School Consolidation and Notions of Progress: Why Community Actors Almost Always Lose the Fight to Keep Local Schools and How They Can Turn the Tables-- A Review of Literature

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Abstract

Supported by a growing body of research, the idea that schools have an essential role to play in local community cohesion and development has gained currency among urban and rural school advocates alike. Yet moving theory into action often grinds to a halt in the face of a recalcitrant bureaucracy. To understand why, it is important to step back and examine the theoretical framework of progress that has driven school consolidation and bureaucratization over the past century. Knowing these underlying power dynamics will help community advocates understand where their power is weakest, and where it is strongest, leading to more effective community action in defence of local schools.

Keywords: school consolidation; community action; community school

School Consolidation and Notions of Progress: Why Community Actors Almost Always Lose the Fight to Keep Local Schools and How They Can Turn the Tables-- A Review of Literature

I first became involved in education policy as a parent and citizen in late 2007, after my local public school board announced a "renewal" plan to close and consolidate schools in our city's core neighbourhoods, leaving 14 fewer schools in what were primarily low-income communities with higher-than-average Aboriginal populations. Parents and community activists reacted with confusion and surprise, for the plan bore little resemblance to ideas and priorities raised in public consultation meetings, and a great deal of resemblance to a closure plan soundly rejected by the public just 2 years earlier (Conway, 2006, p. 3; Donovan, 2009, p. 4; RealRenewal, 2008). To further add to the confusion, late-night Internet searches of the phrase "school consolidation" revealed an overwhelming preponderance of literature that questioned—rather than supported— the practice of school consolidation. As parents arrived at meetings, clutching sheaves of articles they had downloaded in the wee hours, the logical conclusion was that our school trustees were simply unaware of the research in favour of retaining smaller neighbourhood schools—and that, if provided copies of the research, they would swiftly change their minds. Thus, many an office photocopier was clandestinely seconded into action. In retrospect, the collective state of mind, as I recall it, precisely mirrored a decades-old observation of DeYoung and Howley (1990):

> At first, to the circumvented citizen, it seems only that the thinking of local school board members has somehow gone awry. As they read the (professional) literature about rural and small schools, however, they come to understand and question "the facts." Then, because they understand that policymaking has ignored "the facts," they get angry and begin to understand the obscure basis of policymaking. (p. 85)

To the average citizen, the basis of policy making around school consolidation is indeed obscure, and only becomes more obscure the deeper you are drawn into the decision-making process. In an attempt to understand the steady stride toward larger, more distant schools for our children, I decided to delve back in time, seeking a continuum of related literature that might lead to this point in my neighbourhood school's history. What I discovered were two contrary silos of thought regarding the matter of schools and community. On the one hand, a growing body of theory views the support of local schools as an essential community development practice. On the other hand, there are those who view the retention of such schools as a barrier to progress, professionalism, and efficiency. Educational decision-makers tend to drift toward the latter, while community activists fighting to retain their schools drift toward the former, becoming frustrated when they meet what appears to be a solid wall of bureaucratic indifference toward community aspirations. This paper intends to not only review the literature supporting a community development approach to schooling, but also to look over the wall in an attempt to understand the imperatives planted on the other side. Finally, I will explore a few ideas from relevant literature about the power dynamics at play in school board-initiated public consultations, readings which suggest how community actors might more effectively organize public resistance to school closures and consolidations.

Schools and Community Development

Benson, Harkavy, Johanek, and Puckett (2009) trace the placement of schools at the centre of community life to the settlement patterns of early U.S. colonialists, a foundational condition that

persisted as small, community-supported, community-centred schools began to dot the landscape. Tyek (1974, as cited by DeYoung & Howley,1990) describes the 19th Century rural schoolhouse as a place for broad community education and public gatherings that "both reflected and shaped a sense of community" (p. 68). This informally organized development gained more formal expression through the work turn-of-century reformers such as Jane Addams (1910), who helped bring about extension education, and John Dewey (1916), who understood education as a communicative process connected to public life and productivity (Addams 1910, p. 428; Dewey, 1916, p. 4-6). Such concepts fed into the Depression-era "lighted schoolhouse" movement in Flint, Michigan, as well as nascent community school experiments in East Harlem (Benson, et al., 2009, p. 25-26; Campbell, 1972, p. 195). Both models essentially sought to utilize school facilities as social development tools to turn around blighted urban neighbourhoods, a movement that encountered some early successes and public praise. America's schoolhouses also acted as a crucible for emerging concepts such as social capital, as expressed by L.J. Hanifan (1916), state supervisor of rural schools for West Virginia:

> In the use of the phrase social capital I make no reference to the usual acceptation of the term capital, except in a figurative sense. I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit, the rural community, whose logical centre is the school. (p. 130)

Despite the concept's problematic adaptation of the language of capital in the context of human relations (Arce, 2003, p. 854) and its potential disregard for underlying oppression (Schafft & Brown, 2003, p. 340), there are moments when the complex and often misapplied tool of social capital fits the job at hand. If we accept Putnam's (2000) definition of social capital as dense networks of reciprocal networks, it seems reasonable to include schools and their myriad social linkages under this umbrella. Thus, the daily interactions described by Hanifan (1916) are echoed 85 years later in a study into the impact of a school closure in Invercargill, a small city at the southernmost tip of New Zealand. University of Auckland health researchers Karen Witten, Tim McCreaner and Laxmi Ramasubramanian, along with geographer Robin Kearns (2001), begin with an overview of locality-based studies on area characteristics and human health, in particular studies outlining the role of rural health clinics and hospitals in community life (p. 308). The studies reviewed suggest that corresponding declines in community health and well-being are related not only to a loss of services, but also to the loss of a physical space. The authors posit that this is because a health facility's role as a community meeting place and centre for voluntary networks provides a rich source of social capital that contributes to overall health and well-being among area residents (p. 308). With these studies in mind, the authors then turn their attention to schools, which they describe as "gateways" to informational, material, and social resources (p. 309). Suspecting that the loss of a school would have profound impacts on neighbourhood communities, the authors conducted two sets of in-depth interviews with parents, set 1 year apart. Their goal was to draw out common features of informants' insights, as well as variants (p. 310). The neighbourhood in question was low income and indigenized relative to the neighbourhoods the children would be transported to after their school was closed.

Nine months after the closure, the researchers found parents had not found a similar social space to take the place of the school, and were leading more isolated lives. Neighbours

seen on a daily basis were now encountered only occasionally at the grocery store, while the abandoned and vandalized school building contributed to a sense of urban decay. As well, families experienced economic hardships. Transportation costs were higher, and the new schools expected parents to be equally able to pay a variety of fees for books and activities. Added to this was pressure on children to dress in more expensive clothes and participate in costly activities such as water polo and aerobics. Families that had previously felt comfortable in a school environment now felt socially excluded. More significantly, the researchers found that after a brief period of solidarity during anti-closure protests, social networks and collective action quickly dissipated. This had the greatest consequences for the poorest members of the community, whose fragile social ties and limited mobility had hitherto been boosted by the presence of a neighbourhood school (Witten et al., 2001, p. 312- 315).

These narrative accounts prompt the authors to consider possible health outcomes. Referencing studies by Rose (2000), Seeman (1996), Kawachi, et al. (1997), and Berkman, et al. (2000), they argue that there is a well-established link between social cohesion, social exclusion and health (Witten et al., 2001, p. 315). However, their study stops short of providing hard quantitative evidence of declining health, leaving their conclusions in the realm of likely outcomes rather than demonstrated impacts. Nonetheless, the narratives present a compelling argument for greater consideration of social impacts in educational policy-making. Quoting the New Zealand Education Review Office's contention that there are other ways to contribute to social cohesion, rather than relying on schools, the Witten et al. (2001) emphasize that, for their study participants, there was no replacement for the school (p. 316). The authors conclude by pointing out that social cohesion is not something generated solely by communities in isolation from government policy: "Rather, it is an outcome of social investment" (Witten et al., 2001, p. 316).

One of the weaknesses of this conclusion may be that it does not consider that the neo-liberal economy is busy generating its own forms of social cohesion among the younger generation of students, one that is footed in consumerism and globalized culture. As Jaffe and Quark (2006) suggest, neo-liberalism represents a deep restructuring of cultural processes (p. 207). While the parents are left behind, the students seek out new fashions and leisure activities, creating their own dynamic alliances. These solidarities are destined to be distanced from the "original" concept of intergenerational and place-based cohesion, and may be something that no amount of social investment can re-inter in the neighbourhood.

Within this perspective, arguments around social cohesion are often easily matched by officialdom's logical-sounding entreaties for parents to accept new, enlarged, superior communities for the betterment of their children, rather than "clinging to the past." Less easy to dismiss, however, is research that draws a link from consolidated school environments to declining student performance and parental involvement. One of the earliest of such studies was published in 1984 by Richard R. Valencia, whose case study of the impact of school closures on a Los Angeles Chicano[1] community laid the foundation for many such studies to follow. Valencia (1984) was among the first academics to begin totalling the fall-out of a rash of school closures and consolidations carried out across the U.S. in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1979, Valencia was an expert witness in a parent-initiated legal case that argued Chicano students would suffer as a result of their dislocation from a community school. After the judge ruled against the parents, stating that the plan to close three minority schools did not constitute racial discrimination, the students were transferred to three predominantly Anglo schools.

Between one-and-a-half to two years after the closures, Valencia collected data to find out if his initial testimony could be confirmed after the fact (Valencia, 1984, p. 145-146). Through interviews with fifty respondents, he found that students suffered academically and parental involvement decreased; additionally, respondents felt the Chicano community as a whole had suffered psychological damage (Valencia, 1984, p. 135-136). Such findings would go on to be consistently replicated in locations ranging from rural West Virginia to the boroughs of New York City. A literature review prepared by Jon Bailey (2000) for the Center for Rural Affairs found a growing research consensus that students fare better in smaller schools academically and socially. Among the consistent findings were that larger consolidated schools tended to have higher rates of violence, lower parental and student involvement, lower academic achievement and higher drop-out rates at the high school level (Bailey, 2000, p. 1-3). These factors result in hitherto uncalculated consolidation costs at the community level. Bailey (2000) concluded: "Consideration of the long-term social and economic affects of consolidation on communities is imperative" (p. 3). Four years later a similar conclusion was reached in a Harvard University study that examined math and reading test results in North Dakota (Hylden, 2005 p. 35-37). It is only in more recent years that a few studies began emerging with less consistent conclusions, for example Jones and Ezeife's 2011 Ontario study, which found no statistically significant correlation between school size and academic achievement, based on standardized provincial test data. However, the authors noted their study did not take into account the potential influence of external social factors and cultural bias on the data that formed the basis of their study (Jones & Ezeife, 2011, p. 866). A similar study based on test data by Perrigan (2010) also failed to find a clear correlation between school size and student achievement in Virginia secondary schools (p. 89). But while the correlation/no correlation question around school size effects see-saws between studies, Perrigan (2010) notes: "Researchers have reported, more often than not, that there is a positive relationship between small schools and the achievement of the students who attend them, even though there are still questions to be answered" (p. 36). This is particularly apparent in studies that focus on economically and socially disadvantaged communities, which appear to find greater advantage in small school environments in close proximity to the community served, as opposed to larger, geographically distant consolidated schools (Spence, 2000, p. 4).

Backed by a research base that, while contested, for the most part tips toward smaller neighbourhood schools, it would seem community advocates opposed to school consolidation would have an easy time making their case. Also to their advantage is the fact that school-community development linkages are often supported by the high-sounding rhetoric of government-sponsored programs. Such programs include service provision models which deliver state social programs on school premises, carried out in the name of closer community engagement but largely driven by the economic imperative of maximizing space and program efficiencies while introducing private sector partnerships (Clandfield, 2010, p. 17-20). A community development model represents one step further beyond service provision, being more focused on promoting community-level agency. Novella Z. Keth (1996), an advocate of integrating school reform with community development, draws the theoretical distinction: "Central to this [community development] model…is the quest to improve communities less through the agency of professional service providers and more through the public agency of democratic participation and collective action (p. 248). Indeed, this was the early promise of the community schools model introduced by the Saskatchewan Department of Education in 1980: "The Program's major objective is to involve parents and community members in the

educational system for the mutual benefit of both the school and the community" (Saskatchewan Dept. of Education, Community Education Branch, n.d., p. 1). In addition to providing space for community programs and social service deliveries, the promotion of democratic citizen's engagement was promoted under the heading "Community Development" :

> The quality of community life is important in itself and as a support to the school. The community school is prepared to cooperate with local residents in advocating and working toward changes in their communities. (p. 3)

Yet, as discussed in the next section of this article, the marriage of rhetoric to reality should never be taken as a foregone conclusion.

Encountering the Wall

Picking up on the theme of schools as contributors to student success and community development, Bruce A. Miller's (1993) "Rural Distress and Survival: The School and the Importance of 'Community'" describes how a small-town Idaho school became the locus of community development initiatives following the loss of the town's main industry, a mine (p. 1-2). Yet despite this promising example, the remainder of Miller's article offers surprisingly muted expectations. Central to his thesis is the notion that rural schools are well positioned to play a role in revitalizing Community Economic Development, yet this potential has been greatly neglected. After reviewing more than 250 community development papers, Miller (1993) observes:

> I was struck by the conspicuous absence of schools as collaborative partners with their communities. The only exception is in the recognition of the valuable role a good school system plays in developing a viable workforce. (p. 96)

If community developers have failed to include schools in their toolbox, this may be due to the education bureaucracy's reluctance to take on the mantle of community development agents, Miller's article suggests. This reluctance is not for lack of evidence that schools are important social institutions. Citing a broad range of studies, Miller notes that schools have been clearly shown to contribute greatly to cohesive and supportive community life, simultaneously fostering stability and new opportunities. However, this role is "more by default than by intention," he writes; schools are often simply the last remaining local institution not yet regionalized and globalized by external forces (Miller, 1993, p. 92-93). As a result, like it or not, school officials find themselves administrating schools that symbolize the last bastion of community survival, "providing the community with a sense of identity, a source of employment and a common meeting place" (Miller, 1993, p. 93). This "default" setting becomes more visible when the community faces a crisis, such as industry closure or the decline of agricultural income.

Rather than capitalizing on school assets in times of crisis, education officials often move in the opposite direction, restricting public debate to narrow education considerations only. Miller (1993) posits that this is because there is a tendency for all social service bureaucracies, as they grow larger, to shift their attention away from clients and on to activities that maintain the health of the bureaucracies. Increased professionalism becomes the watchword, a position that encourages teachers to establish more impersonal, distanced relationships between themselves and students, families and community life. At the same time, those teachers who do seek closer community links are often constrained by a lack of time and resources (p. 95).

What is lost is an opportunity to engage in school-based economic development and the re-visioning of schools as community centres, Miller (1993) notes. This might include student entrepreneurial projects, the re-positioning of schools as community resource centres, and the integration of the surrounding community into curriculum, rather than relying on centrally authored curricula that undermines local knowledge and values (p. 95-98). With a number of such community-centred education concepts emerging in recent decades, "those concerned about the decline of rural communities feel the most promising direction for revitalization and survival rests with education and the linkages that can be developed and sustained between school and community" (p. 99). Nonetheless, convincing educators to support schools as tools of community survival remains an unrealized goal. In his conclusion, Miller admits that, as a researcher, he is just beginning to comprehend the difficulties of overcoming this barrier.

Miller's (1993) critique is valuable, but leaves one standing at a crossroads. Connie Chung's (2002) Using Schools as Community-Development Tools: Strategies for Community-Based Developers is more prescriptive in providing a road map forward to help community developers, urban planners, Smart Growth advocates, and neighbourhood members come together in support of school-based community development. The suggestions offered include coordinating the development of affordable housing and public schools, developing schools as community centres and engaging schools in community economic development strategies (p. 1-2). The work, sponsored by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, helpfully highlights detailed and specific policy options such as joint school use agreements with community agencies, and initiatives to ensure schools are surrounded by affordable housing (p. 16, 21). The paper also includes a call for community-based developers to directly help develop public facilities "in neighbourhoods where school districts are slow to respond to the need for better quality schools" (p. 24). Chung suggests the answer may be to simply push past the barriers of state inaction by finding creative ways to pool community resources, for example by restoring an abandoned building as a school site (p. 25).

In support of this approach Chung (2002) provides the example of Brooklyn's Cypress Hills Community School, established with the assistance of a neighbourhood-based Local Development Corporation. These and other examples of parent-initiated and charter schools seems to indicate an inherent resignation that school boards are unlikely to step forward to fulfill community development aspirations in poor neighbourhoods. One of the biggest barriers to overcome, she writes, is the school district's desire to treat education concerns, school buildings, and community aspirations as separate, unrelated matters. School administrators "see themselves in the business of education and not community development," she observes (Chung, 2002, p. 31).

This is an observation that recurs in much of the literature on schools and community. Researchers who employ social capital and community development frameworks, while providing much in the way of insight and ideas for change, struggle in their attempts to move theory into action. Such was the experience in my own city, when residents of a neighbourhood facing school closure contracted an independent researcher to explore the creation of a school-community hub as an alternative strategy. The researcher found such a proposal was unlikely to gain the school board's support, a conclusion that turned out to be correct when a resolution to forestall sale of the building was defeated (Graves, 2011, p. 26). Further, the study found no functioning school-community hub models in Canada that went beyond the occasional sharing of space with government and service agencies (p. 27). Thus, despite decades of rhetorical support

for schools as centres of community, actual implementation remains stymied by a brick wall of education planning that appears to actively prevent schools from migrating beyond the domain of education into the domain of community life. Meanwhile, those communities that have the resources drift toward privatized solutions, most often manifested in Canada with the creation of small-enrolment holistic and religious schools that are private in nature but eligible for public funds as schools affiliated to the public system.

A review of the literature reveals there is a strong body of research to back parents' claims that school consolidation negatively impacts children and their communities. There is also well developed theorizing around the essential role schools play in promoting healthy community development. Yet none of this seems to make any difference once a school is cited for closure. Parents present their research, they are thanked for their input, and then the school closes. Obviously there must be a competing narrative at play. Indeed, on the other side of the wall sits an entirely different body of literature. The school of thought that favours large, centralized schools is built on the theoretical heritage of modernity, including faith in progress, scientific approaches and objective quantitative analysis as the basis for rational decision-making. It fosters development not as small-scale community-based initiatives, but rather as state projects designed "to master the scarcity of resources under notions of efficiency" (Arce, 2003, p. 851). This viewpoint, at play in North America's education sector since the late 19th Century, easily adapted itself to and received a great boost from neo-liberalism's later discourse of rationalization and globalization. It is instructive, therefore, to take a longer historical view of how the trend toward consolidated, globalized and placeless education came into ascendancy.

Looking Over the Wall

DeYoung and Howley's (1990) "The Political Economy of Rural School Consolidation" has a rural focus; there is little its co-authors write that could not be applied to urban neighbourhoods as well. DeYoung and Howley describe how early U.S. schools were created by local communities to serve local needs, but gradually became objects of state and national concern. The transition, they argue, had little to do with the education of children. Rather, this change reflected a centralization of power and the wide-scale adoption of a model of modernity and economic progress that had little use for the one-room school. At stake was a transfer of control to the state, inducing individuals to give up their local ties (p. 65).

Historically, DeYoung and Howeley (1990) observe, the school was the locus of all manner of community activities – activities sometimes more highly valued and trusted by the community than the classroom instruction itself (p. 67-68). To illustrate, the authors quote Tyack's (1974, as cited by DeYoung & Howley, 1990) lively description of a 19th Century school:

> In one-room schools all over the nation, ministers met their flocks, politicians caucused with the faithful, families gathered for Christmas parties and hoe-downs, the Grange held its baked-bean suppers, Lyceum lecturers spoke, itinerants introduced the wonders of the lantern-slide and the crank-up phonograph, and neighbours gathered to hear spelling bees and declamations. (p. 68)

This view of the school was challenged with the migration of school superintendents into state education departments, the authors argue (although we might point to the aforementioned L.J. Hanifan as a notable exception). Intent on imposing a scientific and professional view of schooling, education departments pegged volunteer involvement in the daily school operations as

problematic and unwanted. Standardization of everything from curricula to building codes became the watchword. Convinced that rural America needed large, new, professionally-run schools, the education officials branded small rural schools as a threat to "efficient management" (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 69).

DeYoung and Howley (1990) further note that professional educators then and now are careful to carve schooling apart from schools, allowing public discussion to be easily diverted away from issues of place and community, and toward broader state educational objectives over which parents have little control (p. 66). As well, because classroom educators "confound the technology of classroom instruction with 'school' (i.e. confounding schooling with the school), most educators fail to 'understand' their setting the way students do" (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 67). This broad historical perspective adds to Bruce A. Miller's (1993) previously stated understanding, in the context of rural Idaho, of why school officials shift their concerns from the needs of the students to the needs of the bureaucracy as the bureaucracy grows. DeYoung and Howley's (1990) work also goes a long way toward explaining why school officials in Invercargill, New Zealand were unmoved when parents described their long hours of volunteer work at the school, including building a wharenui, or Maori meeting house (Witten et al., 2001, p. 311). Such stamps of local culture and endeavour—full of meaning for local actors—count for little in a standardized, professionalized educational landscape.

Referencing Durkheim's discussions of schools and modernity, DeYoung and Howley (1990) conclude that the implications for schools are clear: Modernity provides an overarching rationale to organize rural schools into "bigger units concerned with producing students with the skills and values required for the pursuit of national goals and occupational possibilities" (p. 73). As schooling becomes the prerogative of the state, allegiance to local schools and education in the service of non-utilitarian aims "appear as merely sentimental anachronisms" (p. 76).

Carlyle's (1987) look at school consolidation in the Canadian prairies serves to further emphasize this conclusion. Carlyle describes the beginning of prairie schools as community-led initiatives intended to serve families within walking and horse cart distance, leading to compact school districts of twelve to fourteen square miles. As in the U.S. experience, schools became a source of community identity and social cohesion on the Canadian prairie. But as early as the early 1900s, a drive for consolidation emerged, led by the demands of the professional education community for larger schools and more standardization, and by public demand to add secondary education into the system (Carlyle, 1987, p. 9). Following the Depression, when rural districts began to struggle with tax base loss and declining enrolment, the three prairie provincial governments stepped in one-by-one to establish larger school divisions and divisional boards, as opposed to local school-by-school administration. This process began in the 1940s and continued until the mid-1960s. Having lost their decision-making powers, most local boards voluntarily ceased operating, giving way to consolidated divisional boards. The last province to fall in line was Manitoba, where strong local opposition to consolidation delayed the creation of divisions until the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 10-13).

Here Carlyle (1987) gives voice to the underlying currents of ideology and economy identified by DeYoung and Howley (1990). Using the language of modernity, Carlyle (1987) finds Manitoba's resistance "puzzling," in light of the province's "early progress" in administrative "reform" (p. 14). He characterizes the opponents of consolidation as conservative-minded politicians and rural dwellers "reluctant to change established structures" (Carlyle, 1987, p. 14). When the pace of consolidation finally accelerated in Manitoba in the 1980s, he attributes

this to the fact that "most rural people now have come to accept that higher standards can be achieved only if there are larger and fewer schools than previously, even though this is viewed as detrimental to the social life of the community [emphasis added]" (Carlyle, 1987, p. 16). Although he mentions strong decision-making at the division level during this period, he fails to ponder if public attitudes would be the same without the driving hand of divisional policy. Instead, his assumption is that public acceptance signals the triumph of progress against "old style" schools (p. 16). This viewpoint remains widespread, most lately echoed, for example, in the Regina Public School Board's Linnen Report, which characterized public discussion of school closures as "change and choice [pro consolidation] versus resistance and status quo [anti-consolidation]" (H.J. Linnen Associates, 2008, p. 21).

Added to this are some aspects of post-structuralism, in particular the view that any attachment to place and culture is passé—what Brent (2004) refers to as the "fetishization of locality and face-to-face social life" (p. 214). From this standpoint, arguments are mounted that community and place are irrelevant in the discussion of school closures, because community can exist anywhere and, indeed, may never exist at all as a tangible entity.

Careful readers of post-structuralism, however, will observe that the argument does not end there. "Community may lack tangible substance, but it possesses gravitational pull, a magnetic existence that creates real effects – at its best, social relationships of mutual care and responsibility," writes Brent (2004, p. 221). The works of Henri Lefebvre (trans. 1991) and feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2005) serve to return the construction of community to a physical location, whether it be a street, a pub or a school. A Lefebvre-ist take on the issue would accept that control of physical space—in this case a school building—can be used by dominating classes to impose hegemonic ideas, or used by oppressed individuals to assert their identities and values.

Indeed, recognition of place within a constructed world is part of the theoretical heritage of the first silo we visited. In the words of Walsh and High (1999), "social relationships and experiences occur through space, giving space meaning and value" (p. 258). From this perspective, the view that place-based communities are in a state of evolutionary decline, as described by Roland Warren and others (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 5), is open to question and alteration. Authors such as Miller (1993), Chung (2003), and Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, and Ramasubramania (2001) are unafraid to advance ideas of place and community as meaningful entities and sources of social good. Their work originates within a theoretical heritage of social theory that follows community/co-operative development approaches, and employs both quantitative data and qualitative narrative as the basis for people-centred decision-making. Within this framework it is possible, indeed incumbent, to understand communities as constructed, and yet still maintain passion for the meaningful institutions in which communities are embodied and endlessly reshape their identities. To this end, among the tools employed by the authors are political economy understandings, social capital/social cohesion theory, community development theory, and social impact measurement.

Breaking Through

Thus the silos fill separately, leaving one to wonder what communities can gain from community-oriented research. Certainly local actors have an ample and established research well to draw from. Yet, as DeYoung and Howley (1990) point out, parents who arrive at school board meetings armed with research about the positive value of schools in communities are destined to

leave baffled and angry. What community members fail to perceive is that they have been broadsided by a powerful meta-system that has already decisively supplanted the local in favour of national utility: "Local communities, in this view, are not entitled to make decisions about the schools their children attend. Schooling is the clear prerogative of the state" (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 76).

A.G. Phipps (1993) provides a fascinating clinical breakdown of how the undermining of local concerns is accomplished in "An Institutional Analysis of School Closures in Saskatoon and Windsor." It should be noted that Phipps, a geographer, is highly neutral on the matter of closures themselves. His stated subject is an examination of the "real and instantiated powers, and the agency skills of the involved community representatives versus those of school board officials" (Phipps, 1993, p. 1607). After setting the closures in the context of a movement to rationalize public services, Phipps looks at how the school boards changed their decision-making patterns to ensure the closures would be realized. He begins with the observation that school boards derive their power from "real" structures such as legislation and taxation, while community power is based in instantiated structures, meaning "those virtual rules and resources of society, constituted through previous human interactions" (Phipps, 1993, p. 1614). Thus the school board's dominance over other actors is "structurally empowered" from the outset (Phipps, 1993, p. 1614). The board has rules and a legal mandate on its side, while parents have only their own communications and networking skills to rely on, resources that vary greatly from neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

In both Saskatoon and Windsor, the boards previously involved a parent-educator committee in school closures decisions. The committee work gave parents access to information and provided a sustained network, with predictable results: "The participants were educated and mobilized against the school board, which resulted in an inefficient committee process for administrators reviewing more than a single school in an academic year" (Phipps, 1993, p. 1614). Readers of DeYoung and Howley's (1990) political economy framework will find the school board response just as predictable: driven by external narratives of progress, economies of scale, and standardization that have little to do with local concerns, and faced with political pressure from above to rationalize services, school boards were left with little choice but to ignore the recommendations of their own committees. This uncomfortable public position led the boards to replace the joint committees with one-off consultation meetings in which community members were allowed to present briefs but not engage in open debate with school board members (Phipps, 1993, p. 1614, 1619).

Facing off against consolidation, the parents' instantiated power was derived from their knowledge of the community. At the same time, their solidarity was fragmented by the new process's school-by-school approach. Meanwhile, the school boards relied on "real" powers, invoking their legal power to revise the consultation process. Additionally, the boards found instantiated power within technocratic arguments around standardized education, as well as within their ability to control the information flow to opposing community members and the public. By framing the debate within a "best practices" language, in public meetings they were able to successfully privilege technocratic knowledge over community knowledge, thereby greatly increasing the agency of the bureaucracy. As a result, after the new decision-making structure was imposed, not one school was spared (Phipps, 1993, p. 1616-1618). Phipps concludes that the school boards successfully maximized their existing power and skills agency,

while the community representatives were unable to muster the solidarity and skills needed to shift the game in their favour (p. 1620).

For community advocates involved in consolidation debates, the ensuing complaints of community members ring familiar: "…trustees have made up their minds [for closure] a long time ago. They have been wasting everybody's time with this process" (Saskatoon Star Phoenix, as cited by Phipps, 1993, p. 1619). Without saying so directly, Phipps's conclusion concurs with this perspective. By participating in the process set out by their school boards, community advocates allowed themselves to be led into an exceedingly disadvantageous setting. Within this constrained setting they were unable to effectively mobilize city-wide public support, which might have resulted in political change at the board level. Consolidation proceeded, protest swiftly dissipated, and no significant changes were made to the decision-making structures and processes that enabled the closures (Phipps, 1993, p. 1620).

In conclusion, as a community activist I found reviewing the literature to be both informative and a spur to new forms of community action. The studies by Witten et al. (2001) and Valencia (1984) provide a solid research basis for the claims of neighbourhood and rural school advocates. However, further readings of DeYoung and Howley (1990), Carlyle (1987), and Phipps (1993) suggest that waving such data in the face of officialdom is unlikely to bear fruit as a strategy. This is an important point to consider. During my relatively brief tenure in neighbourhood-schools advocacy, I have observed that advocates from New Zealand to Saskatchewan tend to expend great effort on gathering and communicating data to decision-makers, almost always to no avail. It is helpful, then, to expand one's readings from supportive research studies to wider theoretical discussions of political economy, history and power dynamics. These works introduce the notion that, at the end of the day, it is not data that will move mountains. School boards, driven by neoliberal frameworks of rationalization, standardization and professionalism, are not in a position to receive and act on community-generated qualitative information that arises from a radically different framework. Further, as Phipps (1993) observes, parents who dutifully present briefs at consultation meetings enter an arena where their knowledge and activism is destined to be manipulated and overpowered. "By instantiating this structure during the sequence of closures, the community unintentionally reaffirmed their subordinate relationship with a school board, and reproduced it for the future," he states (Phipps, 1993, p. 1619). Phipps concludes that community action outside the prescribed process may offer the only opportunity to develop a sustained social movement network capable of bringing about change (p. 1614).

If it is necessary to step outside the system in order to seriously challenge it, few suggestions of how to accomplish this arise in the readings presented in this review. Miller's (1993) community development approach has promise, although it must be recognized that today's school bureaucrats also lay heavy claim to the rhetoric of community partnerships – for example, Saskatchewan's SchoolsPLUS program. While advocates have placed stock in the community-friendly language of SchoolsPLUS as a way to (unsuccessfully) rationalize the existence of their schools, we must bear in mind that such community partnerships are primarily understood and carried out by school boards as service delivery agreements designed to ease "excess capacity" (unused space) in the system, a task that could be just as easily accomplished in larger consolidated schools that families travel to. Further, as Clandfield (2010) cautions, current interpretations of the service model tend to seek out the territory of neo-liberalized, corporatized efficiency-speak, tied less to community and more to public-private partnerships

and a market-oriented conceptualization of learning (p. 15). Such service consolidation-and-delivery projects do not speak to the type of democratic engagement evident in community development theory as expressed by, for example, the co-operative movement, which seeks to promote leadership, civic participation and alternative governance models (Nembhard, 2004, p. 10-11), or the international NGO community, which increasingly equates citizen engagement with community sovereignty, including the right to define, reform and reject public services (Korten, 1987). As an example of how this objective can be appropriated, one need look no further than the aforementioned Saskatchewan community schools framework, largely abandoned by government and supplanted by school board-authored handbooks that guide school community councils toward a narrow mandate to support their school's Learning Improvement Plan (Regina Public Schools, 2007, p. 6), which is derived from a data-driven provincial Continuous Improvement Framework, itself derived from the management-speak of Japanese auto manufacturers (Zangwill & Kantor, 1988, p. 911). We must become more aware, then, that when the educational bureaucracy conjures up community, the understandings and approaches come from a different place, one that may not meet the desires of community members for autonomy, local democracy and community-led development.

Added to the community development model is Chung's (2002) suggestion of community-initiated and charter schools, an increasingly common response in the U.S. and Canada. One should understand, however, that Chung is treading the edges of an entrepreneurialism that may serve to reproduce the neo-liberal economic model that underlies school consolidation. Jaffe and Quark (2006) point out that this type of response places communities in competition with one another, creating a potential cauldron of varying social exclusions (p. 223). Nonetheless, it would be interesting to find out what might unfold in a Canadian setting, if a Community Economic Development plan were to include the creation of a locally-sponsored school that was integrated into CED goals in the manner described by Miller (1993).

Meanwhile, activists unable to muster the resources to open their own schools have other options for working outside the system. From the readings, one can surmise that the establishment of independent communications and information networks would suggest itself as a vital first step toward building needed community agency. This could potentially be followed by parallel processes such as people's inquiries and independently organized public meetings. Community advocates should also find ways to keep the debate centred on schools and community—the things in which they hold expert knowledge—and away from "schooling," the domain of the technocrats. To this end, the imposition of standardization, such as standard school sizes and optimized professional learning communities, should be countered with situated community experience that supports more diverse approaches to education.

None of the aforementioned, it should be noted, is readily apparent in the hundreds of impact studies carried out in the wake of Valencia's (1984) work in Los Angeles. Only more deeply contextual literature, in the vein of DeYoung and Howley (1990), fully reveals the landscape. In brief, knowing consolidation has negative consequences is not enough to win the battle. Neither is offering alternative approaches such as community development. Knowing the political economy and power dynamics behind the process may not be enough either but, at the very least, such readings push activists to re-assess their traditional approach of trying to convince a recalcitrant bureaucracy through argument, and to instead capitalize on their strengths in communications, networking, local knowledge, and community action. From this point, school

advocates may break through to larger social movements. As Phipps (1993) concludes, change cannot be mastered by a small set of directly affected families, but must move across communities and networks (p. 1614, 1620).

As a final note, it is interesting to consider that not one of the papers reviewed mentions the Social Economy, despite the obvious fit in goals and the overlapping use of tools such as Community Economic Development and concepts such as Smart Growth. "The Social Economy is a complex web of grassroots civil society organizations that works in different ways to increase community control over social and economic assets," writes Lavoie-Scott (2009, p. 9). Placing smaller community schools as important social assets within this web may be their only hope for survival. Further exploration of this potential linkage is warranted.

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Endnote

[1]Refers to Americans specifically of Mexican descent, as opposed to the more broad terms of Latino and Hispanic.