, and, in some cases, students. School Advisory Councils exist in most Nova Scotian schools and were formed to provide advice to administrators and boards. The local school based review committees are formed by parents, staff and community members to prepare reports for the school review process and respond to school impact assessment reports.

As I have stated earlier, I can safely conclude that the school review process as it stood in 2015 is adversarial and divisive and this process has negatively affected stakeholders from both contexts. Throughout the transcripts, issues of power and positioning of "the other side" predominate. There are relatively few instances of bridging or conciliatory language and it is my sense that this dialogical failure is actively supported by the nature of the school review and closure process. The activists believe that the board has all the power, although the board generally rejects this claim, sometimes claiming that community activists are capable of exerting direct pressure on elected politicians who subsequently interfere with school governance decision-making.

Rationality is a tool that is applied by both sides to make its points and to position the other side as unreasonable. In fact, one of the main roles of networks seems to be to provide a community for one particular vision of rationality coming out of one particular worldview. In terms of suffering and happiness in this context, the prize (or end goal) of school review as it stands now is indeed happiness. Based on the current model of school review, someone is not going to be happy and someone is going to suffer in the end. The process takes on a zero-sum character with ultimate winners and losers as the only outcome. The role of rationality in emancipatory movements and in the community development literature (Eversole, 2014) speaks to the ability to take positions and to see the other as they see themselves. Neither the activist nor the school board member seems to be able to adequately position take and this aspect focuses on a proper interpretation of reason, which seems to be lacking from both groups. In addition, as we have seen from both groups, quantitative argumentation is mobilized to support school closures, which is a positivist approach to determining review and closure. A critical approach turns the spotlight on the schools instead and focuses on their particular stories.



Continuing with a one-size-fits-all approach to solving the problem (or indeed, even defining the problem) ensures that only one side will be happy. The challenge is to turn the process into a legitimate negotiation on participatory, democratic terms.

I believe that both groups are currently trapped in their respective positions. The activist labels him or herself as oppressed. The school board representative takes no responsibility or demonstrates any significant awareness of participating in that oppression, believing that he or she does not have any real power and is simply operating under the direction of the Province, or indeed, under the sign of some form of efficiency or feasibility calculus. One of the ultimate goals of creating democratic spaces is to initiate public processes of self-reflection, which seems to be missing in both groups' telling of their experiences. I noticed in the conversations with various groups that there was a definite lack of temporality in that, for all, there seems to be no hiatus differentiating themselves as speakers and listeners. There is also a way of constructing and delimiting space –to be both seer and seen while the space between remains obstinately invisible. The lack of a third space (Bhabha, 2004; Soja, 1996) between these polarized positions appears to be missing in this school review process. In light of this absence I will outline some recommendations aimed at making the process more democratic and equitable for all sides and continue to imagine what democratic dialogue can look like in this process.

### **A Vision for a Democratic School Review Process**

Schools mean a lot to their communities, particularly when those communities are small and/or relatively isolated rural locations. Consequently, there is an undercurrent of stress and emotion associated with any move to close them. Both “sides” in the re-location debate recognize this and the obvious sensitivity of this issue is not in question. The question, as the Chair of the recent School Review Process has pointed out throughout the hearings, is: how can the process be improved? In response, our team tried to refrain from commenting on the deeper emotional, social, and even ethical/moral implications of school closure in rural Nova Scotia. We believe that everyone involved in this process is well aware of the impacts after listening to a number of communities (often desperately) share their stories within this school review process. Instead, we focus on specific structural elements to inform the review process conversation.

In terms of democratic dialogue and power, the idea of the conversation frames my analysis here. It is my view that because the process of school review and school closure is so challenging and fraught with emotion, the school review process seems to have sought to deal with it through adversarial processes that attempt to circumscribe and restrict the kind of real human sharing that is at the heart of genuine conversation (Corek, 2013). Genuine conversation is the heart of democracy and the school review process has not been perceived to be democratic by many people who have been involved in it over the years. I suggest, though, that it is precisely because these conversations are so complex that clear and inclusive processes need to be established. This is an opportunity for democratic reform.

It is valuable to look at this study from a critical pedagogy framework, highlighting the layers of oppression felt on both sides, the perceived absence of power and the need for a deliberative democracy. Kincheloe (2007) suggests that in order for critical pedagogy to synthesize, there must be a combination of a social and individual imagination, along with the development of a critical consciousness that takes into account subjectivity that is socially constructed. We might call this what Corbett (2015) has recently termed a “rural sociological imagination” that positions rural places as spaces of hope rather than places to be abandoned. On both sides of

this school review process, neither group seems able to recognize the bounded or limited realities facing the other, and there is no attempt to combine the social and individual imagination with both groups holding firm to their positions.

Contemporary feminist analysis features the importance of standpoint (Smith, 1987) as a way of thinking about the multiple layers that constitute reality. Each social agent operates and perceives reality from a particular position and sets of obligations, choices and commitments. Haraway (1988) highlighted the existence and analysis of multiple standpoints not as the abandonment of objectivity but rather a sharpening of objective analysis through multiple perspectives. In the critical pedagogy tradition, Kincheloe along with Australian scholar John Smyth and his collaborators (Smyth, 2011; Smyth, Down and McInerney, 2014) highlighted the importance of democratic community-building relationships between individuals. Their work serves as a framework for imagining a new more deliberative process that seeks to build relationships first, aimed at increasing a democratic process.

Carr's (2011) work on *thick* and *thin* democracy is also key to making sense of the processes at work here. Swift (2002) defines the differences between the two as a weak vs. strong analysis and states:

Two strains can be identified in the history of democratic thought and experience. One is weak democracy where popular sovereignty is hemmed in by the individual right to property that holds sway over the collective rights of the community. This theory is based on a notion of possessive individualism and is a strong market/ weak democracy model. The second strain is the notion of strong democracy rooted in the radical republican tradition, which emphasizes the self rule of the political community and the equality of power in democratic decision making. (p. 35)

In the current model of school review we are working from a weak democracy model but need to move to a strong democracy model in which the self-rule of the political community would allow for less provincial pressure and more room for contextually based analyses of conditions. School boards and "threatened" communities (Bennett, 2013) should be encouraged to come together in ways that are deliberative and democratic, and both groups should be considered to be representative of the political community rather than a technical-rational institutional mechanism for the exercise of political power. What is needed here is a dialectical critique of this school review process that focuses on power (Carr, 2011). In focusing on power, we will be able to interrogate the notions around authority and decision making that leave many feeling left out by the "democratic" process. Carr (2011) believes that democracy cannot be understood without a critical linkage to social justice, which "problematizes identity, diversity and social change, including intersecting forms of power and privilege" (p. 20).

This critical linkage is also what is needed within the school review process and this would allow for both communities and school boards to be seen as unique and authentic in their contexts and capable of engaging in an autonomous school review process that is representative of both parties. Having both parties with a real seat at the deliberations table, ready to engage in what in labour negotiations is known as good-faith bargaining, rather than the current top-down approach would result in greater ownership of the process on all sides. It is also possible that better quality facilitation of the process and extended time frame might be helpful; however, there is the possibility that extended time frames will simply become a methodology to wear down community activists who have other commitments and things in their lives.

## Conclusions

There is no doubt that key questions concerning schooling in both rural and urban areas in Atlantic Canada are in a kind of legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975) and all stakeholders consistently make clear and informed arguments on why (or why not) schools need to close in various communities. Population trends do not bode well for school enrolments, particularly in rural Nova Scotia. However, a crisis can be seen as an opportunity for innovative solutions and a reason to do things differently than they have been done in the past. Nova Scotia's current stock of schools was, for the most part, constructed in response to another demographic anomaly, the post-war baby boom. At the same time, the 1950s to 1970s was a period of rapid and thoroughgoing expansion of educational franchise and educational offerings to Nova Scotian citizens (Corbett, 2014). Nova Scotia is now left with infrastructure that was built to accommodate an expanding education system and an expanding population. It was also a time when the modern education system in the province was established with increasing administrative centralization, the professionalization of teachers and teaching, and standardization of programming and facilities construction. It is clearly time to rethink what purpose schools serve in the emerging economic and social circumstances in which we now find ourselves. Recent discussion papers and presentations on school review in Nova Scotia, along with documents emanating from *Now or Never* (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014) clearly point to radical economic and demographic changes in the province that are already well under way. It is unlikely that a piecemeal change or a moderate "tweaking" of the existing system will adequately address the future educational needs of the province. The current system with its architectural infrastructure was built for a particular set of economic conditions that have now passed into history.

Generic solutions do not work particularly well for Nova Scotia's rural communities. This is a position that has been articulated by the federal government in its rural strategy and in the idea of the "rural lens" or the idea that problems of development and education should be understood from the perspective of rural citizens themselves (OECD, 2010). In terms of education, this can and should imply a move toward place-sensitive or community education (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Gruenewald, 2006; Smith 2011). This view of education does not necessarily imply a rewriting of curriculum so much as it encourages educators to use local resources (human and natural) to make curriculum relevant to the community. This also implies that schools might become centres of learning and inquiry dealing with real community problems and issues.

As communities change, it is probably inevitable that some places will have fewer students, and in some cases, very few students. There are, however, models of educational delivery that can accommodate children of different ages in the same class. This is not the old notion of the "split grade," but rather the idea of multi-age teaching (Leeds & Marshak, 2002; Little, 2006), a philosophy of education that imagines learning differently from the standard grade-based model. Employing a multi-age teaching framework will allow more small schools to stay open because the necessity of "filling" grade specific classes become redundant. Obviously, a move to this model of education will require focused in-service and pre-service teacher development, some of which is already under way.

A related issue has to do with design of schools, which seems to us to have remained much as it was in the 1950s and 60s when the consolidated and district schools were constructed. The

architectural model of the time was to have a limited number of more or less generic plans for the construction of school buildings. Touring around the province for instance, it is easy to see generic elementary school structures designed in the 1950s and 1960s still in operation. These are the very schools that are now often considered to contain “excess” space, based upon current student population levels. The buildings are also aging and, in many cases, need significant renovation or replacement. Part of the problem with these buildings is that they are purpose-built, institutional structures. It is possible to imagine other architectural models that are more flexibly designed, possibly in modular form. This approach has been used in the construction of elementary schools in Australia for instance where a school site typically contains a set of linked buildings that can be added to when student populations rise and more easily re-purposed should populations decline.

Significant exploration of the idea of schools as multi-service learning centres is recommended, or in the language that was popular some years ago, “community schools.” This would articulate well with a more flexible approach to school architecture described above. A school site using a modular framework could more easily combine multiple services in close proximity and allow for expansion and contraction of services as community needs dictate. The residue of the community schools movement is still felt today and schools now serve a number of purposes today that were virtually unknown even a couple of decades ago. This is a sensitive issue given heightened liability and security concerns, but I feel as though the province needs to continue to explore ways to make schools into more inclusive and multifaceted institutions of learning.

It is my sense that decommissioned schools should generally become the responsibility of the province with the municipal units given first option to take over schools for a nominal fee should they have the resources to do so. Education and community economic development that have been the responsibilities of school boards and municipalities respectively should not be treated separately. Community economic development and education ought to be coordinated to a much greater degree. This kind of innovation will enrich the public conversation about schooling and take it beyond the walls of the centralized bureaucracy.

Another innovation is a focus on the challenges and rewards of rural teaching. Again, to keep rural schools vital and relevant, their teachers need to remain current and active in ongoing professional development. This has been a great challenge historically but with Internet and other forms of connectivity, this professional development is possible. This would involve collaboration between teacher education programs and various government departments, particularly the Department of Education. Such an initiative would fit well into the mandate of a newly formed Provincial Education and Development Advisory Group.

In summary, part of the problem in the current process and indeed in the current school governance structure is that schools and educational planning is “siloes” in school boards that have no responsibility to collaborate with other governance structures other than school advisory councils. Even here, school boards hold all of the power, and pretty much choose how they interact with these essentially powerless community bodies. Community members serving on a School Advisory Council (SAC) can understandably feel as though they have no authority in educational decision-making. In most respects they do not. One question to consider is whether or not School Advisory Councils should have enhanced authority in decisions to close the school. By giving SACs some measure of power and voice in the review/closure process, the endemic feeling of alienation expressed by local school activists who struggle valiantly to keep their communities together would be recognized and valorized, at least to some extent.

At present, the school review process is very much controlled by the school boards and full authority for closing schools rests with them. They are required to consult but not to share power. Municipal units contribute to the operating budgets of school boards but they have no representation nor any say about how money is spent by boards. Again, it is not difficult to understand that municipal units often do not feel well represented when school boards take consequential decisions like school closures. The obvious solution to this problem is to create structure and process that will engage communities in meaningful ways in the process of both long range planning and the process of deciding whether or not a school should close. Perhaps, the first step in creating a third space is to accept that even parties in hierarchical relationships can create room for a democratic dialogue as equals by focusing on shared tasks (Freire, 1968). I conclude then that the provincial government should initiate and facilitate a strategic discussion about how to break down silos and encourage cooperation and collaboration across agencies and governance bodies, not after some tragic event, but on an ongoing basis. Working out how to discuss our wicked problems is the role of government and rather than allowing narrowly interested groups to wage war in the context of an adversarial process that leads toward zero-sum outcomes, a facilitated process of deliberation might be initiated.

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