

WHERE DOES THE SMALL RURAL SCHOOL STAND?

EXPLORING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

The closure of small rural schools is the single most implemented educational change reform in rural areas of Canada (Wallin, 2007). Similarly, throughout the 20th century, rural school consolidation was the single, most frequently implemented educational policy in the United States (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). This study explores the why and how of this phenomenon.

Rural education research has indicated that small rural schools across North America share common challenges unique to the rural situation (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2006; Blaine, Pace & Robinson, 2004; Mulcahy, 1993; Wallin, 2007). Many rural education researchers concur that some of these challenges arise from social, economic and political differences between urban and rural settings, but primarily, they stem from the consequence of globalization on trade, labour relations, regulatory control, or governmental rules and guidelines (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). In response to these challenges, many policymakers and educational officials have initiated reform efforts in the form of small rural school closures and consolidations (Bard et.al, 2006; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Hicks, 1999; Wallin, 2007). In this study, I carry out a qualitative analysis of the rationale behind these reforms, using one particular Eastern Ontario school board's proposal (Boundary 2020) and a number of other documents as an exemplification of these closure and consolidation movements, and the various rural stakeholder responses to this reform.

In an exploration of rural perspectives and philosophies, I bring alternative rural perceptions to the forefront and advocate for rural stakeholders to have a voice in the future of their schools and communities. Moreover, by acknowledging not only the existence of small rural schools in Ontario, including the notion that their future is threatened by plans such as Boundary 2020, this project serves as a point of departure for future rural education research in a province that tends to favour a metropolitan-inspired school system. Furthermore, by emphasizing the need to cultivate rural meanings and identities, I hope to encourage rural communities to nurture the strengths of their local schools through the development of locally responsive curricula and community-centered activities and opportunities, which could contribute to the sustainability of their local rural schools.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the students, parents, community members and colleagues, who have truly touched my life and opened my eyes to the situation of rural education in Ontario. Your devotion to your rural community schools is inspiring. Thank you for teaching me about the amazing gifts each and every small school community and their school have to share.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iii |
| DEDICATION..... | iv |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | v |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | ix |
| CHAPTER1: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Rationale..... | 2 |
| Significance and Purpose of the Study..... | 4 |
| Research Questions..... | 7 |
| Definitions of Key Concepts..... | 7 |
| Project Overview..... | 9 |
| CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE..... | 11 |
| Origin and Significance of Research in Rural Education..... | 11 |
| Globalization..... | 12 |
| Impact on Education..... | 13 |
| Impact on the Local Small Rural School..... | 15 |
| Situated Cognition and the Importance of Learning in the Localized Context.... | 17 |
| The Small <i>Rural</i> School..... | 19 |
| The Rural Context..... | 20 |
| Representations of <i>Rurality</i> | 21 |
| Historical Background | 22 |
| North American Rural Education of the 19 th and 20 th Centuries..... | 22 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Recent Trends in Rural Education Research..... | 25 |
| Rural Challenges..... | 27 |
| Declining Enrolment – The Situation in Ontario..... | 28 |
| The Question of Small Rural School Closures and Consolidation..... | 30 |
| The Value and Viability of Small Rural Schools..... | 34 |
| The Small Rural School Community..... | 34 |
| Learning in a Small Rural School | 36 |
| Canadian Study..... | 36 |
| American Study..... | 41 |
| Summary..... | 43 |
| CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY..... | 45 |
| Rationale for the Choice of a Qualitative Approach and Research Method..... | 45 |
| Context..... | 48 |
| Conceptual Framework..... | 49 |
| Methods..... | 51 |
| Document Selection..... | 52 |
| Boundary 2020 Official Document..... | 53 |
| UCDSB Research Article..... | 54 |
| Director’s Message – UCDSB Website..... | 54 |
| Kingston Recorder and Times Article..... | 55 |
| ETFO News Release..... | 55 |
| Poem..... | 56 |
| Journal..... | 57 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Semiotic Analysis..... | 58 |
| Document Analysis Process..... | 59 |
| Themes and Coding..... | 59 |
| Summary..... | 63 |
| CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS..... | 64 |
| Common Perspectives..... | 65 |
| Major Themes..... | 67 |
| Voices of all Stakeholders..... | 69 |
| Summary..... | 70 |
| CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION..... | 71 |
| Are All Voices Heard?..... | 71 |
| Split Loyalties - Rural versus School Board Commitments..... | 72 |
| Parents' Voices..... | 75 |
| Teachers' Voices..... | 78 |
| Students' Voices..... | 83 |
| Whose Voice Counts?..... | 86 |
| The Closure and Consolidation Issue | 88 |
| Declining Enrolment and School Size..... | 88 |
| Efficiency and Economics..... | 91 |
| 'Quality' Education and Student Achievement..... | 94 |
| The Future of Small Rural School Communities..... | 97 |
| Recommendations and Alternate Choices..... | 106 |
| Summary..... | 112 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION..... | 113 |
| Implications for Future Research..... | 113 |
| Limitations..... | 116 |
| Concluding Remarks..... | 117 |
| REFERENCES..... | 121 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1: Themes, Codes and Qualifier Descriptions..... | 61 |
| Table 2: Location of Codes and Values in Documents..... | 62 |
| Table 3: Values of Codes across Documents – Attitudes toward Reforms..... | 65 |
| Table 4: School Closures and Consolidation - Major Themes, Main Arguments and Examples..... | 68 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this section, I provide a general overview of the current situation of the small North American rural school. I relate my personal background to the problematic issues uncovered. I then describe the significance and purpose of the study, followed by my research questions and an overview of the project.

To gain a deeper understanding of living and learning in small rural communities, local rural perceptions need to be considered (Blimkie, 2007; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Howley 1997; Wallin, 2007). Many rural education researchers argue that when it comes to perceptions of rural education, local rural voices tend to be silenced and replaced with government and school board discourse advocating for small school closures and consolidations (Bard et al., 2006; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Howley, 1997).

Unfortunately, recent studies in rural education have found that these initiatives come at the expense of local rural schools, which in many cases are the lifeline of their communities. Once these lifelines are severed in the wake of reform movements, the local communities fail to thrive (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Wallin, 2007). Therefore, researchers need to delve deeper into the world of rural education in order to discover whether these school sites, that government proposals seem to find expendable, are viable and valuable, not only to the local community, but to the local students' well-being and future education. As such, a re-examination of the history of rural educational research, along with an analysis of common misconceptions about the inefficiency and inferiority of small rural schools are necessary, in order to develop a

comprehensive understanding of the existence and significance of rural schools in today's North American society.

Rationale

As an elementary teacher in a small Eastern Ontarian rural school, I observed and continue to observe certain 'challenges' this school faces due to its small, rural nature. These challenges include, declining enrolment, multi-grade classrooms, high teacher turnover rates and schools sharing principals. Within my first year teaching at this school (2006), I was frequently privy to discussions amongst staff, parents, community members and even students regarding these aforementioned issues. Before long, these discussions were fueled by frustration and concern over a possible school closure or consolidation. Upon an investigation of local school board, the Upper Canada District School Board (UCDSB), resources, such as the official website, newsletters and media releases, I learned that the catalyst for this uncertainty and anxiety was a 'system-review,' entitled *Boundary 2020* (UCDSB, 2005). In response to the board-wide issue of declining enrolment, the trustees had directed administration to conduct a single study of all families of schools in Upper Canada entitled *The Five W's and How of Boundary 2020*, (UCDSB, 2007). This proposal sought to justify board-wide school closures, consolidations, program cuts and grade 7 and 8 transfers to high schools under the rhetoric of "program enhancement, consolidation and boundary alignment" (p.1) Guided by the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) issued to all Ontario school boards by the Ministry of Education in October of 2006, the UCDSB appointed four advisory Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs) to meet throughout 2007 to lead

the public review of school closures and program boundary changes (*The Five W's and How of Boundary 2020*, 2007).

Many teachers, parents, students and community members within the school board region were particularly concerned by the school board trustees' and administrators' perceptions that these small rural schools were a problem to be fixed by a convenient, efficient and educationally beneficial consolidation solution. These rural stakeholders did not perceive this 'solution' to be beneficial to their children or the viability of their towns. Conversely, they shared a fear that these consolidation, closure and grade 7 and 8 transfer 'solutions' would have potentially harmful implications for the future viability of their towns (Carson, 2007; Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2007; Lunman, 2008; People for Education, 2008; Thompson, 2010). Therefore, in response to this 'system-review,' many parents and community members attempted to voice their disapproval and petitioned against the Boundary 2020 initiative. They used various outlets to voice their opinions such as attending ARC meetings and writing letters to the director of the UCDSB (Lunman, 2008; Thompson, 2010). One particular parent felt so passionate about the possible negative consequences of a school closure or consolidation that he wrote a poem voicing his point of view on local small rural schools and government intervention (Carson, 2007). This poem, as well as other responses to Boundary 2020 will be investigated as part of my document analysis (Chapter 3) and elaborated upon in my findings and discussion sections (Chapters 4 and 5).

As my personal experience has indicated, having taught in this climate of educational transitional uncertainty, whereby small rural schools are perceived as sites of disdain in the eyes of educational officials (DeYoung, 1987), I became interested in

further exploring the current situation of small rural schools across North America in order to relate this local problematic to other small rural schools facing similar circumstances. Thus, for the purpose of my study, I chose to begin my research by conducting a broad investigation of the topic of rural North American education. I then narrowed my search, focusing specifically on the common issues small rural schools in Eastern Ontario face and the administrative response to these issues, namely school closures and consolidations.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Though North American educational policymakers do not deny the existence of small rural schools (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2006), in an educational climate where standardized, globalized conceptions of schooling overrule local rural priorities, small rural schools continue to be viewed as inefficient, uncoordinated and outdated. As such, in terms of meeting the set standards of what schooling should look like (i.e., appropriate class sizes, single grade make-up etc.), these small schools are perceived as expendable against the ‘bigger is better’ and ‘one size fits all’ mentality of the urban scholar (Bard et al., 2006; DeYoung, 1987; Howley & Howley, 2004; Wallin, 2007). Therefore, many rural schools in North America, such as those previously mentioned in the UCDSB, face possible closure or consolidation due to school ‘improvement’ initiatives (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006). It appeared that rural education studies conducted in the United States have found that rural school consolidation was the single, most frequently implemented educational policy of the 20th century (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Similarly, recent Canadian studies have indicated that small rural school closure has become the number one reform effort in Canada (Wallin, 2007). Specifically in Ontario,

as student enrolment continues to decline across the province, school boards continue to adopt the common perception that fewer, larger schools would be fiscally efficient and enhance quality education by providing increased curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for students (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009; McWilliams, 2008).

I have great difficulty accepting this ‘one size fits all’ perception as the norm because as Howley and Howley (2004) argue, it tends to disregard the importance of context in reform decisions and continues to treat all educational settings as the same, whether rural, urban or suburban, thus embarking on a quest to implement universalized reform efforts and change regardless of the local contextual, and social and educational factors. Moreover, these rural circumstances are worsened by the fact that for the most part, rural stakeholders were not invited to share their perceptions regarding reform efforts (Howley, 1997). As their perspectives continue to remain unheard, Giroux and McLaren (1990) are concerned that small rural schools will continue to be marginalized through a structured silence. In other words, as rural stakeholders’ perceptions of the value and viability of their schools continue to be suppressed by policymakers’ and educational officials’ perceptions of a ‘one-size fits all’ solution to the small rural school ‘problem,’ small rural schools will continue to be expendable. This situation is increasingly problematic for the viability of small rural communities and community-centered learning.

On the other hand, recent American journals such as the *Rural Educator* and the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* have been established with the intent to publish studies that examine rural school challenges from a rural perspective. Furthermore,

various contemporary Canadian studies have been conducted in the field of rural education, primarily to emphasize the need for future research on the impact of consolidation efforts on rural lifestyles and priorities (Blimkie, 2007; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Wallin, 2007). In addition, certain rural education annual conferences have been established with the intent to bring rural stakeholders together in an environment where they might share opinions and perspectives on the current situation of rural education. These conferences include: the annual National Congress on Rural Education in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (www.usask.ca/education/ruraled/); the 2006, 2007 and 2008 Rural Education Conferences held in British Columbia (www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/rural_education/conferences.aspx) and the annual Rural Education and Small Schools Conference in Manhattan, Kansas (<http://coe.k-state.edu/cress/conference.html>) . Though rural education research and discussions demonstrate increasing concern for the sustainability of many small rural schools, these viewpoints are rarely considered in school reform agendas (Bard et al., 2006; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

The overall purpose of this study is to discover where the small rural school stands with regards to reform agendas. First, the intent is to understand the rationale behind small rural school closure and consolidation, by examining one particular school board reform initiative, Boundary 2020. Second, this study explores local, rural perceptions that challenge the common perceptions amongst policymakers and educational officials regarding the future or lack thereof of small rural schools. Third, by uncovering these conflicting perspectives, the aim is to demonstrate the need for further research into this relatively unexplored phenomenon as well as encourage educators to

foster educational developments and curricular plans that take into account rural meanings and identities.

Research Questions

Through a thorough examination of a number of pertinent studies and documents, I have sought to answer the following research questions:

- What is the intention and rationale of policymakers and educational officials involved in rural school closures and consolidations?
- What are the shared perspectives of rural students, parents and community members regarding school closures and consolidations and the value and viability of their small rural schools?
- What are the effects of small rural school closures and consolidations on local rural communities?

Definitions of Key Concepts

Many North American rural researchers concur that much ambiguity exists about what constitutes *rural* and *rurality* (Blaine, Pace & Robinson, 2004; Chalker, 1999; Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). Most American studies reviewed for this study define *rural* as the open country and small settlements of less than 2500 people that are not in the vicinity of the densely populated suburban areas known as urban clusters (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Beeson & Strange, 2003). Statistics Canada has developed various definitions of the term *rural*. In relation to research in rural education, Statistics Canada recommends the use of the *rural and small town* definition: individuals living in towns or municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres of 10,000 or more people (de Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2001).

Recent studies conducted in Ontario regarding declining enrolment have taken the term *rural* as it relates to education one step further and sought to define the *rural school*. In March of 2009, The Ministry of Education of Ontario's Declining Enrolment Working Group identified a *rural school* in one of two ways: the second character of the school's postal code is zero, indicating that the school's address is defined as rural by Canada Post or the school is listed as a rural school by the provincial Grants for Student Needs (GSN) regulation (Ontario Ministry of Education, October 2008, p. 88 as cited in Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009). In terms of a definition for my research site, I have employed the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) definition of the *rural school*.

In addition to the importance of exploring the concept of *rural* when discussing rural education, for the purpose of my research context, it is imperative to investigate the notion of *small* in terms of the *small rural school*. The research on rural education indicates that most rural schools are characteristically *small* (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Howley & Howley, 2004). Moreover, smaller school populations increase the chances for a multi-grade classroom organization (Mulcahy, 1993). Thus, when exploring the issues common to many rural schools such as declining enrolment, an increase in split or multi-grade classes, high teacher turnover rates and schools sharing principals, the literature is often based on multi-grade classes in small rural schools.

As Howley and Howley (2004) explain, when discussing *smallness* in terms of schooling, this term is relative. The literature indicates that various studies have deliberately avoided an absolute definition of small in relation to schooling, with the intent to consider a wider range of research findings to investigate the characteristics of small schools (Jimerson, 2007). However, with respect to this study, *small schools* have

included elementary schools with less than 300 students and high schools with less than 800 students.

As previously outlined, most studies investigating the future of small schools tend to discuss reform efforts, namely school closures and consolidations. Bard et al. (2006) explain that historically, school *consolidation* has been a way to solve rural issues in the eyes of policymakers and educational officials. They explain that a variety of terms exist to describe the consolidation process. Some scholars define *consolidation* as the merging of two or more attendance areas to form a larger school, whereas others view *consolidation* as combining two or more previously independent school districts into one new, larger district. However, Bard et al. (2006) ascertain that most community members perceive *consolidation* to be any type of school unification, reorganization, or merger. For the purpose of this project, the term *consolidation*, for both American and Canadian rural contexts, will refer to this latter definition. As such, later discussions of UCDSB grade 7 and 8 student transfers to local High Schools will also refer to *consolidation*.

Project Overview

In this chapter, I have outlined my interest in and personal connection to small rural school closures and consolidations. I have described the rationale for this study as it relates to my background knowledge of small rural schools. Following an outline of the significance and purpose of my study, I have listed the research questions that have guided my inquiry and provided the reader with definitions of key concepts. The remainder of this project is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 2, I offer a review of the literature, including the impact of globalization on education, the correlation between situated cognition theory and learning in a localized context, the history of rural

education and recent trends in small rural schools. In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological approach adopted for my study as well as explain my choice of site and conceptual framework. I describe the methods used to collect and analyze data. I present the findings from my data analysis in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings as they relate to the various contrasting perspectives of school officials and small rural school stakeholders and their impact on the future of small rural schools. In Chapter 5, I also provide alternate choices and recommendations. In Chapter 6, I discuss implications for future research, limitations and include concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I begin by outlining the origin and significance of the research in rural education reviewed for this project. I then theoretically ground my research with a brief discussion of the way both globalization and the theory of situated cognition relate to the fate of North American small rural schools. Following a brief overview of the rural North American context and representations of *rurality*, I explore the history of research in rural education and the rise of the consolidation movement. I then discuss the recent trends in small rural schools, including the primary issue of declining enrolment. The chapter concludes with an investigation of recent studies that have been conducted to explore the benefits of small rural schools on student learning, school culture and the local surrounding community.

Origin and Significance of the Research in Rural Education

Prior to an analysis of the following rural education research, I draw attention to the origin and significance of the literature. First, although the research is equally American and Canadian-based, most empirical Canadian studies regarding small rural schools have been conducted in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta and Newfoundland. These provinces may have a shared recognition for research in the field of rural education because the rural population of these provinces comprises a large percentage of their total populations (Statistics Canada, 2001). Nevertheless, the fact that the other Canadian provinces do not acknowledge the existence of rural education is troublesome. In Ontario, for instance, the scarcity of rural education research is suggestive of a shortage

of small rural schools throughout the province. However, my personal experience teaching and visiting numerous small rural schools in Ontario coupled with the recent literature on declining enrolment in rural school districts throughout Ontario (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009; McWilliams, 2008; People for Education, 2008) discards this assumption that small Ontarian rural schools are scarce and indicates, rather, the existence and vulnerability of rural schools in Ontario. Second, within the research reviewed, the rural contexts vary in terms of characteristics, demographics and geography. Therefore, just as we need to appreciate the importance of context and specific local situations when planning school 'improvement' initiatives, Beeson and Strange (2003) note, there is no single agenda for rural education that is universal to all provinces and states.

Globalization

In 1985, economist Theodore Levitt coined the term *globalization* to describe changes in global economies affecting production, consumption and investment (Spring, 2008). Theorists in the field of globalization, such as Spring (2008) and Stromquist (2002) argue that although Levitt's definition captured the vast economic and financial changes affecting production, consumption and global investment, it did not grasp the various social and cultural effects of globalization. Consequently, in the past two decades, extending beyond Levitt's original financial and economic scope, the concept of globalization has been analyzed in the fields of sociology, education and anthropology (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Stromquist, 2002).

Recently, theorists have described the term *globalization* as the growing mobility of goods, services, people and ideas across countries (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Carnoy,

2000; Spring, 2008; Stromquist, 2002). Anderson-Levitt (2003) describes this process as a 'global flow' of ideas, practices, institutions and people across the world in an unprecedented volume.

Impact on Education

As practices, institutions and ideas have been shared and transferred amongst various countries and cities, Anderson-Levitt (2003) explains that the mobility of educational practices and ideas and the institution of schooling has followed suit. As such, over the past decade, certain globalization theorists have studied the relationship between globalization and education. These theorists concur that formal education is the most commonly found institution and most commonly shared experience of the contemporary world. Thus, from this standpoint, formal schooling is viewed as a common global phenomenon (Carnoy, 2000; Spring, 2008; Stromquist, 2002).

Carnoy (2000) asserts that an analysis of the concept of globalization requires an acknowledgment that two of the main bases of globalization, information and innovation, are highly knowledge intensive. In other words, through information industries and global markets, knowledge is portable and thus lends itself easily to globalization. Therefore, Carnoy argues that if knowledge is fundamental to globalization, globalization should, in turn, have a profound impact on the transmission of knowledge and specifically on the delivery of education. As such, he suggests that theorists examine how globalization and its ideological packaging affect the overall delivery of schooling.

In his discussion of globalization and educational reform, Carnoy highlights the major impacts of globalization on education that are common in many contexts. First, in financial terms, the rise of globalization has pressured governments to reduce the growth

of public spending on education and find other sources of funding, such as privatizing education, for the expected expansion of their educational systems. Second, in labour market terms, the shift of economic production to knowledge intensive products and processes has led to a worldwide demand for certain kinds of skills (i.e., mathematical, scientific and technological), which in turn results in an increase in payoff to higher levels of education. As such, governments are pressured to expand their higher education and correspondingly increase the number of secondary school graduates applying for postsecondary institutions. Third, in educational terms, the quality of national educational systems is increasingly being compared on an international scale. As such, school quality is related to interschool competition and school accountability. Consequently, school systems around the globe continue to place an emphasis on math and science curricula, standardized testing and meeting standards by changing the overall delivery of schooling (Carnoy, 2000).

Stromquist and Monkman (2000) discuss the many repercussions that globalization has had on formal schooling in North America. First, the corporate criteria of 'efficiency' and 'productivity' have extended to the world of schooling and are manifested in quantitative measurements of student performance, such as standardized tests. The results of these tests are then used to 'improve' educational efficiency (Carnoy, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Second, the focus has shifted from a child-centered curriculum to economy-centered vocational training. As such, students are no longer learning for the sake of learning, but being educated to be trained to later enter the public workforce. Third, education is losing its ground as a public good and is becoming another marketable commodity. Thus, students are being educated as human

capital. In accordance with this line of thought, Eisner (2005) argues that many perspectives on the purpose of education tend to focus on a broad education of citizens, instead of the unique learning experiences of the individual. Fourth, globalization has led to a reduction of teachers' autonomy, independence and responsibility, whereby workplace knowledge and control are in the hands of administration (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Therefore, educators have lost the right to determine what is taught and how to evaluate its merit. Furthermore, in relation to curriculum delivery, Stromquist and Monkman argue that in North American education today, the global trend toward privatization and decentralization has had the following consequences on the delivery of schooling: a neglect of fields less connected to the market, such as history and the arts; a rejection of pedagogies less linked to the market, such as critical theory, for market-driven instruction, such as logical problem solving; a disregard for issues of equality and equity, in terms of women and ethnic minorities, for consideration of efficiency, such as performance and quantitative test scores.

Impact on the Local Small Rural School

As the previous section has outlined, globalized conceptions of schooling have impacted educational situations around the globe. According to Anderson-Levitt (2003), rather than diverging into unique learning situations, many schools are converging toward a single global model. Various researchers in the field of rural education (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007) find this conformity problematic for the future of school systems. Howley voices his concerns by stating:

Public school curricula and practices do look remarkably similar worldwide and this fact ought to disturb educators more than it apparently does. Educators, after all, have a vested interest in the institutions of cultural transmission. When

practices are so similar to one another worldwide, we ought worry about the health of global culture overall. (Howley, 1997, p.1)

In some cases, Eisner (2005) explains, this globalized way of thinking, which includes educational competitiveness, has led to educational change under the rhetoric of ‘improvement’ and ‘reform.’ The uncertain fate of small rural schools, for instance, provides a localized example of the conflict between globalized agendas, such as small rural school consolidation in the name of efficiency and productivity, and local, rural priorities and values, such as community learning in community schools. Following this line of thought, American rural researchers, DeYoung and Howley (1990) suggest differentiating between schooling and schools in order to make a distinction between globalized conceptions of schooling and various unique school situations. They define *schooling* as an attempt at systematic instruction of predetermined bodies of knowledge and *schools* as important places in which people construct a social reality. The term schooling seems to regularly coincide with globalized education and nationalized curricula, whereas the term school is usually associated with local meanings, interests and cultures. This distinction relates to small rural school reform, in that schooling improvement initiatives are driven by the logic of globalization, which in turn leads to a disregard of the diversity of rural places and rural schools. In the same respect, local rural issues and dilemmas are often obscured by national and cosmopolitan practices (Howley, 1997). Thus, it is imperative to investigate living and learning in a local rural community from a localized lens. In order to do so, I have drawn upon the theory of situated cognition, which emphasizes the contextual nature of learning.

Situated Cognition and the Importance of Learning in the Localized Context

For the past three decades, leading educational psychologists and sociologists have questioned the cultural commonsense about knowing and being, which is traditionally based on the view that proposes that learning is a naturally occurring, specific kind of cognitive functioning, separate from engagement in doing something (Lave, 1997). Lave terms this theory of learning as the ‘culture of acquisition.’ Situated cognition theorists, such as Lave, Wenger, Olson and Gee, have moved beyond the ‘culture of acquisition’ and adopted positions that seek to better reflect the fundamentally socio-cultural nature of teaching and learning (Gee, 1997; Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 2001; Olson, 2003). These theorists adhere to the theory of ‘understanding in practice,’ which proposes that the processes of learning and understanding are socially and culturally constituted and what is to be learned is integrally implicated in the medium in which it is appropriated (Lave).

Situated cognition is based on the premise that mind, meaning and learning are situated and socio-cultural in nature (Gee, 1997). This theory stresses the influence of the social and physical contexts upon thinking and learning, whereby thinking becomes a practical activity which is adjusted to meet the demands of the situation (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Behrman, 2002). Therefore, learning entails lived practice in a particular context, such as a local rural community context would (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997). Moreover, concepts change in various contexts and are thus seen as fluid and they can be adapted to various situations (Gee, 1997).

With regards to a classroom setting, these theorists are concerned with interpersonal dynamics and collective activity. Therefore, teaching the curriculum is not a

matter of mechanically transferring knowledge to the student who receives the information objectively. Rather, knowledge is intertwined with the social and physical contexts of activity and learning occurs through active participation in a community of practice (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 2001; Lemke, 1997)

In a situated approach to learning, cognition is collective, thereby defined by joint intentionality, shared assumptions and common sense in established communities of practice. Situated cognition, thus recognizes individuals in all their complexity, while crediting the intrinsically social nature of cognition and learning (Davis et al., 2008; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Rubenstein-Avila, 2003). From this perspective, for a student, the curriculum can signify the possibility to make sense of his/her own life-world. In other words, the student becomes open to the world, eager to give it meaning and able to recreate or generate the materials of a curriculum in terms of his/her own consciousness (Olson, 2003). In addition, Olson stresses the need for shared intentionality where teachers and students together negotiate the curriculum.

Focusing on the contextual nature of learning, the situated cognition viewpoint advocates for a self-reflective school culture. This perspective takes as its central premise the idea that learning and development occur as people participate in the socio-cultural activities of their community, which results in a transformation of their understanding, roles and responsibilities. Within this model, students learn information as they collaborate with other students and adults in carrying out activities with purposes connected explicitly with the history and current practices of the community.

In small rural schools, students are able to cultivate rural meanings and identities, by engaging in locally responsive curricula and community-centered activities and

opportunities. Regardless of the unique socio-cultural nature of learning in small rural schools, these places are still being targeted by globalized agendas of school officials to close and consolidate them. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is imperative to examine the nature of small rural schools in terms of their shared rural context, history and challenges.

The Small *Rural* School

Despite the global drive for larger, business-like schools, in both Canada and the United States, there has been a rise in the urban ‘small schools’ movement. Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) stress the many small school initiatives sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. However, Howley and Howley (2004) caution that the prescriptive literature on urban ‘small schools’ and the push for reform initiatives to personalize huge city schools by creating ‘schools within schools’ are *not* synonymous with small *rural* school literature and initiatives. Thus, it is imperative to reiterate that this project focuses on the situation of small *rural* schools across North America. Howley and Howley (2004) make the distinction by arguing that while small *urban* school movements push for the creation of these schools, most small *rural* school reform movements are one and the same with closure and consolidation movements, thus destroying these small rural schools.

Most research on rural education discusses schools in rural, sparsely populated areas as characteristically small (Chalker, 1999; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Newton & Newton, 1992). Thus, although certain studies may not explicitly use the term *small*, (Cotton, 1996; Newton & Newton, 1992), Newton and Newton (1992) state that smallness is a positive feature of many rural schools. As such, the literature reviewed for

this project focuses on the past, present and future of *small* schools in *rural* contexts.

Prior to an exploration of the history of small rural schools, it is important to review the population dynamics of the North American rural contexts as well as representations of *rurality* in order to contextually and conceptually set the stage.

The Rural Context

Throughout the 20th century, due to the rise of industrialization and urbanization, North America experienced a steady decline of its rural population. In 1901, 63% of Canadians lived in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2001), whereas, in 2006, the rural population percentage varied between 19% and 30%, depending on the definition of rural. However, in 2006, upon an analysis of the urban and rural population statistics, Bollman and Clemenson (2006) described the overall picture as a growth in the rural population of Canada, and most of this growth was taking place in areas adjacent to larger urban centres. Nonetheless, rural population growth has been minimal in comparison to urban growth. As a result, the rural share of Canada's total population continues to decline. Furthermore, rural population growth and decline differ between provinces. In Ontario, for example, from 2001 to 2006, the rural population increased by 3.5 percent (Bollman & Clemenson, 2006). However, this was possibly due to a new definition of rural which included areas outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres. In addition, researchers suggest that the ambiguity of the term *rural* may contribute to discrepancies amongst North American rural population statistics (Chalker 1999; Howley, 1997).

In the United States, the rural population decreased from 60.4% in 1900 to 24.8% in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). In terms of the educational context, American

researchers have conducted quantitative studies regarding the existence of rural schools and determine that 21% to 40% of American school children can be classified as rural, depending on the definition employed (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Blaine, Pace & Robinson, 2004). In Canada, on the other hand, researchers have yet to measure the percentage of students attending rural schools. The lack of statistics associated with rural Canadian students is an indication of the scarcity of rural education research in certain Canadian provinces. Moreover, Herzog and Pittman (1995) argue that the lack of a definitive understanding of the meaning of the term *rural* is problematic for the future of rural education.

Representations of Rurality

Howley (1997) explains that in addition to the ambiguity surrounding definitions of *rural*, most researchers view *rural* in as the binary opposite to *urban*. This perception is evident in definitions such as the aforementioned Statistics Canada definition (dePlessis et al., 2001), where rural areas are identified using terms like *outside* or *close to* large urban centres. Howley cautions that defining rural areas simply by their geographical relation to urban areas can result in an othering and marginalization of rural places and people. Herzog and Pittman (1995) and Giroux and McLaren (1990) share Howley's concern that *rural* perceived from an urban viewpoint often leads to negative stereotypes associated with rural inhabitants, such as "country bumpkins," "hillbillies" and "hicks" (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 113).

Howley (1997) calls for a move beyond the dominant urban, cosmopolitan perspectives of what constitutes *rural* toward an exploration of *rurality* from the rural perspective. Howley argues that in order to gain a deeper understanding of rurality, one

must recognize that a rural area is not identified by its boundaries, but rather the rural meanings inherent in the lives of the rural inhabitants (Howley, 1997). In this project, I have used Howley's notion of exploring rurality from a rural perspective as a conceptual lens with which to critically analyze the stated position of educational officials regarding the past, present and future of small rural schools, including the consolidation movement and responses to recent trends in rural education (i.e., enrolment issues), as well as to explore the rural stakeholders' responses to this position.

Historical Background

North American Rural Education of the 19th and 20th Centuries

In the late 19th century, most school reform literature was based on an emerging industrial, urban and progressive North America (Corbett, 2001; DeYoung, 1987). In Canada, industrialization in the 19th century brought about rapid social change which instigated the 'Canadian Educational State' (Curtis, as cited in Corbett, 2001). The aim of this educational project was to shape children personally and collectively into uniform social subjects. Thus, the state began creating schools where students would be fitted for 'roles' in 'society' and learn a standardized curriculum (Corbett, 2001). This standardized, industrialized view of education was equally present in the United States, where the previously established one-room rural schools were considered to be uncoordinated and outdated in contrast to this new, modernized view of schooling (DeYoung, 1987). Scholars believed rural schools to be populated by cognitively deficient students because rural students were achieving lower scores on early standardized tests. Consequently, small rural schools were labeled not only as less desirable administratively and financially, but less intellectually stimulating (DeYoung,

1987; Howley, 1997). Howley (1997) states that “from 1910 to 1965, education was part of the march of progress toward an inevitably better future--a progressive, postwar, and increasingly post-rural future” (p. 2). As such, a dominant colonial binarism was being reproduced through urban versus rural discourses, whereby rural schools were perceived as uncivilized, archaic and inefficient against the civilized, modern and efficient urban schools. Thus began the othering of rural people and places, to which Howley (1997) refers. Consequently, American policymakers and administrators of the early 20th century targeted small rural schools for upgrading, reform and improvement. As a result, one-room schools of the early to mid-20th century were replaced by fewer, larger schools in the name of progress and modernization (Cotton, 1996; DeYoung, 1987; Giroux & McLaren, 1990).

By the mid-20th century, in the United States, policies advocating for an urban, centralized model of education were coupled with discussions of appropriateness of size. For instance, James Conant's book *The American High School Today*, published in 1959, proposed that in order to increase cost effectiveness and offer large and varied curricula, a high school needed to have at least 100 students in its graduating class. Cotton (1996) argues that this book contributed to the acceleration of the momentum of the consolidation movement. Conant (1959) piloted the idea that successful, efficient schools needed to be large, corporate-like schools. Conant claimed that small high schools were a grave problem for the future of education and advocated that policymakers and administrators make the elimination of these schools their top priority. Cotton (1996) ascertains that school administrators and policymakers engaged in this one-size-fits-all discourse to demonstrate their commitment to the forces of progress and modernization

of the 1950s. In addition to this mentality, Bard et al. (2006) argue that the American political climate of international competitiveness of the mid 1900s also contributed to the flourishing of consolidation efforts. The Cold War and Sputnik created increased concerns that small high schools, many of which were rural, were not developing the human capital needed for national security. Believing that professionals knew better about educating children, policymakers and educational officials were more interested in centralizing control rather than leaving decisions to members of a local community. DeYoung and Howley (1990) elaborate upon this notion of students as human capital by arguing that by the 1950s, modern views of schooling advocated a view that children were human resources, and as such they were useful for economic development. In line with this thinking, small rural American schools began to be consolidated into larger, one-size fits all schools, where students were seen to be educated for human capital (Bard et al., 2006; Sergiovanni, 1996). As a result, the rural community situation continued to dwindle with this great acceleration of the closure and consolidation movement (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

In terms of the Canadian rural context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as previously noted, various Canadian historians agree that the history of North American education was primarily urban. In Canada, rural history was simplified and presented as a backdrop for the 'real' history of the development of a modern urban, industrial nation (Corbett, 2001; Sandwell, 1994). Furthermore, amidst the 'bigger is better' mentality of the urban North American scholar and the notion that students should be educated to fit roles in society, contextual differences between urban and rural schooling were often obscured (Corbett, 2001; DeYoung, 1987). As such, DeYoung (1987) argues that

research in rural education of the 19th and 20th centuries was not only sparse, but ideologically motivated by the urban scholar discourse. However, one Canadian researcher questions this position and offers a different perspective regarding the actual situation of rural Canada at this time in history (Corbett, 2001). Corbett explains that various parts of rural Canadian geography were not institutionally penetrated by the state until the late 20th century. Although formal education entered the rural communities of southern Ontario in the 19th century, many rural communities in parts of Canada such as, Northern British Columbia and Northern Ontario remained independent from industrialization, urbanization and formal education until the late 20th century. As the local culture and community continued to develop within these areas, attending high school was secondary to joining the local labour force (Corbett). Therefore, although progressive education and standardized schooling infiltrated the rural United States throughout the 19th century, this view did not reach various rural Canadian communities until the late 20th century. Corbett concludes that the history of Canadian rural education is diverse and requires further investigation in order to paint an accurate picture of the rural schooling context of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Recent Trends in Rural Education Research

In the United States, in the late 20th century, a new focus on rural education surfaced among American educational researchers (DeYoung, 1987). This research was pioneered by Sher (as cited in DeYoung), who upon an historical policy analysis, argued that the rise of industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries served as a catalyst for an urban, centralized model of education that arose at the expense of the small rural school. Sher discovered that urban policymakers of the past had limited knowledge of rural

meanings and identities, let alone the value of small rural schools. Therefore, he argued that the so-called efficiency of rural school consolidation and reorganization agendas was a myth (DeYoung, 1987). DeYoung and Howley (1990) concur that a critical analysis of the history of rural education demonstrates that the factors driving the small rural school consolidation trend of the early to mid 20th century were rooted in the North American sociological and political situation of the 19th and 20th centuries. This societal situation, rooted in early industrialization and urbanization movements and then a rise in globalization, contributed to the perspective of advocating for a ‘bigger is better’ or ‘one size fits all’ model of schooling, which catered to the consolidation ‘solution.’ As such, for many decades of the 20th century, school *consolidation* was considered synonymous with school *improvement*, despite the fact that there was little to no evidence to support this assumption (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

Sher (as cited in DeYoung, 1987) was not only a pioneer for research in rural education of the 21st century, but among the first theorists to engage in an alternative to the ‘bigger is better’ and ‘one size fits all’ models of schooling, which catered to rural school depletion and urban school proliferation. Bard et al. (2006) ascertain that Sher was not alone in his plight for the small rural school. These researchers explain that, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, although rural perspectives were usually overruled by the urban, centralized model of education, the closure and consolidation of small rural schools has nonetheless been a controversial topic for policymakers, school administrators and rural communities since the late 19th century (Bard et al., 2006). In terms of the Canadian context, Corbett (2001) argues that many rural communities of the 19th and 20th centuries resisted standardized schooling due to its urban bias. Therefore,

although the history of Canadian education is seemingly urban biased, many centralized, formal models of schooling met resistance from rural communities. Therefore, the American historical literature tends to focus on progressive education closing or consolidating the previously established rural schools or one-room school houses of the 19th and 20th centuries, whereas the Canadian literature explains resistance to the penetration of standardized schooling in rural communities.

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, the research on rural education has increased. With researchers such as Howley, Corbett and Mulcahy, and Jimerson, the small rural school situation has been exposed to the public. Moreover, researchers have found recent trends in the area of rural education, including challenges common to small rural schools; the primary challenge being declining enrolment.

Rural Challenges

The literature on small rural school consolidations and closures indicates that many rural areas in North America face a number of challenges that impact on educational decision making. These challenges include declining enrolment, lack of special needs funding, declining economic and social circumstances, a prevalence of multi-grade classes, out-migration, teacher surpluses, high teacher turnover rates and schools sharing principals. Although each small rural school context is unique, recent studies have indicated that many rural schools across North America share any number of these common obstacles (Blaine et al., 2004; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; McWilliams, 2008; Mulcahy, 1993; Newton & Newton, 1992; Wallin, 2007). When investigating the challenges that many small rural schools share, it is imperative to take a moment to examine the ‘issue’ of declining enrolment, as it is not only the primary rural challenge

that most Canadian small rural schools face (Bard et. al., 2004; Wallin, 2007) but the lead reasoning for closures and consolidations across Ontario (DEWG, 2009).

Declining Enrolment – The Situation in Ontario

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning put forth the School Enrolment Trends in Canada for the past decade. According to Statistics Canada's figures for that time period, the Council ascertained that Canada's elementary and secondary school enrolments fell by 1.2% between the 1997 and 2004, and further declines were anticipated over the next few years as the school-aged population was predicted to continue to shrink. The Council found that although there was interprovincial variation in the pattern and extent of change, most provinces had experienced a steady decline in kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolments between 2000 and 2006. Initially, Ontario had proven to be an exception, with an increase in enrolment between the late 1990s and the 2003 school year. However, even this province's enrolment dropped sharply when Ontario's Grade 13 or OAC was eliminated (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). In the 2008 Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools, the People for Education reported that between 2002 and 2008, overall enrolment in Ontario elementary and secondary schools had declined by nearly 90,000 students. Moreover, in their report on the planning and possibilities of declining enrolment in Ontario, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) stated that the Ministry of Education expected a similar trend between 2009 and 2013. The Ministry anticipated that the number of students in the public education system would decrease by a projected 72,000 or 3.8% by 2013.

In addition to the interprovincial variations reported by the Canadian Council on Learning (2006), enrolment patterns also vary amongst school boards within a particular

province. Moreover, for the purpose of this project it is important to note that the steepest declines were and are occurring in small, rural and remote school boards (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009). On a similar note, in the People for Education's Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools (2008), it was reported that Ontario's rural and remote school boards had faced extreme declines in enrolment due to a combination of birth rate declines and migration to urban and suburban areas.

Although migration patterns influence variations in local trends in enrolment, such as the fact that over 50% of Canada's immigrants choose to settle in Ontario, the Canadian Council on Learning found that the overall, Canada-wide decline in enrolments is the result of demographic changes. In particular, the last of the echo boomers, which are described as the large group of children born to the baby boomers between 1980 and 1994, have completed their elementary and secondary schooling experience. The children of the next generation are part of a much smaller group. Therefore, the Council argues that the fact that there are not as many school aged children in Canada as there were a few years ago, presents both challenges and opportunities for Canada's elementary and secondary schools (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006)

In the 1970s and 1980s, the steep decline in student enrolment brought about challenges such as, school closures, teacher layoffs, hiring freezes, and service reductions. Recently, however, the Council has found that the challenges posed by declining enrolment on a national scale are somewhat different from the past. These challenges include: funding, program delivery and staffing. Research has shown that in Ontario, there remains evidence of an increase in school closures (Canadian Council on

Learning, 2006). According to data compiled by People for Education (2008), the rate of school closures in Ontario has doubled in recent years. In her discussion paper of the Declining Enrolment in Ontario Public Schools – Implications for the Teacher Labour Market, McWilliams (2008) reports that declining enrolments have meant decreased revenues and the need to reduce expenditures, resulting in school closures and consolidations as well as the transfer or lay-off of teachers and other personnel.

The Question of Small Rural School Closures and Consolidation

In 2006, as a result of the increase in Ontario's school closures of 2003, the province introduced a uniform standard for making decisions about school closings, which lifted the moratorium on school closings imposed in 2003 (People for Education, 2008). In October of 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines. Along with the guidelines, Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs) were established to determine the future of low-enrolment schools (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009). The Accommodation Review Guidelines lay out a process for consultation, involvement and evaluation to ensure school boards explore a range of factors and views when they are considering closing schools. In 2008, half of Ontario's 72 school boards were undertaking accommodation reviews. The reviews involved nearly 300 schools, and affected over 100,000 students. In May of 2008, the reviews had resulted in 50 recommendations for closure (People for Education, 2008). The Upper Canada District School Board is among the boards involved in the ARC process.

The purpose of the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) (Ministry of Education, 2006) is to provide direction to Ontario's school boards regarding decisions

about school closures and consolidations. The guidelines state that any decision regarding the future of a school needs to be informed by local community consultation and based on a broad range of criteria regarding the quality of the learning experience for students. In recognition of the role that schools play in strengthening rural and urban communities, these decisions also need to consider the value of the school to the community, taking into account other government initiatives aimed at strengthening communities.

The School Board Accommodation Review Policies, outlined in the PARG (Ministry of Education, 2006), state that school boards are responsible for establishing and following their own accommodation review policies. The guidelines recognize that, wherever possible, accommodation reviews should focus on a group of schools within a school board, rather than examining one single school. These schools are reviewed together because they are in close proximity, making up a planning area to aid in facilitating the development of viable and practical solutions for student accommodation.

The Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (2006) set requirements for the use of a formal School Valuation Framework, whereby school boards in Ontario assess each of the following four considerations about the school(s) being reviewed: *value to the student* (i.e., quality of the learning environment, range of course or program offerings, range of extracurricular activities and extent of student participation), *value to the community* (i.e., range of program offerings at the school that serve both students and community members, school grounds available for recreational use, value of the school if it is the only school in the community), *value to the school board* (i.e., condition and location of the school, availability of specialized teaching spaces, fiscal and operational factors), *value to the local economy* (i.e., school as a local employer, attracts or retains

families in the community). School boards are to develop their generic School Valuation Framework with the assistance of a public committee, which should include parents, educators, board officials, and business and municipal leaders. The public review of a particular school or group of schools is to be led by an Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) appointed by the board. Each ARC must include a member from the school community and the broader community. If a group of schools within the same planning area are being reviewed together, each school must undergo a valuation specific to that school using the same framework (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Once the ARC's review begins, school boards are to present alternate accommodation plans for the students of these schools as part of the ARC review. For instance, whether or not there will be changes to existing facilities or transportation. Moreover, the Ministry recommends that a school be subject to one ARC review over a five year period. The committees are to ensure that all information used to determine the value of a school be made publicly available, via the school website or printed copies. Furthermore, once an accommodation review process has begun, the ARC must ensure that a wide range of school and community groups are consulted via public meetings whereby the ARC receives input and community feedback on options for accommodating students who would be affected by a school closure (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Using the School Valuation Framework, the ARCs must complete School Valuation reports for each school reviewed, making recommendations regarding the future of the school(s) being considered. Once this report is discussed with the community, the ARC submits this report to the school board for review and analysis. The school board then presents this report, along with their recommendations and proposals to

the trustees, who will make the final decision regarding the future of the school(s). If the decision involves school closure, the board must outline clear timelines for when the school will close (Ministry of Education, 2006).

In line with the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines and in response to the challenge of declining enrolment, in October 2005, the Upper Canada District School Board trustees conducted a system-wide review entitled Boundary 2020. The Upper Canada District School Board (UCDSB) is one of the largest school boards geographically in Ontario. Comprising a considerable portion of Eastern Ontario, this school board includes many smaller schools in rural towns that cater to the youth living in surrounding rural areas. Most of these rural schools, such as the school where I teach, face common rural challenges, such as declining enrolment. Using the ARC procedures outlined above, the UCDSB Boundary 2020 proposal reviewed all the families of schools within the school board in order to slate certain schools for closure and boundary re-alignment. Four advisory ARCs appointed by the school board met throughout 2007 to lead the public review of school closures and program boundary changes under consideration for each family of schools within a specific region. One ARC was assigned for each region of the school board. In October of 2007, proposal packages were released to each region of the UCDSB (the Rideau region, the Capital region, the Gateway region and the St. Lawrence region). Each proposal mapped out the specific initiatives to be taken for a certain family of schools. The Rideau Family of Schools' proposal, for instance, suggested that each of the 4 schools in that family would become K-6 schools, with the grade 7 and 8 students transitioning to the local High School (Educational Proposal Package for the Rideau Family of Schools, 2007).

The Value and Viability of Small Rural Schools

The previous section described the outcomes of the primary challenge of declining enrolment on small rural schools, namely the issue of closures and consolidations. Using the province of Ontario as an exemplification of enrolment trends in Canada, I have explored the process that small rural schools undergo in order to determine whether they are of ‘value’ to the students, community, economy and school board. In the following sections, I focus on the value of small schools in terms of community identity and student learning.

The Small Rural School Community

“Smaller communities are typically places that naturally result in close interpersonal connections, where individuals know, share with, and care for each other. Smaller schools mirror these qualities” (Jimerson, 2006, p. 16). Many of these local schools offer sources of entertainment, sports and music. Rural researchers have described small rural schools as the glue that binds the community together and serves as their economic and social hub (Jimerson, 2006; Wallin, 2007). Thus, there is substantial evidence of local community pride and support for these small rural schools. Herzog and Pittman (1995) explain that rural schools and communities have strengths that should be part of the prescription for remedying problems and directing changes in rural education. Furthermore, certain researchers suggest the development of school and community relationships and the establishment of networks with various groups including school divisions, higher education institutions and the provincial government, in order to contribute to effective learning environments (Bard et al., 2006; Wallin, 2007).

Though the local rural community *surrounding* these schools is an integral component of the unique situation in rural education, many researchers view small rural schools as communities *within* themselves. This notion of the school as a community has its origins in the history of the one-room schools. Rural education researchers such as Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) and Howley (1997) argue that the industrialized and urbanized view of education of the 19th and 20th centuries, ultimately led to the deterioration of the sense of community associated to small rural schools. By closing small rural schools and creating large, urban mega-schools, the small, family-like, community aspect of these rural schools was lost. Sergiovanni (1996) describes communities as collections of people who share mutual commitments and special relationships and are bound by a set of shared ideas, values and beliefs. These communities foster caring, kind, helpful people who have a sense of belonging and responsibility toward themselves and others. Sergiovanni (1996) states that two conditions are necessary for community building: continuity of place and manageable scale. Small schools are unique in that they can provide both these conditions. Findings from a recent study can attest to this positive feature of small rural schools. This qualitative study shows that small rural school cultures foster caring and cohesive communities, which exemplify the following traits: sustaining relationships, providing individual support, supporting student effort and expanding opportunities for success (Haughey, 1996). Therefore, as the previous literature indicates, most recent rural education research capitalizes on the strong sense of community that thrives within and around many existing small rural schools (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

Rogoff, Matusov and White's (1999) community of learners' instructional model, which is based on the theory of situated cognition, can be adapted to the current small rural school situation. In congruence with Sergiovanni's (1996) idea of community, this model proposes the underlying theoretical notion that learning is a process of transformation of participation in which both teachers and students contribute support and direction to shared endeavors. Thus, within a small school, learning and development occur as people participate in the socio-cultural activities of their community which transforms their understanding, roles and responsibilities as they participate (Rogoff et al., 1999). Newton and Newton (1993) build on this model by stating that in small rural schools, there is school-community integration, enhanced parent-community involvement and hands on learning in the real world.

Learning in a Small Rural School

Numerous Canadian and American projects have been undertaken to bring attention to the uniqueness and strengths of small rural schools. This research underscores the viability and importance of most remaining small rural schools (Bard et al., 2006, Blaine et al., 2004; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Jimerson, 2006). In this subsection, I describe one Canadian study and one American study that were conducted to explore the value and viability of small rural schools.

Canadian Study

In 2006, Canadian researchers, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006), were asked by the Municipality of the County of Cumberland in Nova Scotia to investigate the viability of two schools slated for closure by the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. To accomplish this task, they conducted a thorough review of the relevant literature,

analyzed various policy documents related to rural policy and rural development and conducted their own study into the educational effectiveness of the two schools under scrutiny.

Their literature review of American and Canadian studies regarding small rural school value and viability is informed by extensive knowledge and experience in rural education, stemming from scholars such as Howley, Cotton and DeYoung. Craig Howley is the most authoritative, widely known and respected scholar and researcher on the relationship between school size, achievement and equity. Within the literature, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) uncover an increasing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of small schools in providing students with equality of educational opportunities. The literature indicates the following: there is no significant difference in terms of achievement between smaller and larger schools; smaller schools are somewhat superior to larger schools in terms of achievement; small schools are especially beneficial in mediating the effects of socio-economic status. Furthermore, the research supporting the effectiveness of small schools in providing students with equality of education opportunity continues to grow. The researchers state that there is no evidence that larger schools are better for students. In other words, using a variety of recent studies, they repudiate the idea that more program offerings of larger schools equal a higher quality of education. In comparing large and small schools, the researchers discuss the 'curriculum issue' in detail as well as describe why small schools work. In terms of the curriculum issue, the studies show that the broader curriculum of the larger schools does not, necessarily, have a positive effect on student achievement. Moreover, although small

schools may offer fewer programs in terms of quantity, they tend to be much more inclusive and in many cases are open to all students.

Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) use four questions to guide their research:

1. What are the commonalities amongst various levels of government regarding rural communities and sustainability policy issues?
2. What are the goals of education according to the Public School Program?
3. What is the evidence that small rural schools are structurally adequate for achieving these goals?
4. Are the particular schools slated for closure meeting these goals? (p. 11).

To answer these questions, they employ several specific research techniques, including documentary policy analysis, a literature review of the viability of small rural schools, focus groups, interviews and a survey questionnaire. Their overall methodological position is that it is difficult to address a complex problem like the achievement of the broad goals of the Public School Program (PSP) of Nova Scotia without utilizing a variety of research methods. The researchers combine quantitative and qualitative analysis with the methods of documentary analysis to investigate the research questions from a number of perspectives. They suggest that the data collected and analyzed from surveys and other forms of social research that involve quantitative analysis must be enriched by a focus on the understandings and voices of the multiple stakeholders in the process using qualitative measures. Therefore, they argue that their use of multi-method or triangulated research is considered to be the richest methodological form available for this kind of study.

Following an outline of their study, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) examine the current policy context in relation to rural education. Their rationale for this analysis is that policy changes of the late 20th century resulted in amalgamations and consolidations of health care and school governance structures. As such, schools like the two under

investigation were being slated for closure and the researchers explored the reasoning for these closures and consolidations. Their policy analysis includes an investigation of documents from relevant governmental bodies (both federal and provincial) and the Municipality of the County of Cumberland and the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. The researchers pay particular attention to broad policy statements contained in mission and vision statements that frame the way that each level of government understands rural communities, rural development, rural sustainability and the place of education for rural communities generally. For example, the Canadian federal government now recognizes that rural communities are important to the fabric of the country. Similarly, documents from the Municipality of the County of Cumberland state that we should protect and enhance the rural way of life. Finally, the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board documents include a mission statement regarding the orientation of the system to the preparation of well-rounded citizens who will contribute to their communities. Overall, the researchers found that all levels of the policy context share the notion of *community* as a core concept in relation to rural education. Similar to Wallin (2007), the researchers explore the goals and priorities that government bodies establish for effective schools in order to relate these priorities to the viability of small rural schools. As such, their analysis of the PSP is used to inform the construction of focus group questions and specific items for the survey schedules in their data collection phase.

Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) argue that the mentality that educational performance is standard and can be measured without problems is a myth, which counters other quantitative studies linking achievement to rural schools. Rather than focusing on standardized testing, the evidence suggests that schools function to produce capable,

literate, caring, engaged life-long learners who are prepared for full participation in a rich community life and satisfying employment. They argue that such ambitious educational goals are not easily measured. Thus, in terms of their report, the researchers assume that the only way to actually measure such broad educational outcome is to listen to the voices of people who have moved beyond their school experience. Consequently, to determine the viability of the two schools under investigation (River Hebert and Wentworth schools), the researchers conducted surveys and interviews with graduates from these schools. In the discussion of the results, the researchers outline specific themes pertaining to small school viability and value such as: self-esteem/self-respect, feeling valued, working effectively and cooperatively with others, caring for others and volunteering for leadership roles. These themes are related to the holistic development of students. Many studies show that this development can be fostered in various ways including: opportunities for leadership, engendering in students a sense of belonging and being needed, and opportunities to take part in extra-curricular opportunities. Furthermore, the research literature confirms that in terms of social and affective development, students excel in smaller schools. Therefore, small rural schools provide a personalized learning environment that fosters students' social and affective development (Corbett & Mulcahy).

Based on the evidence compiled, Corbett and Mulcahy state:

It would be a grave error to close these schools now or at any point in the future. To do so would be a backward step which is totally out of synchronization with the best current thinking in education in North America. It may even jeopardize the potential for success of many students currently attending Wentworth and River Hebert (2006, pp. 9-10).

Therefore, their research determines that the two schools under investigation are both viable and valuable educational institutions, serving the children and their communities well.

American Study

In the United States, the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) is the leading national nonprofit organization addressing the important relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. Rural Trust seeks to improve the quality of teaching and school leadership in rural communities, advocates for appropriate state educational policies and addresses the issue of funding for rural schools. In 2006, as part of a Rural Trust initiative, Jimerson conducted research to investigate “why small works” (p.7). In congruence with Corbett and Mulcahy’s (2006) study, she examines the current rural education literature for typical attributes of smaller schools that have a positive effect on student learning and well-being.

Jimerson (2006) introduces the concept of ‘why small works’ by noting the recent Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation initiatives to break large urban schools into smaller schools. In congruence with many studies on small rural schools, the purpose of this study is to support rural communities who are fighting against recent initiatives for small school consolidation (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Wallin, 2007).

Jimerson states that small *rural* schools are frequently the glue that binds together small communities, serving as their economic and social hub. She believes identifying key effective elements of *smallness*, will help to improve schooling in places where small schools are forced to conform to the illusion of ‘bigger is better.’ Jimerson aims to dispel this illusion by exploring the following ten reasons why small works: 1) There is greater

participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success, 2) Small schools are safer, 3) Kids feel they belong, 4) Small class size allows more individualized instruction, 5) Good teaching methods are easier to implement, 6) Teachers feel better about their work, 7) Mixed-ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations, 8) Multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions, 9) Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy, 10) More grades in one school alleviate many problems of transitions to new schools.

Jimerson (2006) elaborates upon these themes, explaining that these ten themes fit into three categories: relationships, instructional strategies, and structural elements. She argues that attributes such as students' sense of belonging, school safety and teacher morale are closely linked to the quality of interpersonal relationships found in small schools. Elements such as looping, integrated curriculum, experiential learning, and individualized instruction can be viewed as instructional approaches implemented to improve student learning. Factors such as class size, district size, and grade-span configuration are all structural components of school systems. Therefore, in relation to DeYoung and Howley's (1990) distinction between schooling and schools, Jimerson distinguishes between interpersonal relationships and instructional strategies, which relate to individual *schools* and structural components of school systems, which relate to *schooling* in general.

Jimerson (2006) ascertains that these ten themes only scratch the surface of small school attributes that are associated with positive outcomes for children. She notes that emerging studies are beginning to uncover other features of small schools that are advantageous for students. As such, her investigation is fluid and not an end result.

However, she concludes that the ongoing battle to close small schools is unnecessary and irrational as exemplified in this quote, “To expend energy on closing these schools diverts energy and focus from strengthening them” (Jimerson, 2006, p. 17).

Corbett and Mulcahy’s and Jimerson's studies are examples of the recent increase in literature relating to small rural school effectiveness. Other studies have shown additional small school strengths, such as a higher number of students taking academic courses and students developing a close connection with their community and positive attitudes toward school and their peers (Bard et al., 2006; Blaine et al., 2004; Cotton, 1996). Furthermore, Canadian researchers Newton and Newton (1992) explain that the following effective and well-respected teaching practices originated in small schools: individualized instruction, peer-tutoring, cooperative education and school and community relationships. Moreover, they list various advantages of small rural schools in Canada namely: lower pupil/teacher ratio, equal opportunity for extra-curricular activities, more leadership opportunities and high levels of community support for schools. Newton and Newton (1992) argue that rather than closing these small rural schools, we should be capitalizing on their contexts. For instance, the small school population could lead to school-community integration and locally relevant curricula. Low pupil/teacher ratios could lead to individual attention, positive teacher/student rapport and personalized curricula.

Summary

Beginning with a rise in industrialization and urbanization, followed by the proliferation of global trends, schooling has become a marketable commodity. Small rural schools have been left behind in the wake of these ‘developments.’ Despite the

research evidence pertaining to the various advantages of small rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Newton & Newton, 1992), many North American reform efforts are advocating for the closure and consolidation of these schools. Although the theory of situated cognition stresses the importance of social and physical contexts upon learning, endorsed by researchers, such as Newton and Newton (1992) who explain that we must capitalize on the contexts of small rural schools, globalized, standardized ideals continue to 'rule the school.' An examination of a localized example of this phenomenon is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of where the small rural school stands. The following chapter details my research methods and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To this point, the introduction and literature review have been intended to contextually, conceptually and historically inform my methodology. In what follows, I will elaborate upon my methodology for this project. I begin with a rationale for my qualitative approach and research design, followed by an outline of the rural context particular to my study and the conceptual framework grounding my research. I then describe my research methods, explaining how I investigated the aforementioned research questions through location, identification and analysis of seven pertinent documents: my personal anecdotal notes, a summary of the UCDSB Boundary 2020 proposal, a poem written by a local parent and Township of Rideau Lakes councilor in response to the Boundary 2020 proposal, a newspaper article from the Brockville Recorder and Times, a news release from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), a research article from the UCDSB and a message from the director of the UCDSB.

Rationale for the Choice of a Qualitative Approach and Research Method

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) explain that qualitative studies are important for the illumination of social issues and the improvement of educational practice. In addition, Howley (1997) asserts that researchers in the field of rural education have a responsibility to expand their knowledge of rural places, ways of living and working and local rural meanings. In line with these authors' thinking, a qualitative approach was used to shed light upon an issue that has been silenced by North American school boards for

decades; the issue of the impact of closure and consolidation movements on small rural towns and students' education. By doing so, I hope to empower the rural inhabitants who have been marginalized and give them a voice in the future of their schools.

Bodgan and Biklen (1998) write, "the qualitative researchers' goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 38). In order to investigate meanings and identities, qualitative researchers use a variety of research methods including: participant observation, in-depth interviews, document and artifact collection and field observations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). In addition, Howley (1997) notes that in order to study rural educational circumstances, the researcher needs to have "interest in matters and minds rural" (p. 7). He explains that interest refers to some combination of experience and understanding that puts the researcher in the middle of a salient rural issue. As such, the best experience on which to ground the researcher's interest would be to live or work in a rural community (Howley, 1997). I believe one way to cultivate rural meanings would be to engage in an in-depth participatory qualitative study, including interviews and participant observation. I have nonetheless become involved in the exploration and discovery of rural lives and meanings through working in a small Eastern Ontario rural school for five years and reflecting upon my experiences. Coupled with these experiences, I have thoroughly reviewed the pertinent rural education literature and engaged in personal and official document analyses.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) describe personal and official documents as artifacts. "Artifact collections are tangible manifestations that describe people's experience, knowledge, actions and values" according to McMillan & Schumacher (p.

356). Hodder (2000) adds to the importance of analyzing artifacts by stating that these documents provide insight into other components of lived experience. Thus, in terms of my research, artifacts have been collected and analyzed in order to gain a better understanding of where the small North American rural school stands. These artifacts include: personal anecdotal notes, written while teaching in one small rural school, one particular Eastern Ontarian school board proposal, three responses to this proposal (a poem written by a parent, a local newspaper article and an ETFO news release), and two news releases from the UCDSB officials regarding the outcomes of this proposal. Through a thorough analysis of these documents, I have searched for the construction of meanings among small rural school stakeholders. By employing multiple documents for varying points of view, I increased the validity of my study. Moreover, although as a teacher in one of these small rural schools in Eastern Ontario, I have first-hand understanding of the situation of small rural schools, by keeping an anecdotal journal (field log), analyzing my notes and engaging in critical questioning, I was able to be more objective. This objectivity enabled me to be detached from my emotions. As McMillan and Schumacher (2006) suggest, the two strategies of keeping a field log and engaging in critical reflexivity enhance the overall reflexivity of a study.

Overall, this research design proved to be effective and valuable as regards my particular study, in that I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the situation of North American small rural schools and promote opportunities for social awareness of rural perspectives. As Howley (1997) writes, this research is necessary in order to:

Pull back the veil of national, or cosmopolitan, concern in order to expose contemporary rural issues not only worthy of attention in their own right, but worthy of particular attention in an ethos more evidently concerned with globalization than with its related need for ruralization. (p. 2)

Context

In my literature review, I have explored small rural schools from a broad North American perspective. For the purpose of my study, I have localized my research context to that of an Eastern Ontario school board: The Upper Canada District School Board. I have chosen this school board as my research site because, as one of the largest school boards geographically in Ontario and comprising a considerable portion of Eastern Ontario, this school board includes many small schools in rural towns that cater to the youth living in surrounding rural areas. Moreover, 13 of the 50 schools slated to close in Ontario by 2012 are UCDSB schools (Thomas, 2010). I have drawn upon my teaching experience in one particular small rural school within this school board to provide personal anecdotal evidence to locally situate my research and acknowledge the relationship between this school and the school board.

The school where I teach is located in a rural town with a population of approximately 600 inhabitants. Most students travel to school by bus from the local community and surrounding areas within a radius of 10 kilometers. The school population consists of 85 students, 4.4 teachers, one principal, one half-time educational assistant, one office administrator and one custodian. Given that the school population consists of 85 students from kindergarten to grade 8, the school is divided into split-grade and triple-grade classrooms. Due to its demographics and location, this school is often described as a small rural school. As a small rural school, this school faces many of the rural education challenges, previously mentioned in the literature review, namely declining enrolment, multi-grade classrooms and high teacher turnover rates. The local community is aware that the recent school board review, *Boundary 2020*, seeks to close

some schools in the area, re-align program boundaries and transition the grade 7 and 8 students to the local high school in 2011.

The current discourse at this school is that in September of 2011, the grade 7 and 8 students will transition to the local high school, leaving this school with a population of less than 65 students from kindergarten to grade 6. Following this move, it will be up to policymakers and administrators to ultimately decide whether this school is fiscally and viably worth saving. Thus, the discussion around these transition and reorganization programs is pervading the local community as well as the school culture. This makes for a climate of anxiety and uncertainty among students, parents and community members. Considering the apparent confusion around school board officials' reasoning for these plans, it is an important issue to investigate. Moreover, the acknowledgement of rural perspectives requires further attention in order to explore the possible role of rural stakeholders in the future of their schools and communities.

Conceptual Framework

Of note at the outset of my conceptual framework is the fact that most of the previously reviewed literature concerns research that was conducted in response to recent small rural school consolidation and closure initiatives. Thus, over the past few decades, various North American organizations have commissioned research to develop an awareness among educators and administrators regarding rural concerns and the viability of small rural schools. As such, most of the research is not developed around a theoretical framework per se. Rather, the researchers have built upon prior findings and philosophies in rural education to establish a conceptual lens through which to view the current rural education context. I have drawn upon these various rural perspectives to guide my

inquiry. These perspectives and concepts have given direction to my research. I have also teased out the shared theories of globalization and situated cognition that underline the literature.

Upon an exploration of the literature concerning North American small rural school closures and consolidation, the concept of globalization was identified as a key factor in educational change reform in rural areas (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). According to Carnoy (2000), as the quality of national education continues to be compared on an international scale, school quality is related to interschool competition and school accountability. Impacted by this globalized way of thinking, schools around the world place an emphasis on standardized testing and meeting global standards for the delivery of schooling (Carnoy, 2000). As such, schools that do not meet these pre-set standards, such as small rural schools, are labeled as needing improvement and tend to face educational reform agendas, which can include school closures and consolidations. Moreover, the corporate criteria of productivity, efficiency and effectiveness extend into the world of schooling (Carnoy, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000) and filter into small rural school reform (Bard et al., 2006; DeYoung, 1987; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). As schooling converges into one single global model, or one best system, the benefits of small rural schools, such as smallness, sense of community, equal extra-curricular opportunities for all and so on, are deemed deficiencies instead of advantages. Thus, the purpose of education tends to focus on the universalized, standardized education of citizens instead of the unique learning experience of the individual (Eisner, 2005).

In contrast to these globalized conceptions of schooling, the theory of situated cognition, focusing on ‘communities of practice’ (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Gee, 1997; Lave, 1997; Wenger, 1998) is interwoven in the literature which outlines the value and viability of small rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Jimerson, 2006).

Not only have the concept of globalization and the theory of situated cognition grounded my research, they have shown to support the opposing perspectives surrounding the ‘for’ (globalization) and ‘against’ (situated cognition) sides of small rural school reform. With regards to this apparent conflict in perspectives, my research has also been informed by Wallin's (2007) premise that as tension continues to increase between rural priorities and lifestyles and urbanizing, globalizing agendas, rural schools will continue to be exploited in the name of efficiency and curricular opportunity. In response to Wallin's suggestion, Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) argue that a return to community-centred rural schools could be the answer to the globalizing, universalizing school rhetoric. This conflict of global versus local and the world versus the community has provided a foundation for my research.

Methods

Given the research documenting the common challenges many small North American rural schools encounter (Bard et al., 2006; Blaine et al., 2004; Mulcahy, 1993; Wallin, 2007) and school closures and consolidations as educational officials' primary response to these challenges (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Herzog & Pittman, 1995), an analysis of the link between this ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ was appropriate. In order to support these research findings in the literature review and undergo a thorough

investigation of this phenomenon, a document analysis, using semiotic analysis as the basis was used. By localizing the problematic to one Ontario school board and utilizing one particular family of schools as my research site, my aim was to understand the rationale behind these closure and consolidation initiatives, how they were shared with the public and local rural stakeholders' (i.e., parents, teachers, students, community members) responses to these initiatives.

Document Selection

After several months of background reading on rural education during my first year of the Master's program at Queen's University, I returned to teach at the aforementioned small rural school for the 2009-2010 school year. Whilst teaching, I began a journal, documenting my experiences with the issue of declining enrolment, Boundary 2020 and the characteristics of small rural schools. Throughout the year, I uncovered one particular Boundary 2020 document, outlining the Who, What, When, Where of Boundary 2020 in a clear, concise manner for the public. Following the first consolidation phase, I found school board research as well as a director's address outlining the so-called positive aspects of these UCDSB reforms on school staff and students of these 7-12 and K-6 high schools (Dawes, 2009; Thomas, 2010). I also had casual conversations with many local community members regarding the Boundary 2020 process and uncovered various perspectives regarding the climate of uncertainty and possible school reform. One particular parent, who was also a Township of Rideau Lakes Councilor, had attended many ARC meetings and displayed a passionate response to the school board initiatives. He shared his feelings and opinions in a poem (Carson, 2007)

and read this poem at an ARC meeting. Given the array of Boundary 2020 documents and written responses to this reform, I chose to analyze the documents mentioned above.

Boundary 2020 Official Document

In September of 2007, David Thomas, the Director of Education of the UCDSB, created an information sheet for parents and guardians of UCDSB students regarding the Boundary 2020 process. This document, entitled *The Five Ws and How of Boundary 2020*, explains that guided by the UCDSB's School Closure Policy No. 413 and the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines, issued to all Ontario school boards by the Ministry of Education in October of 2006, Boundary 2020 is a school closure and boundary review. The argument for school closures stems from the rationale that declining enrolment within the board was threatening the board objective of a 90% graduation rate by 2020 since small schools with fewer students would obstruct the board's ability to provide quality education to future generations of students. The argument for boundary reviews stems from the rationale that the boundaries in place for many elementary schools did not align with their feeder high schools. Thus, the UCDSB needed to correct many of its boundaries. Four advisory ARCs appointed by the board were to meet throughout 2007 to lead the public review of school closures and program boundary changes under consideration for each family of schools. The UCDSB officials explain that all stakeholders, including parents, teachers and students would have the opportunity to voice their opinion and participate in the Boundary 2020 process. For the remainder of this study, this document will be referenced as 'Boundary 2020, 2007.'

UCDSB Research Article

In September of 2009, following the implementation of the first stage of Boundary 2020, the UCDSB conducted two surveys, polling 30 principals, vice-principals and system managers throughout the board. The article entitled *Staff and Students Like Grades 7-12 and K-6 Schools, Surveys Suggest* outlines the results of these surveys. Phil Dawes, the UCDSB Planning and Research Officer writes: “The surveys show that our system is responding well to the new format and that these changes are helping student learning” (lines 6-7). Although the article reviews various findings indicating that school and community reaction has been positive to the changes set out under Boundary 2020, the surveys also emphasize the need for mentoring opportunities for students and staff. The article concludes with an assurance that further surveys of students and the wider school communities are planned in the weeks and months to come.

Director’s Message – Building 2020 Website

A general internet search of Boundary 2020 will defer the searcher to the ‘Building 2020’ website. On the homepage of this website, the Director of Education, David Thomas (2010) has posted a message welcoming visitors to the website. In this message, he explains the purpose of the Building 2020 website as keeping all stakeholders informed of Boundary 2020 updates, including grade 7-12 schools, French course programming, Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 schools and Bus Transportation. Thomas re-iterates the information found in the Five Ws and How of Boundary 2020 and states that on May 14, 2008, school board trustees voted to close 13 schools by 2012. Thomas relates the challenge of declining enrolment to changing demographics and the weak eastern Ontario economy. As such, he argues that in order to achieve the 90%

graduation rate by 2020, “we must enhance educational programming – hence the creation of Building 2020” (lines 14-16).

Kingston Recorder and Times Article

On April 30th, 2008, the last public meeting was held in order for delegations to make their final presentations to the trustees on Boundary 2020 plans, prior to their vote on May 14th, 2008. Kim Lunman reports on this meeting in her article, *School closures could hurt their communities, realtor tells board*. She describes the 15 delegations present at the meeting including parents, realtors, councilors and students, and their various arguments against Boundary 2020. Lunman writes: “School closures and transferring grades 7 and 8 students into region’s high schools by 2012 are among Boundary 2020’s most contentious recommendations” (paragraph 16). This article outlines the debates on this controversial topic, which occurred at this meeting between delegates and trustees. Realtors argued that closing down schools within the region has devastated communities. School council members voiced concerns about losing programming, such as the design and technology workshop in proposed recommendations to transfer elementary students to high schools. High school students wondered how the high schools would accommodate for an influx of new students, when their classrooms, cafeteria, computer labs and Science labs were already full.

Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) News Release

The ETFO news release entitled *Board’s proposal to transfer grade 7 and 8 students to high schools is ‘just plain wrong’ say elementary teachers*, describes the campaign launched in December of 2007 to underline the harmful effects on young adolescents resulting from the Boundary 2020 grade 7 and 8 student transfer to high

schools. Through this campaign ETFO deliver the message that “elementary schools offer a better and safer learning environment for young adolescent children, an environment less open to bullying and more closely connected to the local community” (lines 5-7). ETFO president David Clegg argues that the UCDSB has offered no evidence to support the assumption that this accommodation plan will improve student learning for grades 7 and 8. Rather, Clegg explains that academic research suggests that elementary schools are better for young adolescent students. If these students go to the high schools, they will have longer bus commutes, face the pressure of older, more mature students and lose the many benefits only provided by elementary schools. ETFO urges parents to speak out against Boundary 2020, using the ETFO campaign website, www.protectourkids.ca.

Poem

Amidst the various parental concerns surrounding the Boundary 2020 reform, specifically school closures and the grade 7 and 8 move, one particular parent, Anders Carson (2007), voiced his concerns in a poem, entitled “Look at the Stars.” As a parent and Township of Rideau Lakes councilor, Carson petitioned against the pending closures and consolidations. In his poem, he fondly depicts a rural community “where it is possible to not only reach for the stars, but also to see them” (lines 27-30). He portrays this community as being threatened by school closures at the manipulative hands of governments. As these governments and school board officials press for the closures of these small community schools in the name of quality education, Carson counters this rationale by stating: “A silent swing does not a better education bring” (lines 8-9). Closures and consolidations will only bring sorrow and community devastation in the form of “cries of long distance learning” (line 10) and “tears of flags being lowered” (line

11). Carson concludes his poem with a hopeful tone, urging all stakeholders to care for these communities and their destinies.

Journal

As previously described, in September of 2009, I began a personal journal, documenting my experiences at the school where I teach. Given that the Boundary 2020 reform was the cause for many questions and concerns regarding the future of our small rural school and grade 7 and 8 students, I chose to write about the ‘ins and outs’ of a small rural school facing possible reform. As such, my journal is both a documentation of the Boundary 2020 process in one local school as well as a celebration of this small rural school’s accomplishments.

I chose the above sources because I felt that they each show a different perspective on the UCDSB initiatives, coming from: a school board director, an educational school board researcher, an ETFO representative, a parent, a teacher and a community member. The Boundary 2020 (2007) document serves as an exemplification of the abundance of North American small rural school reform initiatives. The director’s message describes the new ‘Building 2020’ website and summarizes the school board’s consolidation and boundary alignment initiatives (Thomas, 2010). The UCDSB research article outlines two surveys conducted by the UCDSB, involving principals, vice-principals and system managers, suggesting that “staff and students like their new grades 7-12 high schools and K-6 elementary schools” (Dawes, 2009, p. 1). The poem displays a parent’s passionate response against this initiative (Carson, 2007). The ETFO (2007) news release outlines ETFO’s stance on the Boundary 2020 proposal to transfer grade 7 and 8 students to the local high schools. The news article discusses the possible effects of

Boundary 2020 on the future of local communities (Lunman, 2008). My anecdotal notes outline personal observations of the effects of these changes on the school culture (Thompson, 2010).

Semiotic Analysis

Within my document analysis, I am engaging in a semiotic analysis of recurring themes in the literature. The semiotic method aids in understanding how we encode and decode meaning from the many representations we make. Semiotic analysis consists in establishing significations or meanings. In this study of documents, I am examining verbal signs and linguistic structures such as expressions and phrases. I am looking at the meanings different groups of people (i.e., administrators versus parents) make of certain words (Danesi & Perron, 1999). For instance, 'Boundary 2020' may have a harsh tone for parents and community members, as it relates to drawing barriers. Perhaps it is for this semantic reason that, in 2009, the UCDSB changed their Boundary 2020 website to 'Building 2020.' Hence, words need some figuring out in the context of background culture knowledge. First, I will identify *signifiers*, words or groups of words, such as 'declining enrolment' or 'Boundary 2020,' the use of which is indicative of position taking in the debate of concern. Then, I will consider the context, because it determines or at least constrains, the particular meaning that it entails. For example, in the context of my research site (the small rural school where I teach), the words 'Boundary 2020' may have a negative connotation for parents, students and teachers; whereas, in a larger school in Brockville or Carleton Place, these words may be known, but hold a positive or neutral connotation. Finally, I will complete the inquiry by making an interpretation (Hayakawa, 1991).

Beasley, Danesi and Perron (2000) recommend the following questions which I will use to guide my analysis: Who or what created the sign (expressions, phrases)? What does it mean? How does it deliver its meaning? What medium was employed (verbal, such as rhymes, non verbal, such as images)? For whom was it intended, or how did it come about? In what context does it occur? To what system of signification does it belong (ex. persuasive discourse, creative, argumentative, etc.) How many interpretations are possible under the circumstances?

In doing so, I will concentrate on what the message means and on how it creates meaning. I am looking at interpretive dimensions and more specifically hermeneutics as I aim to study how the chosen official and personal documents generate meaning. I try as much as possible to identify the meanings on the basis of symbolic considerations, relevant sources and historical background. A technique often used is semantic-differential: it consists of asking a series of questions about a specific concept. Is it good, or bad? Is it weak or strong? Is it negative or positive? (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957).

Document Analysis Process

Themes and Coding

In the early stages of my research, I uncovered various themes within my literature review, such as common rural challenges, small school closures and consolidations, declining enrolment, globalization, situated cognition etc. I colour-coded these themes throughout my literature search. During my personal and official document analysis, I used these previously established themes to uncover similar themes, such as

declining enrolment, Boundary 2020 and voices of all stakeholders. The unit of analysis chosen was a word, phrase or short paragraph in a chosen document.

However, it became apparent that the themes relating to the unit of analysis had particular meanings attached to them depending on the creator of the sign, its context, how it was delivered, using what medium, and for whom it was intended (Beasley et al., 2000). As such, there could be various interpretations of one particular sign, depending on these aforementioned factors. Using the semiotic method and following the questions that Beasley et al. recommend, I investigated each pre-determined theme according to its frequency, significance and meaning to the stakeholders in question. In order to present the findings resulting from my document analysis, the unit of analysis was highlighted and coded according to a pre-determined semantic coding scheme. Once the themes were coded, I used the semantic differential technique, described in my methodology section, to attach a positive or negative value to this theme, according to how it was being portrayed in the context of the document. For example, the theme of 'declining enrolment' was coded as DE and set along a scale from 1 to 7; 1 demarking that declining enrolment is 'problematic for quality education' and 7 demarking the potential 'positive aspects' of declining enrolment for 'quality education.' Using these thematic codes and scales, I highlighted a phrase such as:

The UCDSB is dedicated to the long term objective of its CREW (Communication, Equitable Distribution of Resources, Educational Programs and Wellness) strategic plan; namely, a 90% graduation rate by the year 2020. But the UCDSB is at risk of not achieving this objective due to declining enrolment caused by our aging population (Boundary 2020, 2007, lines 9-13).

I then marked the appropriate code in the margin (DE) and allocated a specific number to this phrase. For this particular phrase, as it was evident that the UCDSB

believes declining enrolment to be detrimental to quality education, it was placed at the beginning of the scale, with a qualifier of 1.

Table 1 lists the themes, the code allocated to each theme and the value scale relating to each theme.

Table 1

Themes, Codes and Qualifier Descriptions

| Theme | Code | Scale (qualifiers) | | | | | | |
|--|-------|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Small School Closures and Consolidations | CC | negative impacts | | | positive impacts | | | |
| Declining Enrolment | DE | problematic for quality education | | | positive aspects for quality education | | | |
| Boundary 2020 | B2020 | problematic for student learning and communities | | | beneficial for student learning and communities | | | |
| Potential Effects of School Closures and Consolidations on Communities | CCRC | harmful effects on communities | | | positive effects on communities | | | |
| Voices of all Stakeholders | VS | few voices are heard | | | numerous voices are heard and valued | | | |
| Grade 7/8 Transition to High Schools | G78T | harmful effects | | | positive effects | | | |
| Learning in Small Rural Schools | LSS | Problematic | | | valuable | | | |
| Government Involvement in Closures and Consolidations | GI | negative involvement | | | positive involvement | | | |
| Small Rural Community | SRC | little value attached | | | highly valued | | | |

Table 2 represents the location and qualifiers of codes within the documents. The numbers in parentheses signify the value assigned to each code as it appears in a particular part of a particular document.

Table 2

Location of Codes and Values in Documents

| Code | Boundary 2020 Official Document | Research Article Building 2020 | Director's Message Building 2020 | Recorder & Times Article | Poem | Journal | ETFO News Release |
|-------|--|--|---|--|------------------------------|---|---|
| CC | L. 2-3 (5) L. 16-18 (5) | L. 1-2 (6) L 6-9 (6) | L. 5 (5) L. 6 (5) | Pa. 14 (6) | L. 8-9 (1) L. 10-11 (1) | 10/14/09 (2) | L. 1-3 (2) |
| DE | L. 9-13 (1) L. 14-15 (1) | | L. 10-11 (2) | Pa. 6 (3) Pa. 11 (1) Pa. 13 (4) | | 10/23/09 (6) | |
| B2020 | L. 4-5 (4) L. 7-8 (7) L. 29-30 (5) L. 30-32 (7) | L. 26-28 (6) | L. 2-3 (6) | Pa. 15-16 (4) | L. 8-9 (1) | 09/08/10 (2) | L. 9-10(2) L. 15-16 (2) |
| CRCC | L. 6-7 (7) L. 34 (6) | L. 3 (7) | | Pa. 1 (1) Pa. 2-5 (1) Pa. 11 (6) | L 19-20 (2) | | |
| VS | L. 20-21 (5) L. 35-36 (6) L. 39-40 (7) | L. 3 (5) L. 10-11 (4) L. 29-30 (5) | L. 8 (6) L. 18-20 (6) | Pa. 15 (7) Pa. 17-20 (7) | L. 24-25 (5) | 11/25/09 (3) 11/12/10 (6) | L. 4 (5) L. 22-24 (7) |
| G78T | | L. 2 (7) L. 6-9 (7) L. 14-21 (7) | L. 6 (5) | Pa. 21 (2) | | 10/14/09 (2) 06/10 (4) | L. 1-3 (1) L. 5-7 (1) L. 8-9 (4) L. 12-14 (1) |
| LSS | L. 13-15 (2) | | | | | 09/09 (6) 10/20/09 (6) 10/22/09 (6) 10/22/09 (2) 10/23/09 (7) 11/12/09 (5) 11/24/09 (6) 11/24/09 (3) 11/26/09 (3) | L. 19-21 (6) |
| GI | | | | Pa. 24 (4) | L. 3-5 (1) | | |
| SRC | | | | Pa. 1-5 (5) | L. 19-20 (7) L. 26-30 (7) | 10/20/09 (6) 10/22/09 (6) 11/12/09 (6) 12/15/09 (7) | |

Notes: Pa. = paragraph, L.= line, Dates = month/day/year

After coding the location and value of themes within the documents, I used Table 2 to investigate the frequency of each theme within and across documents. This step allowed me to determine which themes were meaningful and significant to most or all stakeholders. Through code and value comparison across documents, patterns within the documents were established in order to determine the similarities and differences

between the stakeholders' perspectives, which will be outlined in Chapter 4. This analysis of frequency and patterns enabled me to uncover the major themes that were pertinent in the rural stakeholders' perspectives, my conceptual framework and the literature reviewed. These major themes form the basis for discussion in Chapter 5.

Summary

In this chapter, I have contextually and conceptually grounded my research by outlining my research site choice as well as the theories that have guided this inquiry. I have provided a detailed account of my methods: (a) document selection, (b) semiotic analysis and (c) themes and coding. A non-interactive qualitative research design has proved to be beneficial to this study in that, through document analysis, using semiotic analysis, I have explored and uncovered various themes relating to perspectives on the past, present and future of small rural schools.

The following chapter presents the findings resulting from my document analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasoning behind small rural school reform and the various responses to this reform. To this point, I have analyzed seven documents related to the Boundary 2020 process, using themes uncovered in my literature review. This chapter outlines the results of my document analyses. Following the data collection outlined in Table 2, I examined the frequency and values associated to the nine original themes across documents. This step allowed me to uncover patterns in the form of common perspectives found within documents. Using these patterns, four frequent and emergent themes were teased out. This chapter provides a detailed account of these four themes and examples of these themes within the documents. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the main theme of ‘voices of all stakeholders’ and how this theme is intertwined within the four major themes.

In order to present the findings resulting from the document analysis, I analyzed the codes and values presented in Table 2. The purpose of this step was to uncover the shared meanings different groups of people made of different themes. Using the previously established semantic differential, I took the 1 to 7 value scale from Table 1 and 2 and transferred this data onto a Positive and Negative value scale. Specifically, numbers 1 to 3 were allocated a negative (N) value, number 4 was allocated a neutral (Neutral) value and numbers 5 to 7 were allocated a positive (P) value. If the document had more than one occurrence of a particular theme, such as DE in the Recorder and

Times Article: Pa. 6 (3), Pa. 11 (1), Pa. 13 (4), I took numbers 1, 3 and 4 and calculated an average of 2.7. Thus, this data was entered as negative (N).

Table 3 shows the values of codes across documents. This table is colour-coded in order to visually distinguish between the positive (green), negative (red), neutral (blue) and non-applicable (shaded) sections.

Table 3

Values of Codes across Documents – Attitudes toward Reforms

| Code | Boundary 2020 Official Document | Research Article Building 2020 | Director's Message Building 2020 | Recorder & Times Article | Poem | Journal | ETFO News Release |
|-------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|------|---------|-------------------|
| CC | P | P | P | P | N | N | N |
| DE | N | | N | N | | P | |
| B2020 | P | P | P | Neutral | N | N | N |
| CRCC | P | P | | N | N | | |
| VS | P | P | P | P | P | P | P |
| G78T | P | P | | N | | N | N |
| LSS | N | | | | | P | P |
| GI | | | | N | N | | |
| SRC | | | | P | P | P | |

Common Perspectives

Table 3 shows apparent commonalities in value association across documents. For the closure and consolidation theme, for instance, the Boundary 2020 official document, research article, director's message and Recorder and Times article all share a positive view of these reforms; whereas the poem, journal and ETFO news release all share a negative view of these reforms. In order to analyze the findings in Table 3 and draw conclusions, I asked the following questions: For whom was it intended, or how did it come about? In what context does it occur? To what system of signification does it belong? (ex. persuasive discourse, creative, argumentative, etc.) (Beasley et al., 2000) In doing so, I uncovered the following patterns between documents.

The Boundary 2020 document, director's message and UCDSB research article share common properties. They are intended for parents and teachers throughout the entire school board. All three documents occur throughout the beginning (Boundary 2020 official document), middle (research article) and end (director's message) of the Boundary 2020 process. These documents are both informative and persuasive. While explaining the details of the Boundary 2020 process, these documents attempt to persuade their readers that declining enrolment is problematic for schools and students and that an ideal solution are Boundary 2020 reforms, which will increase quality education and strengthen communities. For the remainder of this project, these documents will be entitled the 'pro Boundary 2020' documents.

The poem, journal and ETFO news release present common perspectives. These documents oppose the 'pro Boundary 2020' documents on most themes. For example, Boundary 2020 and hence, closures and consolidations, which were previously viewed as positive by the first three documents, are seen as negative in the poem, journal and news release. The intention of these three documents is to give a voice to rural stakeholders (i.e., parents, community members and students). They occur in a more localized context to the previously described board-wide documents. These documents are reflective, argumentative, creative and persuasive. The authors are attempting to deliver a very specific message: Small rural schools have many gifts to give and closing down or consolidating these schools will hinder both student learning and rural community identity. For the remainder of this project, these documents will be entitled the 'pro saving small rural schools' documents.

The Recorder and Times article shares common properties with both the ‘pro Boundary 2020’ documents and the ‘pro saving small rural schools’ documents. This article is informative and was intended for all audiences. Lunman represents both sides of the debate, by quoting both the director of education, David Thomas as well as community members and students. As such, in this article, the voices of various stakeholders are acknowledged.

Major Themes

Building upon the patterns found with regards to the aforementioned common perspectives and re-evaluating the data collected in Table 2 and Table 3, I consolidated the nine original themes into four major themes. Using these themes, I re-visited the seven documents and coded them according to the major themes. Once again, the findings show from the documents analyzed, that there is a debate between whether or not declining enrolment is a valid argument for closure and consolidation initiatives, such as Boundary 2020; and the positive and negative effects of Boundary 2020 on education and community sustainability.

Table 4 shows the debating representations of the major themes surrounding closure and consolidation initiatives and examples of these themes in the documents.

Table 4

School Closures and Consolidations - Major Themes, Main Arguments and Examples

| Major Themes | Pro Boundary 2020 (arguments for school closures and grade 7 and 8 consolidation) | | Pro saving the small rural school (arguments against Boundary 2020) | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| | Argument | Example | Argument | Example |
| Declining Enrolment and School Size | B2020 will fix the problem of DE by closing small schools and creating large mega-schools | “The stark reality is that our school board...faces a new challenge of DE because of changing demographics...and that reduces the number of children entering Kindergarten each year. So to achieve our goal of a 90% graduation rate by the year 2020, we must enhance educational programming – hence the creation of B2020” (Thomas, 2010, L. 9-16). | DE requires further research. Research shows that small schools are beneficial to student learning | “Small rural schools provide a family-like school culture, including, community involvement, peer teaching, leadership opportunities, and equal opportunities in extra-curricular activities” (Thompson, 2010, p.8). |
| Quality Education and Student Achievement | Quality education is at risk with DE. However, B2020 will increase quality education and student achievement | “Left unattended, [DE] will increasingly obstruct our ability to provide quality education to future generations of students” (Boundary 2020, 2007, L. 14-15). | Student achievement is high in small schools. Small schools provide increased quality education | “Students from age 10 to 15 show gains in mathematics, language and reading when they attend small schools with lower student-teacher ratios and shared teaching” (ETFO, 2007, Pa. 7). |
| Efficiency and Economics | B2020 will alleviate the school board’s financial problems. The grade 7 and 8 transition is more efficient for all stakeholders | “[Through closure and consolidation,] B2020 is an innovative and efficient long term vision for public education” (Boundary 2020, 2007, L. 7-8). | The grade 7 and 8 transition has negative effects on students. Small schools are efficient in their own right. | “While moving grade 7 and 8 students into high schools may be a cost-effective way of addressing DE, young adolescent students will pay the price” (ETFO, 2007, Pa. 3-4). |
| The Future of Small Rural School Communities | B2020 will strengthen rural communities | “B2020, [through closure and consolidation], presents an opportunity for Eastern Ontario to redefine and strengthen our local communities” (Boundary 2020, 2007, L. 6-7). | Small schools are the symbol of community identity and closing schools will lead to the demise of rural communities | “It is with hope that ribbons wave high, so that children’s voice will one day fly, choosing to live in a community where it is possible to not only reach for the stars, but also to see them” (Carson, 2007, L. 23-30). |

Voices of all Stakeholders

Table 4 shows the ongoing debate between stakeholders who are ‘pro Boundary 2020’ and thus believe in closures and consolidations for the good of student learning and communities; versus stakeholders who are ‘pro saving the small rural school’ and thus argue against this type of reform in order to preserve their community schools. In Table 3, these conflicting voices are evident in the opposing Positive and Negative attitudes towards the relevant themes. However, one of the nine themes is agreed upon and viewed positively in all seven documents: voices of all stakeholders. Furthermore, referring back to Table 2, in terms of frequency across documents, the theme of the ‘voices of all stakeholders’ appears consistently in all documents. It is of particular interest that this theme, in itself is a theme of perspectives or interpretations. For instance, the Boundary 2020 (2007) document, which is written by school board officials and intended for parents and teachers, states that: “Everyone has an opportunity and responsibility to participate in the Boundary 2020 process; our students, parents, teachers, administrators, trustees and community leaders” (lines 35-36). By choosing this particular phrase, it is evident that the UCDSB is encouraging all voices to be heard and respected. However, although the intent is evident, it does not state whether or not these voices were later recognized. Furthermore, later documentation shows that although parents and community members voiced their concerns and disapproval of Boundary 2020, the educational officials nonetheless ruled on the implementation of the school closures and consolidations (Thomas, 2010). The importance of exploring the various perspectives involved in Boundary 2020 and whose voice counts in the final decision will serve as a starting point for discussion in Chapter 5.

Summary

In this chapter, I reported the findings that emerged from my document analysis. These results support the findings in the literature (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007) which argue that there is a clear debate between global, reform initiatives and local, rural lifestyles and commitments. The findings presented in Table 4 showed four major themes relating to conflicting perspectives surrounding school closure and consolidation: 1) Declining Enrolment and School Size, 2) Quality Education and Student Achievement, 3) Efficiency and Economics and 4) The Future of Small Rural School Communities. These themes will be further discussed in Chapter 5. In addition, the theme of ‘voices of all stakeholders’ was recognized as an umbrella theme under which all other themes gather.

The following chapter delves into the significance of the ‘voices of all stakeholders’ as it relates arguments for and against Boundary 2020, whose voices are heard and respected in final school reform decisions and the effects of these decisions on student learning and small rural communities.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Are all Voices Heard and Respected?

All seven of the documents analyzed for this project, namely: 1) *Look at the Stars*, (Carson, 2007), 2) *The Five W's and How of Boundary 2020* (2007) 3) My anecdotal notes (Thompson, 2010) 4) *School closures could hurt their communities, realtor tells board* (Lunman, 2008), 5) *Board's Proposal to Transfer Grade 7 and 8 Students is 'just plain wrong' Say Elementary Teachers* (ETFO, 2007) 6) Message from the Director of Education, David K. Thomas (Thomas, 2010) 7) *Staff and Students Like Grades 7-12 Schools, Surveys Suggest* (Dawes, 2009), encourage various people involved in the present and future of small rural schools (i.e., teachers, students, parents, community members etc.) to speak out and share their opinions and beliefs regarding the Boundary 2020 process. The theme of 'voices of all stakeholders' (VS) corresponds to the literature reviewed for this project, which indicates that the future of small rural schools lies in a move towards listening to local voices (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Hicks, 1999; Newton & Newton, 1992). Newton and Newton (1992), for instance, argue that a positive feature of many rural schools is their *smallness* which should be conducive to rich, continuing dialogue among students, staff and other adults in the community. They emphasize the importance of this continuing dialogue, which they explain requires active listening and suspending one's own beliefs. However, whether or not educational officials and administrators are able to suspend their own beliefs and actively listen to all stakeholders (Newton & Newton, 1992) is difficult to assess.

My findings show that throughout the Boundary 2020 process, the UCDSB argues that everyone has the opportunity and responsibility to participate in this process including students, parents, teachers, administrators, trustees and community members (Boundary 2020, 2007). As per the Accommodation Review Guidelines, the UCDSB undertook a process of consultation, involvement and evaluation to ensure they took a range of factors and views into account when considering school closures and consolidations. Therefore, in theory, many voices are supposedly heard and valued. However, in practice, whether or not, for instance, a community member's voice is equally respected to a school board trustee's opinion is a good question. Only with a linear analysis of the small rural school reform movement, using the Boundary 2020 process as a local example, can we begin to understand the reasoning behind rural school closures, which stakeholders are actively involved in the decision making, the effects of the outcomes on all small rural school stakeholders and the positive and negative responses by stakeholders to these outcomes. Thus, throughout the following discussion, the reader will be able to determine whether ALL necessary voices are truly heard and respected within this process.

Split loyalties: Rural versus School Board Commitments

At the school where I teach, I observed the participation of parents, teachers and community members in the Boundary 2020 process (Thompson, 2010). Various parents and community members attended the ARC meetings and public forums to make presentations to UCDSB trustees against Boundary 2020 (Lunman, 2008). At one particular meeting in Kemptville, on April 30th, 2008, the last public meeting prior to the trustee vote on Boundary 2020 in May of 2008, 70 members of the public attended and

voiced their opinions. Lunman (2008) explains that these participants warned the trustees that the Boundary 2020 “proposal to close 13 schools could cripple small communities across eastern Ontario” (paragraph 1). Similarly, parent and Rideau Lakes Councilor, Anders Carson’s (2007), poem entitled *Look at the Stars*, depicts the reform movement process as “manipulation” (line 14), whereby “governments swing back and forth in power” (lines 3-5), as “teachers watch for that fall” (line 6), and “parents watch for that choice” (line 7). As such, he is describing the parents and teachers as silent bystanders ‘watching’ the government and school board officials take the future of small rural communities into their ‘hands’ and make executive decisions without considering the opinions of others.

Regardless of these rural stakeholders’ petitioning, social action, letters to the school board and shared reflections on the matter of the Boundary 2020 proposal, on May 14th, 2008, the majority of the school board trustees’ vote called for the implementation of the Boundary 2020 plan. As such, in the Boundary 2020 document (2007), the claim that there exists a “collective respect” (line 39) for the viewpoints of others is inaccurate. Rather, the school board officials and trustees are providing rural stakeholders with the chance to share their opinions, but ultimately, the decisions remain in the hands of the officials. Thus, teachers’, parents’, students’, and community members’ voices seemed to be either unheard or ignored by school board officials, resulting in what Giroux and McLaren (1990) term a ‘structured silence.’ In relation to the literature reviewed, which states that within rural school reform movements, as tension continues to increase between rural community lifestyles and priorities and globalizing educational reform

agendas, this Boundary 2020 plan is ultimately serving global objectives at the expense of local community interests.

Howley (1997) expands upon this argument by stating that studies in rural education must consider locally relevant issues that emerge from local experiences and perspectives or embody local dilemmas. For the sake of contrast, he begins by outlining the *cosmopolitan commitments*, which have been unwarrantedly related to rural settings, but do not share rural commitments. People who adhere to these commitments are concerned with: increasing the level of students' aspirations, overcoming resistance to school closure and consolidation, overcoming the disadvantages of students' backgrounds, implementing governmental reforms, offering a broad and deep high school curriculum, insulating the school from local politics, implementing 'best practice' (i.e., nationally validated methods and programs), and changing the local culture. These commitments are evident in the Boundary 2020 (2007) official document, the school board's research article (Dawes, 2009) and the director's message (Thomas, 2010). The Boundary 2020 document, for instance, states that without this reform, "this situation will increasingly obstruct our ability to provide quality education to future generations of students" (lines 14-15), which corresponds to the cosmopolitan commitments for implementing 'best practice' and overcoming resistance to school closures and consolidations.

In comparison, Howley (1997) outlines local *rural commitments*, which should be considered when conducting educational research and/or reform in rural areas. These rural priorities are as follows:

Senses of and attachment to rural places; the relationship between school and community sustainability; proper aims for an education committed to rural

community; rural pathways to rural adulthoods; community engagement in rural schools; rural community and educational stewardship; curricula to sustain rural places; small-scale organization in rural schooling and community; and cultivation of appropriate local meanings, knowledge, and commitments (p. 7).

These rural commitments are evident in my findings, within the documents written by teachers, parents, community members and union representatives. In Carson's (2007) poem, for instance, he depicts a community where "children's voices will one day fly" (lines 24-25), and one can choose "to live in a community where it is possible not only to reach for the stars, but also, to see them" (lines 26-30). This text relates to the following rural commitments: sense of and attachment to rural places, rural pathways to rural adulthoods, and cultivation of appropriate local meanings, knowledge and commitments (Howley, 1997).

The results of my study as well as the literature reviewed indicate an array of perspectives on the present and future of small rural schools. In the following subsections, I outline the specific groups of people and the ways in which they create shared meaning when it comes to reform efforts, such as Boundary 2020.

Parents' voices

As depicted in my anecdotal notes, I found that many parents wanted to be directly involved in the educational change reform dialogue (Thompson, 2010). At the public forum in Kemptville on April 30th, 2008, one particular parent, Scott Burns, told trustees and school board officials that a previous school closure in Delta, Ontario, five years prior, had "devastated that community" (Burns as cited in Lunman, 2008, paragraph 2). He explained that "the studies (on the economic impact of school closures in small communities) have not gone far enough" (Burns as cited in Lunman, 2008, paragraph 6). In his poem, another parent, Anders Carson (2007), describes the effects of

school consolidation and closure as a “cry of long distance learning” (line 10) and “tears of flags being lowered” (line 11). Thus, the documents analyzed show that once a community is facing the uncertain fate of school closure or consolidation, many parents tend to speak up and voice their opinions regarding the future of their school and ultimately their community.

Prior to the possibility of closure or consolidation, however, the research shows that parents are not as willing to share their opinions on school reform and improvement. In 2009, for instance, the Declining Enrolment Working Group of Ontario consulted with key education stakeholders, other organizations and the public, including parents, in order to discuss ways in which Ontario’s education community could continue to improve student achievement, while addressing the impact of declining enrolment. In terms of the parent voice, the DEWG states difficulty in engaging parents and the wider public in a dialogue about declining enrolment. They suggest that this is partly due to the fact that many parents believe that declining enrolment leads directly to school closures, which educational stakeholders believe can have an economic impact on the community (DEWG, 2009). This perspective is justified by research indicating that declining enrolment is a major factor in small rural school closure and consolidation decisions (People for Education, 2008; Wallin, 2007).

In their discussion of declining enrolment in Ontario, the People for Education of Ontario (2008) indicate that due to this phenomenon there are 300 schools across Ontario involved in Accommodation Reviews. These reviews involve consultation, participation and evaluation to ensure school boards take a range of factors and views into account when considering closures and consolidations (People for Education, 2008). The People

for Education state that since the inception of the Accommodation Reviews, “many parents have expressed disappointment at the results of reviews, because (school) boards, often hamstrung by provincial policy and funding, are unable to implement many review recommendations” (People for Education, 2008, p. 6). For instance, since the implementation of the ARCs, the province has provided school boards with a Declining Enrolment Grant, which is a temporary transition grant to allow boards to adjust their staffing and expenses as enrolment declines. However, provincial policy has not changed regarding the number of students required to generate staff in the funding formula, despite steep declines in average school enrolment (People for Education, 2008).

Similarly, in their consultations, which included parents, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) of Ontario heard several concerns about the ARC process. Many consultation participants stated that the process was too lengthy and complex, and thus not beneficial in terms of increased public understanding about declining enrolment or engagement in the process. “Public disclosure of information, it was claimed, led to disputes about the information’s accuracy and assessments of different schools’ ‘value to the community;’ it pitted one school against another; and the outcome was often seen as predetermined” (DEWG, 2009, p. 35). Specifically with the school valuation aspect of the ARC process, there were concerns that committees were seen less as engaging the public and more as a technical group that focused on completing the school valuation report. The DEWG, thus, argue that a review of the Accommodation Review process is required, in order to increase public dialogue about and engagement in the issue of declining enrolment.

Teachers' voices

With regards to their perspectives on small rural school closures and consolidations in Ontario, teachers find themselves in a controversial position due to the fact that they are both paid employees of the school boards and members of the school culture. Moreover, certain teachers may also live in the surrounding community, while others may commute from other areas. At the school where I teach, one teacher out of 5 staff members is an actual resident of this community and a parent of students at our school. Depending on their personal connections to the community and their involvement in the school culture, teachers' opinions may differ regarding small rural school reform movements. Furthermore, my findings suggest that many teachers have difficulty voicing their points of view in a public forum (Thompson, 2010). One productive and efficient way teachers can share their opinions and knowledge of small rural school reforms is through research initiative, as is the case with this study.

In December of 2007, elementary school teachers launched a campaign to underline the harmful effects on young adolescents resulting from the UCDSB proposal to transfer grade 7 and 8 students to high schools (ETFO, 2007). ETFO states that various forms of media including, newspaper and radio ads, brochures and a website (www.protectourkids.ca) deliver the message that “elementary schools offer a better and safer learning environment for young adolescent children, an environment less open to bullying and more closely connected to the local community” (ETFO, 2007, p.1 lines 5-7). With regards to the pending grade 7 and 8 transitions to high schools, President of ETFO David Clegg (2007) stated: “The young students will spend more time on school

buses, face the pressure of older, more mature students, and lose the many benefits that can only be provided in elementary schools” (lines 12-14).

In May 2008, at the conclusion of the Boundary 2020 review, the Board of Trustees decided to close a number of elementary schools, increase student access to French language programs, adjust certain school attendance boundaries and begin grades 7-12 structures at some schools (Thomas, 2010). In response to this decision various teaching staff informally voiced their opinions amongst one another. Outlined in my anecdotal notes, through discussions with teachers within my family of schools (comprised of four schools), teachers had differing points of view regarding the outcome of the Boundary 2020 process. Some teachers at my school expressed concerns that the grade 7 and 8 move would deplete the population of the school so severely that the school would no longer be able to function and would ultimately close (Thompson, 2010, p. 14). Certain teachers at other schools in our family of schools supported the consolidation movement and saw this as a career opportunity to teach in the grade 7 and 8 portion of the high school (Thompson, 2010, p. 15). Teachers in our family of schools voiced concerns and questions regarding the ins and outs of the grade 7 and 8 transition and what this move would entail for grade 7 and 8 students’ education and well-being (Thompson, 2010, p. 17).

As a teacher affected by the Boundary 2020 reform initiative, I sought to find the rationale behind this ‘improvement plan.’ I began with the Five W’s and How of Boundary 2020 (2007). This document explicitly states that declining enrolment within the UCDSB runs the risk of schools falling short of the board-wide 90% graduation objective by the year 2020. Hence, the title Boundary 2020 strategically implies that by

implementing the aforementioned initiatives, the school board will achieve its graduation goal for the year 2020. I have developed concern for this cause-effect reasoning, based not only on my document analysis, but in relation to my firsthand experience at a formal address by the director of the school board to all the school board staff during a board-wide staff meeting via Skype in 2007. I found his delivery particularly troublesome in that he rationalized striving for a 90% graduation rate based on the fact that the many other Ontario school boards were ‘only striving for 80%.’ By setting a particular universalized standard, under the pretense of an ‘objective’ for the schools, school board officials are first, attempting to locally implement a globalized agenda without consideration of context and second, they are adhering to the discourse of student achievement for human capital and international competitiveness.

In October of 2009, in relation to this school board ‘objective,’ our staff room was outfitted with a four foot by three foot poster reading ‘90% - What have you done for your students today?’ Most teachers were insulted by this question and felt that it demeaned their professionalism and value as teachers. One teacher voiced his opinion by asking the rhetorical question, “Why fix something if it’s not broken?” (Thompson, 2010, p. 7). These teachers continued to question the school board’s rationale. Another teacher asked: “Are they striving for 90% to ‘better’ the students’ education and futures or are they just in competition with the school board next door?” “Are these changes in the students’ best interest or are they just for show?” (Thompson, 2010, p. 7).

In a recent staff meeting, the teachers were privy to a video clip entitled *Changing Education Paradigms*. In this video, Sir Ken Robinson explains that every country in the world is reforming public education based on two major questions: “How do we educate

our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st century?” and “How do we educate our children to be aware of their cultural identity amongst globalization?”

Consequently, reformers are using the strategies they used in the past (i.e., creating bigger and better schools where students will receive University degrees and obtain jobs) to implement changes in the present. As a result, the current system of education was designed and conceived for a different age and economic circumstance, the age of the industrial revolution. As such, this system is modeled on the interests of industrialization, such as the production line mentality, whereby schools are concerned with conformity and standardized testing. Schools are organized on factory lines, with ringing bells and separate facilities, specialized into separate subjects. Children are still educated by batches or age group, which assumes that the most important thing children have in common is their shared age (Robinson, 2010). A researcher in situated cognition, Darwin (2006), expands on these perceptions by stating that schools have been and continue to be designed to meet learners’ needs in chronologically organized, age-appropriate ways that are thought to match points in their cognitive development. This standardization is also a product and factor of globalization.

After viewing this video clip, as a staff, we discussed how small rural schools have started changing the paradigm by circumstance, but now we advocate for this by choice. We agree with Darwin’s (2006) argument that this aforementioned view of schooling continues to be one of the most dangerous underlying assumptions to plague our school system. As teachers, we believe each student learns differently. Some students benefit from group learning, while others prefer to learn independently. Some students enjoy teaching their peers, while others benefit from peer learning. My colleagues and I

discussed that small rural schools are in an ideal position to steer away from grouping students by age and organizing schools like factories (Thompson, 2010). A shared characteristic of small rural schools around the world is multi-graded classrooms (Mulcahy, 1993). Moreover, Canadian research clearly indicates that multi-grade classrooms are a viable, effective organizational alternative to single grade classes (Gomolchuk, 1995). As a staff, we discussed the various benefits of multi-grade classrooms, including peer tutoring, differentiated learning and innovative teaching (Thompson, 2010, p. 17). My findings concur with Gomolchuk's (1995) argument that multi-grade classrooms lead to greater levels of cooperation among students, individualized instruction, and reduced discipline problems. In smaller groups, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) explain that students feel more integral and teachers understand students as individuals: their interests, their comprehension of ideas, the challenges they face, what gifts they have to offer and most importantly, their learning styles. The small-scale organization of rural schooling is one of the rural commitments to which Howley (1997) refers.

Regardless of the research, most policymakers and educational officials view characteristics of small rural schools, such as multi-grade classes, as 'issues' or 'challenges' and thus believe closures and consolidations to be a solution to these rural problems. This point of view adheres to the assumption that bigger schools are more fiscally and academically efficient. However, Howley argues that rural issues and dilemmas are obscured by national and cosmopolitan practices and we need to recognize that improvement initiatives are driven by a logic of globalization, which in turn leads to a disregard of the diversity of rural places. In the same line of thought, American rural

researchers Nachtigal and Theobald (1995) and Bard et al. (2006) as well as Canadian researcher Wallin (2007) concur that small rural school closure and consolidation ‘improvement’ plans are the outcome of globalization, international competitiveness and a move toward a universalized view of schooling.

In terms of teachers’ role or lack thereof in these ‘improvement’ plans, this globalized view of education has led to a reduction of teachers’ autonomy, independence and responsibility, whereby workplace knowledge and control are in the hands of administration (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Therefore, educators are not only continually losing the right to determine what is taught and how to evaluate its merit, with the rise of a standardized curriculum, but we are also caught between what the school board *tells* us to think with regards to reform movements and what we actually *believe* is best for the education of our students.

Students’ voices

Of *all* stakeholders involved in small rural school closures and consolidations, it is ultimately the students who are most affected by these reforms. They will be the people who have to commute for up to two hours a day. They will be the people who do no benefit from learning in their *own* community. They will be the people who transition from small, family-knit classrooms, to a larger business-like setting. Therefore, the student voice should be respected and acknowledged, prior to reform decision making.

At the school where I taught and continue to teach, during the Boundary 2020 process, when our school was being reviewed by an ARC, the staff were aware of the various stakeholders involved in this process, including students. Thus, we organized a committee, comprised of all teaching staff, our principal, two Educational Assistants, our

office administrator (who was also a member of the community), two parents and four students between grades 4 and 8. At one of our meetings, we asked the students the following three questions: “Describe your perspective on our school’s strengths?” “Describe your perspective on our school’s areas of need or weaknesses?” and “Explain what you believe are the ‘next steps’ for this school?” (Thompson, 2010, p. 3) The students brainstormed amongst themselves and with the various stakeholders at the meeting. They wrote their ideas on chart-paper and presented their opinions to us. Through this presentation, we learned that the students were very happy with our school. They enjoyed the family nature of the school. They appreciated that the teachers cared and took the time to get to know their students. We also learned that they were worried about what was going to happen to this school. They had heard so many different opinions in the media, at home and amongst their peers that they were not sure what to believe. This committee was essential to the well-being of our school. The fact that the student voice was not only heard, but respected and appreciated, was crucial to the future of our school. After this meeting, we took the students’ notes and discussed them at our staff meeting. From here, we were able to preserve our school culture (our strengths) as well as implement the students’ specific ideas for next steps (Thompson, 2010).

Similarly, my findings suggest that teachers, parents and community members encourage student involvement in the reform process. In his poem, “Look at the Stars,” when Carson writes, “It is with hope that ribbons wave high, so that children’s voices will one day fly. Choosing to live in a community where it is possible to not only reach for the stars, but also to see them” (lines 24-30), he is expressing his desire, not only for students to have a voice, but to also have the choice to live and learn in their home town.

My findings also show that, during the Boundary 2020 process, students had the opportunity to voice their opinions in a public forum. Lunman (2008) refers to one particular Grade 12 student who spoke up regarding the reform efforts in his community. James Ward, a student asked the UCDSB trustees how the grade 7 and 8 consolidation with the high school would affect a ‘typical day’ at the high school. He was concerned about how the already full computer labs, gym classes and cafeteria would accommodate for more students. Ward was one of the first students able to voice his concerns to the trustees at public meetings on Boundary 2020. Although this particular student had his say, the article does not explain whether or not his questions were answered or his concerns were addressed.

In September of 2009, the UCDSB conducted two surveys on the 10th day of classes at the new grades 7-12 and K-6 schools. Participants included 30 principals, vice-principals and systems managers (Dawes, 2009). Although Dawes (2009) claims that these surveys “suggest staff and students like their new grades 7-12 high schools and K-6 elementary schools” (line 1), there is no mention of actual student involvement in these surveys. Therefore, additional research is required to study the effects of these closures and consolidations on student learning and well-being. This is in line with researchers such as Bard et al. (2006) who believe that policymakers ought to consider the implications of consolidation on student achievement, self-concept, participation in extracurricular activities, dropout rates and the community itself.

Newton and Newton (1992) outline the conditions, advantages and disadvantages of small schools in sparsely populated areas. The purpose of their book is to emphasize the importance of listening to rural stakeholders and developing a shared vision regarding

school development through stronger leadership. In their *Voices* chapter, they analyze a survey conducted in the Big Valley School Division, in Saskatchewan, for students, parents, community members and teachers. The resulting data of this survey underlines the importance of listening to all partners in the educational process. Their research indicates that, of the groups of stakeholders (parents, teachers and students), students were the least satisfied with their current school situations. Therefore, they explain that the student voice must be heard with regards to the selection of content, strategies for learning and assessment. They believe that once student voices are better heard, this will be a starting point for the redesign and revitalization of small rural schools. Hicks (1999) adds to this opinion by stating that in comparison to large, urban schools, rural schools are in an ideal position to listen to the student voice and embrace student-focused school reform due to their unique small size. Furthermore, “rural schools with the advantages of smaller size and opportunity for meaningful community are fertile ground for the positive growth and the development of learner-centered schools and places where the voices of children can offer honest insights into the meaningful direction of school renewal” (Hicks, 1999, p. 187).

Whose Voice Counts?

My findings suggest that despite a seemingly “open and honest dialogue” (Boundary 2020, 2007, line 20) with all stakeholders involved in the reform decision process, including parents, community members, teachers and students (Boundary 2020, 2007; Dawes, 2009; Lunman, 2008; Thomas, 2010), the final decision lies in the hands of school board officials, who ultimately follow their initial agenda and mindset. Thus, my findings indicate that although all voices may be heard, they are not acknowledged in the

decision making process. This concurs with research that states that regardless of the developments in rural education research and studies pertaining to the benefits of small schools, when it comes to perceptions of the future of small rural schools, local voices tend to be silenced and replaced with government and school board discourse advocating for small school closures and consolidations (Giroux & McLaren, 1990; Howley 1997; Wallin, 2007). Furthermore, Howley (1997) argues that most rural reform decisions are still adhering to a standardized, globalized model. Similarly, Eisner (2005) is concerned that many perspectives on the purpose of education tend to focus on the global education of citizens, instead of the local, unique learning experiences of the individual.

Today the school where I teach, as well as various small rural schools across the UCDSB, continue to feel the repercussions of a standardized, globalized school improvement plan, Boundary 2020, as imminent changes loom in the near future. As of September 2009, certain schools have undergone school consolidations, as their grade 7 and 8 students have transitioned to the local high school, thus, leaving these schools with a student population comprising Kindergarten to grade 6 students. As a result, 13 schools have not survived this student depletion and have been forced to close because of under-population (Thomas, 2010). The current discourse at the school where I teach is that in September of 2011, the grade 7 and 8 students will transition to the local high school, leaving this school with a population of less than 60 students from Kindergarten to grade 6. Following this move, it is up to policymakers and administrators to ultimately decide whether this school is fiscally and viably worth saving. In addition, it is increasingly troublesome that the fate of these small rural schools, and hence their surrounding

communities, lies in the hands of people with an agenda that does not mesh with the rural commitments inherent in the lives of the people of these towns (Howley, 1997).

Many rural researchers concur that until policymakers and school board officials view the rural educational context from a rural perspective, schools closures and consolidations will continue to increase at the expense of the local rural communities (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). This tension between rural priorities, lifestyles and commitments and standardized, globalized agendas is evident in my document analysis, whereby ‘pro saving small schools’ arguments relate to the former and ‘pro Boundary 2020’ arguments relate to the latter. These conflicting perspectives are also found in recent research analyzing the rationale behind these closure and consolidation initiatives, studies demonstrating the value and viability of many small rural schools and rural community responses to closure and consolidation initiatives (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Howley, 1997a; Wallin, 2007).

The Closure and Consolidation Issue

In the following sections, I discuss the four major themes uncovered in my findings, namely: *Declining Enrolment and School Size; Efficiency and Economics; Quality Education and Student Achievement* and *the Future of Small Rural School Communities*. I analyze these themes as they relate to the closure and consolidation of small rural schools.

Declining Enrolment and School Size

With regards to small rural school closures and consolidations, my findings as well as most research in the field of rural education concur that the main issue brought to the small rural school reform table is declining enrolment, with is directly related to

school size (Bard et al., 2006; Boundary 2020, 2007; Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009; People for Education, 2008; Wallin, 2007). The Boundary 2020 document and the director's address explicitly state that declining enrolment within the school board runs the risk of schools falling short of the board-wide 90% graduation objective by the year 2020 (Boundary 2020, 2007; Thomas, 2010). By setting a particular universalized standard, under the pretense of an 'objective' for the schools, school board officials are attempting to locally implement a globalized agenda without consideration of context (Howley 1997; Wallin, 2007).

With regards to Boundary 2020, ETFO, draws attention to the UCDSB's main reason for moving grade 7 and 8 students into secondary schools: it is a "cost-effective way of addressing declining enrolment" (ETFO, 2007, lines 8-9). However, they argue that "young adolescent students will pay the price" (ETFO, 2007, lines 9-10). ETFO president David Clegg warns that these "young students will spend more time on school busses, face the pressure of older, more mature students and lose the many benefits that can only be provided by elementary schools" (ETFO, 2007, lines 12-14). This is a steep price to pay for a reform that is based on an issue (declining enrolment) that is affecting not only the school board and province, but Canada as a whole.

"According to Statistics Canada, the number of students in Canada's elementary and secondary schools will decline by as much as 500,000 in the next 15 years" (People for Education, 2008, p. 6). As the student population decreases, many reform advocates argue that it becomes more expensive to run schools. The cost of running a school with fewer than 100 students is 29% higher on a per student basis than the cost of running a school with more than 300 students (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). Thus, the

issue of school size is linked with fiscal arguments for school closures and consolidations.

The People for Education (2008) explain that in rural and northern areas there is a more extreme decline in enrolment, caused by a combination of birth rate declines and migration to urban and suburban areas. This affects funding and communities, whereby most of the funding school boards receive is based on numbers of students, enrolment declines mean less funding, fewer programs, and, in many cases, school closures (People for Education, 2008). Therefore, declining enrolment seems to have a ripple effect, leading to various other ‘challenges’ that are viewed as synonymous with ‘small schools.’ Fewer students lead to smaller schools with multi-grade classrooms. Smaller schools lead to financial cutbacks. Financial cutbacks lead to schools sharing principals and the domino effect continues. However, the research indicates that the issue of declining enrolment is *not* simply a ‘rural’ issue. The entire province of Ontario, for instance, is facing declining enrolment. Due to declining fertility rates, school enrolment is declining (People for Education, 2008). The Ministry of Ontario has deemed this issue so important that it has established a Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009). This group is not limiting its concern to rural areas. Rather, the issue of declining enrolment has become a provincial concern for schools in urban, rural and suburban areas. If we relate this provincial issue to the previously described viewpoint that declining enrolment leads to school consolidation, does this mean that schools will be consolidated in every district across Ontario? Should we be taking away communities’ centres of learning and livelihood just because people are having fewer babies?

Many Canadian and American researchers have found that there is little to no evidence to suggest that larger, urban schools are more efficient and beneficial for student learning than smaller, rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Jimerson, 2006). Furthermore, there is little if any justification for closing small schools as a matter of policy (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). Therefore, this ‘bigger is better’ mentality, whereby students attend larger, mega-schools to be educated as ‘human capital’ to contribute to the nation’s well-being often comes at the expense of the local rural community’s interest of preparing students for life (Bard et al., 2006). As such, many rural education researchers concur that the closing and consolidation of these small rural schools should not be seen as the one and only ‘solution’ to the challenges that small rural schools face, such as declining enrolment (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Mulcahy, 1993; Wallin, 2007). Rather, researchers such as Bard et al. (2006) believe that policymakers ought to consider the implications of consolidation on student achievement, self-concept, participation in extracurricular activities, dropout rates and the community itself.

Efficiency and Economics

As a result of declining enrolment, the UCDSB officials claim that the school board has more schools than are needed for the number of students within the board (Boundary 2020, 2007). This is the case for many school boards across Ontario. Evidently, schools with smaller student populations cost more to operate per student than those with a larger number of students (DEWG, 2009). Therefore, UCDSB school board officials argue that Boundary 2020 is an efficient, cost-effective move for quality education (Boundary 2020, 2007; Dawes, 2009; Thomas, 2010). However, regardless of

the Boundary 2020 vision to “ensure an equitable and seamless educational journey for each student” (Boundary 2020, 2007, lines 30-31), guided by school closures and changes to school boundaries, this reform will result in the closure of 13 schools by 2012, the incorporation of grades 7-12 structures at some high schools and the creation of Junior Kindergarten to grade 6 schools (Thomas, 2010).

With a rise in the global flow of ideas, practices, institutions and people across the world in an unprecedented volume, the mobility of educational practices and ideas and the institution of schooling has followed suit (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). The trend toward globalized conceptions of schooling has led to discussions of educating students as human capital in an efficient and fiscally beneficial manner in ‘bigger’ and ‘better’ schools (DeYoung, 1987; Howley & Howley, 2004; Wallin, 2007). Consequently, many small rural schools have been and continue to be closed or consolidated into larger schools.

Corbett and Mulcahy are amongst the many Canadian and American researchers who have begun to investigate the reasoning behind contemporary small rural school closures and consolidations and the drive for bigger, better schools (Bard et al., 2006; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Wallin, 2007). The literature suggests that reorganization initiatives are proposed by people with power, namely school board officials and policymakers, who, with a globalized mindset, often perceive small rural schools to be inefficient, fiscally unstable and offer limited curricula. This perception stems from the fact that many North American rural areas share similar circumstances including, economic challenges, birth rate declines and out-migration (Bard et al., 2006; Mulcahy, 1993; People for Education, 2008). As a result, contemporary policymakers develop

school reform agendas for both American and Canadian contexts under the rhetoric of ‘improving’ the rural situation (Bard et al., 2006; Wallin, 2007). Moreover, most small rural school consolidation dialogue tends to intertwine these rural challenges with the previously described major themes of declining enrolment and school size; efficiency and economics; student achievement and quality education and the future of small rural communities (Bard et al., 2006).

In the United States, due to the adoption of globalized ideals, such as the efficiency of the private sector, a major factor driving the long-term consolidation trend has been school administrators’ and educational officials’ desire to make schooling efficient in order to demonstrate their commitment to the forces of science, progress, modernization and globalization (Cotton, 1996). Giroux and McLaren (1990) add to this discourse by suggesting that the situation of rural schools in America needs to be understood in light of the current celebration of market initiatives and linking of schooling to entrepreneurial forces within marketplace logic. In this respect, small rural schools are being consolidated into larger, business-like schools, which Sergiovanni (1996) explains are created to mirror the corporate world in terms of their departmentalization and fragmentation.

The National Rural Education Association (NREA) Consolidation Task Force associates small rural school consolidation to globalization and international competitiveness. They state that the general consensus among educational reformers is that ‘bigger is better’ and the elimination of small schools will result in increased cost-effectiveness and greater curricular offerings (Bard et al., 2006). Furthermore, the NREA discusses the clear division between school officials who point to the inefficiencies and

more limited curricula common to small rural schools versus community members who argue that the loss of the school means the loss of the community.

These nationalized and globalized ideals counter Howley's (1997) conceptualization of rurality by rejecting rural meanings and identities for global interests. Howley argues that the commitment to forms of education that sustain local communities as thoughtful cultures is dwindling and being replaced by school improvement initiatives that are nationalizing and globalizing. In terms of the conflict between globalized ideals and local interests, Theobald and Nachtigal beg the question:

Will schools that would sooner use blackboards than computers, teachers who would concern themselves with ideas more than employment, and parents who prefer the happiness of their children over a good return upon human capital, continue to be seen as 'willful primitives,' in this global society? (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, p. 3).

In order to answer 'no' to the above question, they advocate for a return to community-centred rural schools. The idea of community learning and the positive nature of community-centred rural schools will be further discussed in a later section.

'Quality' Education and Student Achievement

My findings suggest that many small rural school reformers subscribe to the view that larger schools lead to increased student achievement and improved quality education (Boundary 2020, 2007). With regards to declining enrolment, the UCDSB officials argue that this "situation will increasingly obstruct our ability to provide quality education to future generations of students" (Boundary 2020, 2007, lines 14-15). Thus, they view this situation as detrimental to quality education and thus argue for small school closures and the creation of larger schools in the name of 'quality education.'

In the initial phases of the implementation of Boundary 2020 for the creation of grades 7-12 schools, the UCDSB officials conducted a survey of 30 principals. The survey showed that these principals believed staff members reacted positively to placing grades 7 and 8 students in a grades 7-12 school. They claimed that this survey suggested that staff and students “like their new grades 7-12 high schools” (Dawes, 2009, lines 1-2) and “these changes are helping student learning” (Dawes, 2009, lines 6-7). Correspondingly, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) argue that many Canadian educational officials subscribe to the outdated view that bigger schools provide better quality education, exemplified in so-called higher student achievement. Some research, however, refutes this perspective.

Studies show that there is no significant difference in terms of achievement between smaller and larger schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). Moreover, there is no research evidence that ‘bigger’ schools are ‘better’ for students (Bard et al., 2006; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). First, bigger schools often result in large, unmanageable, impersonal settings for students (Hicks, 1999). Second, more program offerings of larger schools do not equal a higher quality of education. Third, in terms of the curriculum issue, the studies show that the broader curriculum of the larger schools does not, necessarily, have a positive effect on student achievement (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

Carnoy (2000) explains that this emphasis on standardized testing and curricula and quality education is partly due to a rise in globalized ideals of schooling. Moreover, previously described corporate criteria of ‘efficiency’ and ‘productivity’ have extended to the world of schooling and are manifested in quantitative measurements of student

performance, namely standardized tests (Carnoy, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Eisner (2005) is concerned that boosting test scores and standardizing outcomes are the dominating values currently guiding school reform efforts in North America. In Ontario, for instance, the government focuses on test scores in literacy and numeracy and graduation rates as the two measures of success in provincial education policy (DEWG, 2009; People for Education, 2008, p.6). As such, “the fundamental goal of education in Ontario is the continuous improvement of student achievement” (DEWG, 2009, p. 26). In this regard, many schools that do not meet the pre-set ‘standards’ are labeled as ‘needing improvement’ and must face educational reform agendas. These agendas are proposed by policymakers and school board officials under the guise of promoting educational ‘efficiency,’ ‘effectiveness’ and ‘productivity.’

In the school where I teach, the grade 3 and 6 students are involved in the standardized test of EQAO. This test rates schools in terms of the percentage of students who have achieved a level 3 or higher on the exam. As evidenced in my findings, the results of this test cannot be viewed as an accurate measurement of student learning since there are not enough students writing the test (6-10 students per grade) to show an informative percentage (Thompson, 2010, p. 16). Moreover, I adhere to Corbett and Mulcahy’s (2006) argument that the mentality that educational performance is standard and can be measured un-problematically is a myth. Rather than focusing on standardized testing, the evidence suggests that we should be acknowledging the idea that schools function to produce capable, literate, caring, engaged life-long learners who are prepared for full participation in a rich community life and satisfying employment (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

Despite this research evidence that bigger schools are *not* better schools and standardized testing is not an accurate measurement of student learning and well-being, policy makers continue to pursue the closure and consolidation of small neighborhood and community schools under the pretense that larger schools will provide increased quality education and higher test scores (Boundary 2020, 2007). They pursue this agenda apparently unaware that the educational community has moved on from this mid-twentieth century ‘bigger is better’ view toward embracing the educational opportunities available to students in small rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). Corbett and Mulcahy state that although educational leaders claim to draw upon evidence based decision making, many seemingly ignore the growing body of evidence that clearly indicates that smaller schools are to be preferred over larger ones (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

The Future of Small Rural School Communities

As is evidenced in my findings, under the original theme of learning in small rural schools (LSS), the results show that this theme (The Future of Small Rural School Communities) is predominantly viewed in a positive light. Various rural stakeholders believe that small “elementary schools offer a better and safer learning environment for [students], an environment less open to bullying and more closely connected to the local community” (ETFO, 2007, lines 5-7). As previously discussed, improving student achievement is a fundamental goal of education in Ontario. However, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) describes this goal as a “holistic goal [that] encompasses both measurable academic achievement in areas such as literacy and numeracy and graduation rates and the development of character, a sense of community,

and citizenship skills” (p. 26). To attain this goal, the DEWG suggests that schools provide students with a wide range of programs and services.

In terms of the *small* school culture, studies show that, in smaller schools, all students, regardless of their ethnicity or place on the socioeconomic ladder, tend to achieve at higher levels, have a greater sense of belonging, feel safe, are less likely to drop out, and are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and go on to college (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). At the school where I teach, for instance, the small, nurturing, family-like culture of the school fosters a safe and caring environment for students. Students engage in school activities, such as sports teams, spirit assemblies, excellence assemblies, local drama and story-telling presentations and the annual Christmas concert and community potluck (Thompson, 2010). They show enthusiasm towards and devotion to their school culture. Similarly, one particular study found that small school students were more satisfied with their schools and as such, they became engaged learners and assumed positive roles in school life (DeYoung, 1987).

At the school where I teach, during spirit assemblies, the smallness of the school is conducive to a cooperative and friendly setting. The school is divided into eight spirit teams, each consisting of a grade 8 leader and a *mélange* of students from various grades. Each assembly has a theme (i.e., Halloween activities, bullying awareness, etc.) and a planned activity led by a grade 8 student, such as shared reading, pumpkin carving, creating an anti-bullying song and so on. The setting and activities enable students to become engaged with peers of all ages and provide leadership opportunities for the older students (Thompson, 2010, p. 8).

The small nature of our school ensures that students will participate in the sport of their choice. In some instances, the younger students are asked to join in with the older students in order to make up a full team. This allows for the cultivation of younger athletic talents. Despite our small size, the intermediate girls' soccer team and basketball team won the regional soccer tournament in the fall of 2009 and the regional basketball tournament in the winter of 2011. In 2009, I coached the intermediate girls' volleyball team at our family of schools tournament. Although the girls did not move on to the finals, they displayed dignity, maturity, sportsmanship and teamwork throughout the day (Thompson, 2010, p. 10). This example of good character is merely one of many instances contributing to the positive reputation of which the director of our school board spoke, when he came to our school in April of 2010. He said that this is "a great little school" and you are "doing good things here" (Thompson, 2010, p. 14).

Over the past few years, the students at my school have attended various drama, music and poetry presentations within the school. As in a community-centred school, as Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) would call it, various community members have shared their talents with the students. In the fall of 2009, a local storyteller came to the school to share local folklore about the community (Thompson, 2010, p. 9). In the spring of 2010, the students attended 'jam sessions' with a local song writer, who guided the students in writing a school anti-bullying song. This song was later recorded and saved to the student drive of the school computers (Thompson, 2010, p. 15). These examples concur with the studies showing that, although small schools may offer fewer programs in terms of quantity, in terms of quality, as evidenced in my findings, they tend to be much more inclusive and open to all students as suggested by Corbett and Mulcahy (2006).

Despite the above examples of the value and viability of my Kindergarten to grade 8 school, this school will face drastic changes in the fall of 2011, when our grade 7 and 8 students move to the *high* school. Concerns for this change, stem from my findings that show that “students from age 10 to 15 show gains in mathematics, language and reading when they attend small schools with lower student-teacher ratios and shared teaching – all factors more common in *elementary* schools” (ETFO, 2007, lines 19-21).

Overall, the Canadian educational research indicates that small schools offer the children of these rural communities their best chance of success (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). Moreover, they appear to be somewhat superior to larger schools in terms of cooperative learning, extra-curricular participation, quality of school activities, inclusion and mediating the effects of socio-economic status (Mulcahy, 1993). Furthermore, the research supporting the effectiveness of small schools in providing students with inclusive learning opportunities continues to grow (Corbett & Mucahy, 2006). Therefore, I agree with Mulcahy’s position that rather than closing these schools, educational leaders should be searching for ways to sustain and improve these important rural assets (Mulcahy, 1993). Jimerson (2006) adds to this by stating: “Small schools are intrinsically disposed to offer educational and social advantages for children [and] the ongoing battle to close smaller schools is unnecessary and unwise” (p. 17). Similarly, in the United States, the National Rural Education Association (NREA) Consolidation Task Force has been established to spearhead educational research of rural schools facing possible consolidation. In their 2006 Rural School Consolidation report, the task force ascertains that closure and consolidation should be a decision made by the local school

districts, which examine in depth the implications of fiscal, educational, and community advantages and disadvantages (Bard et al., 2006).

My findings show that school closures have the potential to devastate communities. Thus, the major theme of ‘the future of small rural school communities’ is regarded as most important by the ‘pro saving small schools’ stakeholders. These stakeholders warn of the negative effects of closures and consolidations on small rural communities. In Lunman’s (2008) article, a Rideau Lakes Township realtor explains that since the closure of the school in Delta Ontario, the housing market has diminished, two of the community’s three restaurants have closed and the bank has closed. Members of the surrounding communities state that this once thriving town appears to be a ghost town (Thompson, 2010). Despite the blatantly obvious evidence that school closures and consolidations do not benefit local rural communities, the UCDSB officials argue that Boundary 2020 “is more than just a school closures/boundary review. It presents an opportunity for Eastern Ontario to redefine and strengthen our local communities through an innovative and efficient long term vision for public education” (Boundary 2020, 2007, lines 6-8). My inquiry regarding this particular objective is: How can closing a rural community school strengthen the community? In my opinion, the answer seems obvious considering that, as shown in my findings, the many rural communities that have undergone the closure of their local school have suffered socially and economically (Lunman, 2008). Thus, a “redefinition” or “strengthening” of local communities is an invalid justification for removing the life-line of a community. Rather, UCDSB officials’ attempts to justify board-wide school closures and program cuts over the next two years will have potentially harmful implications for small rural towns across Eastern Ontario.

The literature also indicates that the ‘bigger is better’ school reforms have severed the links between many rural schools and the needs of their communities (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Moreover, Newton and Newton (1992) explain that since small rural schools are interwoven and interdependent with their communities, neither can develop without the other. Wallin (2008) argues that many small rural schools are the symbol of learning and community identity for many rural communities. As such, this reform rhetoric of creating larger, efficient, economically viable schools with better quality education conflicts with rural priorities and lifestyles. Therefore, educational officials and policymakers need to give increased attention to the local context if the potential advantages of small rural schools are to be realized (Newton & Newton, 1992).

In the United States, since the increase of rural education research of the later 20th century, small rural school reform dialogue has begun to include the notion of community identity as a factor when considering school closures and consolidations in rural communities. Similarly, in both Canada and the U.S., there is increasing evidence of the value and viability of small rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Jimerson, 2006). In addition to their educational benefits, small rural schools are viewed by rural inhabitants as the heart and symbol of learning and community identity within rural communities (Wallin, 2007). As such, a critical argument against school consolidation is the role of the school in sustaining the community both socially and economically. Therefore, the purpose of many of these recent studies is to both demonstrate that rural educators are working towards the creation of effective learning environments in rural schools and argue that the loss of small rural schools means the loss of rural communities (Bard et al., 2006; Wallin, 2007).

My findings suggest that small rural schools provide each and every student with unique opportunities for community involvement both in school and outside of school. For example, at the school where I teach, in the fall of 2009, each class walked to the community library to attend a presentation by the local librarian, who was also the mother of two of our students. On the way to the library, the students were able to wave at grandparents, aunts and uncles, and parents driving or walking by and point to their homes. This familiar, comfortable environment allowed students to become enthusiastic about reading (Thompson, 2010, p. 4). Later that season, the primary class walked to the local health centre to perform some songs and dances for the seniors' monthly luncheon. Their homeroom teacher introduced them by surname and the seniors responded in recognition of familiar surnames in the community. One particular song included a verse about "smiling at your neighbour," which is a value instilled in these students from a young age, in both the school and community settings (Thompson, 2010, p. 5). Every winter, the school organizes a community potluck and Christmas concert. For the past two years, I have directed the Christmas concert, composed of a cast of 15-25 students and a chorus, which includes the entire student body. As such, every student participates in this holiday event. At the potluck, each family brings one or two dishes, which are placed at the back of the gymnasium on a long table. Every person is able to sit down with family, friends and community members, enjoy a home cooked meal and watch the student performance. The small nature of the school population enables all families to convene in their local school community gymnasium for an evening of good food and good fun (Thompson, 2010, p. 13).

Rural education researchers such as Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) and Howley (1997) suggest that historically the industrialized and urbanized view of education of the 19th and 20th centuries ultimately led to the deterioration of the sense of community associated to small rural schools. By closing small rural schools and creating large, urban mega-schools, the small, family-like, community aspect of these rural schools was lost. In response to this situation, recent rural education research has capitalized on the strong sense of community that thrives within and around many existing small rural schools (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Furthermore, certain researchers suggest the development of school and community relationships and the establishment of networks with various groups including school divisions, higher education institutions and the provincial government in order to contribute to effective learning environments (Bard et al., 2006; Wallin, 2007).

In their article entitled *Culture, Community, and the Promise of Rural Education*, Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) argue that a return to community-centered rural schools could be the antidote to the detrimental impact of industrialization and globalization on the sense of community associated with schools. The purpose of their research is to address the root causes of the current rural school circumstances as opposed to analyze the symptoms. They argue that successful educational renewal depends on historical and philosophical analyses. Upon an analysis of the history and philosophy surrounding American rural education, the researchers found that the link between industrial trends, such as specialization and centralization, and schooling practices was merely a decision made by people with power and an agenda. This industrial and now global pattern has depleted the sense of community associated with schooling. In their opinion, the common

project, common good, and common unity that used to promote a sense of mutual obligation, social responsibility and belonging in North American society has been lost. Thus, Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) advocate for a drastic change in society's public and private choices in order to allow for the production of sustainable, vibrant communities in the future.

At the school where I teach, the teachers are committed to delivering a curriculum that relates to students' 'real lives' and their community context. In 2008, for instance, the grade 7/8 teacher taught the students about the history of the Rideau Lakes. Each student was responsible to research one aspect in the history of their community and surrounding area. The students then taught one another through power point presentations, poster presentations etc. In the same year, the primary teacher introduced students to the differences between urban and rural life. The students were asked to draw upon their personal experiences within a rural community (Thompson, 2010, p. 2). These examples relate to the theory of situated cognition, in that complex relationships exist between the learners (students) and the settings where learning takes place (the community). Darwin (2006) explains that: "When teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their cognitive skills to a personal issue or problem, learning is enhanced and the students experience an affirming sense of accomplishment" (p. 398). Moreover, this situated type of learning is both about context, place and community of people, as well as the meaning-making occurring amongst its participants (Whitson, 1997).

The research clearly indicates the importance of community identity to the future of small rural schools (Howley, 1997; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995; Wallin, 2007).

Moreover, the notion of community learning or learning in a community of practice has its foundations in situated cognition theory (Lave, 1997; Lemke, 1997; Whitson, 1997). My personal examples have highlighted the significance of the social and contextual nature of learning on students' education and well-being. Unfortunately, as my findings suggest, the major theme of 'The Future of Small Rural School Communities' seems to be overshadowed by the themes of declining enrolment and school size, efficiency and economics, and quality education and student achievement. These themes, which correlate to globalized ideals, drive most closure and consolidation initiatives. The following section provides alternate choices to closures and consolidations and recommendations for future actions.

Recommendations and Alternate Choices

In their research, although Newton and Newton (1992) list various disadvantages of small rural schools, including teacher isolation, lack of cultural diversity and limited program choice, they found that most students, teachers and parents viewed learning, teaching and school operations in small rural schools quite positively. Moreover, for every disadvantage, they list two to three advantages. Thus, new challenges create new opportunities for educational leadership for schooling in sparsely populated areas. There are choices and alternatives to closures and consolidations. Wallin (2007) adds to this line of thought by stating that in responding to these 'challenges,' many small rural schools become innovative out of necessity. Moreover, the high stakes situation that these schools find themselves in, due to the looming possibility of closure or consolidation, serves as a model for effective practice. Therefore, rural school districts have increased their capacity by thinking outside the box (Wallin, 2007). Wallin recommends one way to

capitalize on the creative and innovative nature of small rural schools is to work with other groups within and outside of the local community to share and streamline services in order to maintain programs and opportunities for students.

In my experience, developing strong partnerships between the local rural school and other agencies in and around the community, such as libraries, township councils and health centres, is beneficial to the viability of the school. Moreover, most small rural schools facing closure or consolidation have an active parent council, fighting for the plight of the small local school. Establishing open and honest relationships with these parents allows for sharing of ideas and strategies regarding the future of the school. Thus, I recommend strengthening ties with local community members and parents in order to validate the value and viability of these small rural schools.

Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) add to this notion of capitalizing on ‘smallness’ and ‘community’ by recommending a re-creation of communities. They argue that the contemporary rhetorical agenda for education tends to focus on meeting the ‘needs’ of students and in order to attend to the ‘needs’ of students, schools must contribute to the re-creation of communities. This initiative for community re-creation will require the redesign of schooling which will begin by refocusing the education agenda on the local context and community. They begin with the initiative to make the understanding of one’s place (sense of community) a chief curricular focus in schools, arguing that focusing on place will make learning more experiential and therefore more powerful and provide youths with an ability to understand who they are and how they might be in the world. In addition, developing a sense of place holds the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity, beyond a person’s ability to accumulate material

goods. In addition, Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) recommend that rural educators engage in school redesign, focusing on the creation of viable rural communities (refocusing the educational agenda on local community contexts). This school redesign relates to the following rural commitments as addressed by Howley (1997): senses of and attachment to rural places, the relationship between school and community sustainability, proper aims for an education committed to rural community, community engagement in rural schools, and curricula to sustain rural places.

This type of school redesign would require teachers to view ‘challenges,’ such as a declining school population and multi-grade classrooms as ‘assets’ to their school and classroom culture. This environment can foster peer teaching, personalizing the curriculum, differentiation and shared teaching. As such, I recommend that small rural school teachers embrace their unique situations and cultivate a contextual approach to learning.

Along the same lines as Theobald and Nachtigal and Howley, in their annual report, the People for Education (2008) explain that across North America, education communities are beginning to realize that schools are the ideal place to offer the programs, supports, services and education that families, children and youth need in their communities. As previously outlined, their report describes the effect that declining enrolment will have on schools across the province of Ontario over the coming years. Although their findings show overall improvements in many of the programs and resources in Ontario schools, they argue that our system is not prepared for declining enrolment and lacks a forward-thinking vision for education. Moreover, the many years

of discussion, reports and recommendations for Ontario schools has proven unbeneficial for integrating services in Ontario schools. Thus, the People for Education (2008) argue:

Without provincial policy and leadership to provide structure and support for community schools, to integrate schools into municipal planning, and to integrate services for children, youth and families across provincial Ministries, Ontario will not achieve what has been achieved in other provinces and jurisdictions – schools at the centre of communities, used and valued by the community at large (p. 3).

Therefore, as an alternative to closures and consolidations, the People for Education are suggesting that schools at the hub of communities be used and valued by community members. They draw upon successful reforms in other provinces. In Manitoba, for instance, the Manitoba government provides funding for community schools that “act as a hub for a broad range of services, supports and opportunities that strengthen and support schools, families and communities” (People for Education, 2008, p. 3). Similarly, in Saskatchewan, the province has implemented the SchoolsPlus program, which is based on the premise that schools have two functions: to educate children and youth, and to deliver services to families (People for Education, 2008).

Evidently, new solutions are needed and there are alternative choices to initiatives such as Boundary 2020. In both rural and urban areas, schools can act as viable and thriving hubs for their communities. They can include community centres that stay open after hours and on weekends for community use. Schools can house parenting centres, child care centres, sports events, community kitchens, public meeting spaces, public libraries and health clinics. These community uses add to the life of a school and strengthen a community’s sense of connection to their local school (People for Education, 2008). Moreover, with regards to the closure and consolidation rationale of efficiency and economics, these solutions offer efficient uses of the schools and do not necessarily

cost more money. Rather, in many cases, schools may save more money in the long run. Furthermore, these recommendations may involve municipalities and other ministries and sectors and would impose fundamental changes on the way schools are funded (People for Education, 2008).

As previously exemplified, declining enrolment in Ontario should not be seen as synonymous with school closures and consolidations. In various provinces, Ministries of Education are exploring other strategies to deal with declining enrolment (DEWG, 2008; People for Education, 2008). In Manitoba, in response to the ARC process, parental concerns were so strong and valued that the Manitoba government tabled a bill to put a moratorium on school closures. This proposed legislation meant that any school up for review would no longer be eligible for closure except under extreme circumstances. Thus, many schools facing declining enrolment were not eligible for closure or consolidation (DEWG, 2008). In Quebec, the Quebec English School Boards Association appointed an advisory council to investigate the issue of declining enrolment and limited resources. In congruence with the previously described community-based solutions, this council recommended that Quebec school boards re-position their schools as centres for community-based activity and complementary services. They argued that schools from both English and French systems share more of their services, programs and buildings, and that school systems should co-operate with municipalities to ensure the full and effective use of their buildings (People for Education, 2008).

With regards to the ‘economics’ argument, the People for Education recall that declining enrolment is *not* offset by changes in funding formulas. Over the past few years, Ontario has added grants to support small, remote schools, and school boards now

receive funding for principals, vice principals and administrative staff on a per-school as well as a per-pupil basis. The province also provides school boards with a “Declining Enrolment Grant – a temporary transition grant to allow boards to adjust their staffing and expenses as their enrolment declines” (People for Education, 2008, p. 7). However, despite these steep declines in average school enrolment, the province has not changed the number of students required to generate staff in the funding formula. Perhaps a re-evaluation of the students to staff ratio is necessary in order to alleviate the misperception that closures and consolidations are the one and only ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of declining enrolment.

The Declining Enrolment Working Group report of 2008 recommends ways in which Ontario’s education community can continue to improve student achievement while addressing the impact of declining enrolment. This working group argues that when school closures or consolidations are the only solutions considered, we risk losing sight of our primary goal – the continuous improvement of student achievement (DEWG, 2008). Thus, this group is referring to student achievement as a goal which is *not* synonymous with closures and consolidations. This argument contradicts Boundary 2020’s vision for a 90% graduation rate through school closure and consolidation.

The DEWG suggests that their consultations and research have shown that alternative options exist. Declining enrolment is an issue that must be faced, not by school boards currently affected by it, but by all partners in education, to ensure that Ontario schools continue to be viable, valuable centres of learning. Their recommendations focus on four strategic activities that they deem critical to improving the education system’s response to declining enrolment:

1. Enrolment-based planning: We recommend a comprehensive planning process that encourages sharing information and opening dialogues before the discussion turns to choices about the future of individual schools.
2. Dialogue and partnerships: We recommend measures to build community dialogue and to encourage wider use of effective partnerships with both education and community partners.
3. E-learning and alternative program delivery: We recommend ways to promote e-learning and other alternative means of delivering programs through the use of information technology. These approaches can form an important part of program delivery for all boards, but particularly those experiencing declining enrolment.
4. A more effective funding formula: We recommend changes to make the funding formula more effective in allocating support for boards experiencing declining enrolment and in providing incentives for boards to find a better balance between resources and expenditures (DEWG, 2008, p. 29).

The research indicates that various choices are available to rural schools facing challenges such as declining enrolment. Researchers have suggested cultivating the community aspect of these small rural schools in order to encourage dialogue and strengthen partnerships. Ontarian research groups, such as the People for Education and the Declining Enrolment Working group believe that future research should focus on funding formulas and enrolment based planning. These recommendations and alternate choices should be acknowledged and considered prior to decisions for closures and consolidations.

Summary

In this chapter, first, using the theme of ‘voices of all stakeholders’ I analyzed the diverse perspectives present in the Boundary 2020 debate. I have explained how the four major themes that emerged from my document analysis relate to my conceptual framework and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. With reference to my findings and literature review, I provided recommendations for educational officials involved in reform decisions. In the following chapter, I discuss implications for future research, limitations to the study and make concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study has examined various conflicting perspectives surrounding small rural school closure and consolidation reform in Eastern Ontario. The aim was to understand the rationale behind these reform initiatives and explore local responses to these reforms. In order to do so, seven pertinent documents were analyzed using semiotic analysis, as it allowed for the uncovering of differing meanings and interpretations ('voices') of the reform situation. Intertwined in these meanings and interpretations were four major themes. The preceding chapter discussed these themes as they related to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and my conceptual framework. In this chapter, I offer implications for future research, limitations to this study and concluding remarks.

Implications for Future Research

The documents analyzed for this project indicate an evident clash in perspectives regarding small rural school reform. Regardless of this conflict, the Boundary 2020 reform is now a reality. In light of this one-sided reform, future research is necessary across Ontario in order to listen to and take into account the voices of *all* stakeholders involved prior to decision making. Researchers agree that these types of qualitative studies involving an exploration of the perspectives of rural stakeholders would develop a comprehensive view of small rural school experiences (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Hicks, 1999; Newton & Newton, 1992).

The UCDSB officials have begun this process by surveying certain stakeholders in order to get a sense of the perspectives on this reform (Dawes, 2009). However, these

surveys seem to cater to the administrative side. Enhanced qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups with students, teachers and parents is necessary in order to listen to and value the various voices involved and obtain a clear sense of the impacts of this transition.

My journal and Lunman's (2008) article indicate that when most students are asked for their opinion on their future education, they will take this seriously and reflect on what is best for their learning. However, it is evident in the literature that the student voice is rarely considered in school closure and consolidation decisions. As such, qualitative research exploring students' opinions of the advantages and disadvantages of school closures and consolidations would be beneficial to the reform process.

My findings suggest that teachers find themselves in a difficult position with regards to their opinions on reform efforts. They usually have strong points of view regarding reforms, but may not be able to voice their concerns for fear of being ostracized by the school board (Thompson, 2010, pp. 18-19). However, as closures and consolidations affect both their positions and curriculum delivery, their perspectives are valid for the future of the education system. Thus, quantitative and qualitative research in the form of anonymous surveys would be beneficial to determine their stance on reform efforts.

As evidenced in other provinces, when parents join together to voice their opinions and concerns on reform efforts, the results are beneficial for small school communities. In Manitoba, parental concerns were so strong and valued that the government passed a bill to put a moratorium on school closures (DEWG, 2008). For the

most part, this particular group of stakeholders has the community and students well-being at heart. Future research that attends to parents' perspectives would be beneficial.

Despite the arguments against closures and consolidations (Carson, 2007; ETFO, 2007) and research indicating the various advantages of small rural schools (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Newton & Newton, 1992), numerous small rural communities across Eastern Ontario have been affected by school closures and the consolidations of the Boundary 2020 reform. Although these reforms appear under the guise of efficiency, economics, quality education, student achievement and community identity, further research would benefit from an understanding of whether or not these reforms are truly beneficial to students and their communities in the long run. One parent and realtor, for instance, expressed the following concern regarding the lack of appropriate research: "The studies on the economic impact of school closures on communities have not gone far enough" (Burns as cited in Lunman, 2008, paragraph 6). Therefore, research attending to the aftermath of reforms such as Boundary 2020 is required in order to make recommendations for future reforms. Moreover, as my study was localized to one particular Eastern Ontario school board, it would be beneficial to examine the reform efforts throughout Ontario. In light of the phenomenon of declining enrolment throughout the province and the fact that it is a main argument for reform efforts, research should focus on the similarities of Ontarian reform efforts.

Lastly, most researchers in the field of rural education concur that rural education in general is a relatively uncultivated facet of education (DeYoung, 1987; Howley 1997; Wallin, 2007). Howley (1997) argues that rural places suffer more than other places from the lack of research in education and from the misguided effort to build up standardized,

universalized procedures for school improvement. Many current research efforts undermine improvement in rural education. This research ignores rural circumstances and does not offer anything to fortify the will of those who would see rural schools improve for the benefit of rural community (Howley, 1997). Therefore, in order for school board officials and policymakers to truly grasp unique rural situations, further research is necessary on the “ins and outs” of rural education. I am not saying that each rural school should be put into a cookie cutter mold, but they do share common challenges and we need research that attends to both these challenges and their advantages. Howley (1997) explains that past research lacks empirical data, a consensus about appropriate definitions of rural education and knowledge of the diversity of rural schools. Therefore, I agree with DeYoung's (1987) argument that future scholarship calls for data-based studies on rural schooling dynamics, coupled with literature on administrative issues and problems. Longitudinal studies would allow delving into the issues over time, and follow-up on the consequences and implications of such decision making.

Limitations

My intent was to examine the rationale for the small rural school closures and consolidations of Boundary 2020 and responses to this reform. Although the research allowed me to explore various perspectives surrounding Boundary 2020 in the form of written documents, my data could have been augmented had I been able to engage in qualitative interactive research, including interviewing rural stakeholders (teachers, students, parents and community members).

Furthermore, the Boundary 2020 rationale and responses to this reform cannot be generalized to all school closure and consolidation reform situations as each case has

differing contexts. The perspectives discussed, however, do reflect a set of common themes relevant to small rural school reform.

I am a teacher in the school that served as my research site. My journal depicted examples of routine small rural school experiences. These experiences were comparable to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Although I am not a member of this rural community, as a teacher I have an affinity for this school and its students. Thus, I shared many of the perspectives of the ‘pro saving small rural schools’ stakeholders and disagreed with many of the ‘pro Boundary 2020’ arguments. As such, my closeness to this situation, although deemed to be a significant advantage, could be considered as a source of bias despite efforts made to check the data collected against other sources for increased trustworthiness.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this project, I have been guided by the following research questions:

- What is the intention and rationale of policymakers and educational officials involved in rural school closures and consolidations?
- What are the shared perspectives of rural students, parents and community members regarding school closures and consolidations and the value and viability of their small rural schools?
- What are the effects of small rural school closures and consolidations on local rural communities?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I analyzed seven documents pertaining to the Boundary 2020 closure and consolidation reform, through the conceptual lens of globalization and situated cognition. The data collected support the research findings that

tension exists between standardized, globalized agendas and rural commitments and identities (Howley, 1997; Wallin, 2007). The themes that emerged through my document analysis also relate to the research evidence that closure and consolidation initiatives are fueled by arguments for declining enrolment and school size, efficiency and economics, and quality education and student achievement (Bard et al., 2006; Mulcahy, 1993; Wallin, 2007). Whereas, stakeholders who believe in the value and viability of small rural schools tend to recognize the advantages of their small size and importance of cultivating their community identity (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995)

From this study, it appears that the intent of policy makers and educational officials involved in rural school closures and consolidations is to *solve* the rural *problems* the main problem being declining enrolment, in an efficient, productive and economically viable manner. These factors have been adopted by educational officials as global ideals. With regards to Boundary 2020, school board officials argue that the decrease in the board's student population will hinder our capability to provide quality education to students (Boundary 2020, 2007). However, these officials do not elaborate on this connection between school size and quality education. On the other hand, governmental organizations, such as the Declining Enrolment Working Group, argue that school closures and consolidations as a *solution* to declining enrolment run the risk of losing sight of our main goal as educators, the continuous improvement of student achievement (DEWG, 2008).

In this study, it was found that most parents, community members, students and teachers share common perspectives regarding small rural school closures and

consolidations. These groups of people view their small rural schools not only as an essential component to a thriving community, but as vital learning centres for their children. Students of these schools feel safe and comfortable in these small family-like school cultures. Teachers appreciate the various teaching and learning styles that are fostered in a small school environment, including community-centred learning. This situated learning has its roots in the theory of situated cognition (Lave, 1997; Whitson, 1997). Parents recognize the role of the school as the hub of the community and the center for many community activities. With regards to reforms, such as Boundary 2020, these people join together to save their small rural schools.

The literature indicates that closures and consolidations have been detrimental to rural communities across North America (Bard et al., 2006; Howley, 1997). This study touches upon the effects of small rural school closures and consolidations on rural communities. Within the research context, the Boundary 2020 initiative seemed to recall old wounds of the devastation of surrounding communities caused by school closures in previous years (Lunman, 2008). Although this precedence served as an argument against Boundary 2020, 13 schools in 13 different communities are slated to close. The school board officials have begun to research the effects of this reform on administrative implications and student learning (Dawes, 2009). However, no documentation was uncovered regarding the effects of Boundary 2020 on these communities.

In Ontario, in the fall of 2007, Dalton McGuinty's Liberal Government election campaign promised \$550 million in funding to save rural schools (Lunman, 2008). One wonders what happened to this promise. Moreover, the fact that a facet of McGuinty's campaign referred to saving small rural schools, which implies he feels the need exists, is

evidence of the growing number of small rural schools at risk of closure and consolidation throughout Ontario. This study has served as a starting point for discussion on this topic. My hope is this: as cities and suburbs expand, and large mega schools are created, the *small rural school* will continue to *stand* tall in all its glory. In order to achieve this, innovative strategies have to be explored through negotiations of *all* groups of stakeholders to support small rural schools in the face of change.

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