

# Schools that Don't Close: Possible Places and Spaces for Progressive Teaching, Learning, and Research

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*Small schools and their communities contribute to an important, though threatened, knowledge base. The threat adheres in underlying technologies (conceptual and material) that propel the capitalistic world towards the rationalization of all aspects of human activity. In education, this appears in the consolidation of small schools and ever larger units of organization. From three studies of Newfoundland coastal communities, I describe schools that were deemed to be "necessarily existing." Because of their isolated location, students from the schools could not be transported to larger centres. While reporting both positive and negative features of actual small, rural schools, I argue against hasty school closures and point, instead, to rural school and community opportunities for "place, voice, and space-based" teaching, learning, and research. Small, rural schools can be pivotal in leading Canadian education from its deeply rooted, market-based ideology to progressive and socially relevant practices that embrace lifelong learning, community involvement, and ecological awareness and action.*

*Les petites écoles et leurs communautés nous fournissent l'occasion d'augmenter notre base de connaissances, mais leur contribution est menacée. La menace provient de technologies sous-jacentes qui propulsent le monde capitaliste vers la rationalisation de tous les aspects de l'activité humaine. Dans le domaine de l'éducation, ce phénomène se manifeste par la consolidation des petites écoles et des unités administratives toujours plus grandes. À partir de trois études portant sur les communautés côtières à Terre-Neuve, je décris trois écoles désignées comme « obligatoirement existantes ». Compte tenu de leur isolement, les élèves des écoles ne pouvaient être transportés vers de plus grands centres. Je présente les aspects positifs et négatifs des petites écoles rurales actuelles, tout en militant contre les fermetures hâtives et en soulignant que les écoles et les communautés rurales sont des lieux qui représentent des occasions d'enseignement, d'apprentissage et de recherche qui reflètent « le lieu, la voix et l'emplacement ». Les petites écoles rurales peuvent jouer un rôle clé pour éloigner le système éducatif canadien de son idéologie de marché bien ancrée et le diriger vers des pratiques progressives et pertinentes sur le plan social qui endossent l'éducation permanente, l'implication communautaire, et une conscience et une action écologiques.*

In this time of economic austerity, as experienced in economically neoliberal regimes, we educators hear much about what has been called the "gospel of consolidation" (Theobald, 1990). Those promoting the closing of small schools argue for expanded structural and pedagogical services, single-grade classrooms, and monetary saving for cash-strapped schools boards. Those

in opposition, however, make the case for smaller classes, the dynamics of multi-grade and age diversity, contextual teaching and learning, and community vibrancy (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006; Barter, 2014; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Although I recognize legitimate pressures on provincial governments and school boards to maximize services and minimize costs, this article is written from the “small schools” perspective.

In many remote parts of Canada, although the law requires all children to be educated, there is little need to discuss amalgamation. This is the case in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) where some schools, regardless of student population, must remain open because their outport (i.e., coastal) communities are publicly accessible only by ferry or helicopter. My purpose, in this article, is to demonstrate through three examples of “necessarily existing schools” (NLTA, 2006, p. 2) that such schools and communities are well poised to contribute to an important, though threatened, knowledge base of teaching, learning, and research. To provide a background against which to view “necessary” schools, I begin by outlining the policy context in which contemporary decisions are made elsewhere to close schools.

### **The Critical Challenge**

More than a decade ago, sociologists Burke, Mooers, and Shields (2000) situated Canadian public policy within the context of global capitalism and the ideology of neoliberalism. Within this text, Sears (2000) analyzed the impact of neoliberalism on education. His depiction of “education for a lean world” at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has become even more applicable to Canada today. Sears (2000) embeds schooling within a market-based ideology that permeates government social services – health, welfare, and education. Aspects of this ideology—known comprehensively as the New Public Management (NPM) (e.g., Drechsler, 2005; Samier, 2001)—affect the educational workforce in three distinct ways, according to Sears: by focusing on “waste”; by introducing the concept and reality of “flexibility”; and by causing additional stress to school personnel. Although these impulses form part of this article’s theoretical background (i.e., the “threat” indicated above), the school cases I describe, viewed through critical place-based research, provide a counter narrative to neoliberal or market imperatives.

As noted above, the arguments swirling round school closures are many sided—political and economic—in response to the pervasive NPM, but also social. A community that loses its school loses its history, an important gathering place and its general *raison d’être*. Local people—support staff and community providers, as well as teachers—become unemployed or move to other locations. Children must be transported, sometimes long distances, to new school sites. Teachers, administrators, and parents form loyalties and concerns within a larger, and often impersonal, new district (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). The curriculum, already a product of an “urban mindset” (Barter, 2009), becomes even more remotely distanced from the small community, the “place and space” of rural students’ experiential knowledge (Corbett, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003a). The impact is both ontological—the loss of a school as a central institution changes a peoples’ relationship to the collective—and epistemological, in that school learning becomes detached from the concerns of everyday life. These are some of the problems facing many small communities and schools.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, C. Wright Mills (1959) suggested that such problems ought to be viewed within larger, all-encompassing issues so that we might understand the workings of society, politics, and economics in a way that leads to alternatives. He called this ability to see what has not yet been realized the “sociological imagination.” By problems, Mills (1959) referred

to the everyday conditions and happenings that stand in the way of our valued objectives. By issues, he spoke of the underlying spirit of our times, the *Zeitgeist*, that fuels our perception of reality and the language we use to describe and reflect the world. The educational task, I believe, is to envision a landscape where children explore and name, first, what they know best—their communities—and second, articulate the questions they seek to answer. In the discourse of education, we call this experiential and discovery teaching and learning.

### **Implications of the Critical Challenge**

As my field of study is educational administration, I turn first to its theoretical base to broaden my understanding of the contradictions inherent in school policy and the shape that an alternative might take. The late Bill Foster, a social philosopher of educational administration, identified a “decline in the local” as a significant issue. By this he referred to the tendency of educators to increasingly follow the dictates of centrally located decision-makers. He asked, somewhat rhetorically, if educational leaders are free to serve their school populations, or merely act as “agents of the state ... disseminating rules and standards against local communities’ ethos” (Foster, 2004, p.176).

Mullen, Samier, Brindley, and Fenwick (2013) locate such displacement of educational control within an “epistemic frame analysis of neoliberal culture” (p. 187). Like Sears (2000), they identify neoliberalism as a reactionary conservative force that creatively destroys all institutional frameworks in its way, “forging divisions across society that include labor and social relations” (Mullen et al., 2013, p. 187). Although the claim of Mullen et al. (2013) may overestimate neoliberal processes and power, we recognize their reactionary force in our everyday lives, characterized by government policies of “less” government, tax cuts and slashed social programs, and outcomes that weaken labour unions, exacerbate the gap between rich and poor, and increase corporate rule (Lewis, 2015).

What is more difficult to discern, however, are the ways in which the neoliberal epistemic frame affects our everyday values, skills, knowledge, and notions of reality (Cassell & Nelson, 2008; Hursh, 2011). The changes are subtle and gradual, colonizing our worlds through everyday and professional discourse, rules and regulations introduced from afar, invasive advertising, and constant assurances by politicians and the media that conditions—especially economic conditions—are steadily improving (Mirowski, 2013) or, at worst, “fragile” because of forces beyond our national control (Starr, 2015). With the burden of new forms of accountability, unfortunately, many in the education workforce do not have the time to question the veracity of “improvement.”

Mullen et al. (2013), however, formulate a counter praxis to neoliberalism encapsulated in the German idea of *Regressionsverbot*. Popularized by Bourdieu, Mullen et al. (2013) define the term as “a ban on backward movement with respect to social gains,” realized in the immediate post WWII period (p. 189). Bourdieu (1998) reminds readers of Max Weber’s claim that dominant groups always need a “theodicy of their own privilege,” that is, a theoretical justification for the fact that they are privileged (p. 41). Carrying this idea forward as “sociodicy,” Bourdieu (1998) maintains that, in the neoliberal age, such justifications play a significant role in education whereby an intellectual justification—that the poor are intellectually lacking—accompanies an ethical entitlement to unequal outcomes:

A large part of social suffering stems from the poverty of people’s relationship to the educational system, which not only shapes social destinies but also the image they have of their

destiny (which undoubtedly helps to explain what is called the passivity of the dominated ...) (p. 43).

Bourdieu warns that the concept of competence in our neoliberal thinking has become a major contributor to this backward movement; it has joined the lexicon of those who would justify unequal monetary rewards and corporate definitions of educational achievement. It is my intention, by focusing on the words and actions of rural school educators, to contribute to the spirit and growing reality of a backlash against neoliberalism, a *Regressionsverbot* in effect, to help stem the tide of school consolidation driven by claims of improved effectiveness.

### **Evolving Design and Methods**

Small or remote schools are viewed here in terms of critical feminist theory and post-structuralism. The former provides a lens through which to see the conflicts and contradictions inherent in a deficit model of rural schools as “problematic” (Theobald & Wood, 2010). It also encompasses lingering colonial conditions experienced by Newfoundlanders, a mere half century since becoming independent from British oversight. Post-structuralism illuminates the manner in which those who wield power and knowledge control others at the margins of society (Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1997; Weenie, 2008). Small NL schools are viewed as dependent on centralized controls, this time from Ottawa and St. John’s. Together, these seemingly disparate perspectives reveal human constructions of power and resistance and, always, the possibility that things as they seem to be, could be, and sometimes are, arranged differently (Greene, 1998).

In three coastal community studies over a period of fifteen years, I focused on the possible “difference.” The first study, which took place in the early 2000s was to explore the leadership of innovative women principals. The second, working with a team of six school and adult educators, three community workers, and extending from 2002-2006, was to trace the application of new technologies—to education, health care, and small businesses—in assisting people to remain in outport communities. In the third study, conducted with a co-researcher from 2010 to 2013, I examined pedagogies that involved students and adults in assessing their own historical and present day food practices (Harris & Barter, 2015). In each study, I followed feminist approaches of engaging community members and valuing “local knowledge systems and ... collective, community-based solutions to systems of inequality and expression” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 183).

From the studies, I extract three cases to exemplify my interest in the perceived advantages and disadvantages of teaching and learning within small schools. Student populations ranged from two to 300, teacher/administrator complements from one to 12, and community populations from 34 to 1700. Together, the cases contribute to my present analysis of the question: What happens in small, semi-isolated schools when closure is not an option?

My methodology, as well as my guiding assumptions, changed over the period of research, evolving from a Weberian and interpretive view of technical rationality inimical to rural development, to incorporate aspects of participatory research as research teams worked with community adults at least as much as with schools (Clover & Harris, 2005). Finally, the methodology came to include an analytical interest in critical place-based pedagogy and research. Gruenewald (2003b), and others (e.g., Barter, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Judson, 2006), attempting to stem the rationalities within education that separate planning from practice, argue for this critical, place-based engagement: critical in its questioning of a technological rationality that assumes “bigger is better,” place-based in that it draws on the

significance of personal experience, and pedagogical in its contextual approach to curriculum. Place-based education has its critics, as well, both concerning its application in a supposedly “post-critical” environment that ought to favour a global perspective (Bowers, 2008; Nakagawa & Payne, 2014)—in itself an urban bias—and as cementing negative aspects of social prejudice and habit (Youngblood Jackson, 2010). While acknowledging these possible dangers in place-based study, I believe the initial problem of rural neglect (e.g., as in the NL context of traditional food practices) warrants priority to local, over national or global, issues. In fact, with Gruenewald and Smith (2008), I see place-based pedagogy as reconciling local interests with larger social and environmental concerns. Youngblood Jackson’s (2010) warning, of course, applies to teachers and researchers in all contexts.

Data from the school studies were gathered through interviews, historical analyses, community meetings, observations, note-taking, and participant/observer action (Barter, 2014; Harris & Barter, 2013). Findings were circulated in a wide variety of public, as well as academic, formats (Harris, 2007). Pseudonyms are used in the first two cases, and, in the third, for the community and co-operating teacher.

### **Three Case Studies of Necessarily Existing Schools**

#### **Case Number 1: Principal Emma Young of Southern Inlet**

The first case, examined in the early years of my coastal research, took place at Southern Inlet. This high school, encompassing grades 7-12, is chosen for my present analysis because in the early 2000s it epitomized many of the innovations that have since been recognized as crucial components of small rural schools if they are to survive. Although Southern Inlet High School (SIHS) was not particularly small, it was still “necessarily existing” because of its geographical isolation. This research followed a descriptive/interpretive design, and methods that included observing classes, shadowing the principal for several weeks, interviewing students, teachers, community and Board members, and studying the history of the community itself.

Although the now common term “Hub School” was not used in NL then to describe a liaison between the public school and community projects, in many aspects SIHS served as a hub. Student learning occupied the centre, with adult community activities fanning out in peripheral projects (Bennett, 2013; Clandfield & Martell, 2010; Graves, 2011). Principal Emma Young was instrumental in this hub formation, constantly striving for additional funding, new and inclusive projects, and cooperative links with businesses and community. Although versions of some projects were enacted elsewhere, Principal Young’s skill lay in unearthing and funding them (sources of government funding, for instance, were not widely advertised), and applying them to her own place, time, and community.

My research took place as the community was attempting to recover from the devastating effects of the cod moratorium on the inshore fishing industry. With subsequent widespread unemployment in coastal areas, many government projects were instigated to retrain the population for alternative employment. SIHS came to incorporate several community projects and cooperate in re-allocating skills and equipment. One example was to acquire second-hand computers and their accessories from the office of the departing Fish, Food and Allied Workers union, and procure funds to operate the technology. Another was to relocate the town library to the school and, thus, make information technologies available to adults as well as students. Yet another was to arrange that the school would host evening classes in adult basic education. And

still another was to introduce a tutoring programme whereby students helped their peers and, for this, received money from the government towards their further education. A related scheme was to take advantage of services through a Youth Internship that provided people under 29 with job experience, a weekly honorarium, and a term-end bursary redeemable at any NL post-secondary institution. A similar scheme, the Student Work and Service Program (SWASP) <sup>1</sup>, provided eight weeks employment for six students who returned periodically from post-secondary training to Southern Inlet. One student, for example, tutored students in design and communication technology during the day and, as a musician, came to the school with his guitar to work with students on a volunteer basis in the evenings. A Plato programme, <sup>2</sup> designed for those who wanted to learn at their own speed and time, provided personnel and material for student training in television broadcasting. As Southern Inlet had its own short-wave broadcasting studio, students from the high school were able to plan, produce, and staff a series of shows for community children.

When I asked Principal Young how she learned about these programmes, she replied that she simply “questioned those at the Department of Social Services, or observed innovations in other schools and asked about funding sources.” She assumed that such extensive, creative financing was part of her job. Yet there were aspects of her work, called for by the District or provincial Department of Education, which she ignored or openly resisted. One was triggered by the new format or template, introduced by the District to rationalize year-end reports and to replace descriptive accounts. Principal Young saw this move as a further bureaucratization of education and one that would erase important details of place and condition. She refused to fill out the template and, instead, continued to write her own reports.

Principal Young noted that “templates provide for facts but not for details of use and learning outcomes.” For example, one year with financial assistance from the Department of Human Resource Development, the school installed a Science Technology Centre. Principal Young listed the usual expenses—computers, a scanner, printers—and noted additional costs covered by the school for desks, electrical outlets, and software. She also described new courses that were enabled because of the newly available equipment. Significant educational information concerning the speed of student adaptation to this changing technology and the depth and quality of their new information, she contended, could only be added in a personalized report.

A scheme to directly engage the cooperation of adults and students involved parent volunteers in classes that were experiencing behaviour problems. Both school and community members appeared to appreciate the input of parents joining the class for one-week blocks. Despite much talk and solid research about community input (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Khalifa, 2012), liaisons such as this are much more difficult to arrange in larger, more centralized and bureaucratized schools.

The most ambitious cooperative innovation instigated by Principal Young, however, was to plan and introduce a video conferencing system that would serve coastal schools, health care units, and small businesses. This Information and Communications Technology (ICT), costing some two million dollars, emanated from the existing broadcasting services of Southern Inlet to four neighbouring communities along a 45 kilometer coastline. The ICT project led to my second case, set in Rattling Brook, the outermost of the five communities of the technology design.

## **Case Number 2: Ann Armstrong of Rattling Falls**

In the new project's second year, I was invited by the directors of the local broadcasting system to conduct an evaluation of its operation. This I undertook with an adult educator as co-investigator and a team of six students, researchers, community workers, and advisors. Although I spent four years on this larger project, the case reported here involves the words and experiences of one teacher, Ann Armstrong. Nearing retirement, Ann had agreed to spend her final teaching year at Rattling Brook.

Ann had been warned about the isolation and possible loneliness of Rattling Brook, a community of 34 people. She felt on her arrival in September, however, that she was "coming home. I think you either fall in love or you get claustrophobic and you say I'm going back on that boat. I am not getting off. I fell in love. I was *here*, at the end of my second day." She was invigorated by the fresh air of this outport community, the beauty of its central pond cascading to the sea, and by its environmental integrity, evident in people's care of the homes and land, production of local foods, and treatment of animals (Harris, 2006). When I met Ann, I realized immediately that I was in the presence of a master-teacher, and this prompted our taped conversation around "what it's like, teaching only a few students in an outport school."

In the past, Ann had experienced teaching individual grades, as well as multi-age, multi-grades in rural schools, an arrangement she preferred for several reasons (discussed in Case Number 3). In this school, the challenges of teaching two children, Nancy and Adam, both in grade 5, were quite different from anything she had experienced before. In the first place, "it's not less work. You are preparing [as diligently] for two children or thirty. There's less correcting but that's the only break." For Ann, there was no down time, no time when she could say "work with others"; she was available to the children, on a one-on-one basis, at all times. And her contact extended far beyond school hours. If she arrived at school at 10 after 8, the children were there

at quarter after. They see me arrive. We have our little routine. They walk in and we take off our shoes. They have to put their homework assignment in a certain place. They have to prepare for the first lesson and have that material on their desks. Then we go to the gym. I have lost 12 pounds since I've been here. We don't have a formal physical education program, but we are doing basketball. I know enough to teach them.

I ask, "and this is before school *starts*?"

This exchange prompts Ann to discuss preparation for learning, what she calls "brain gym. There is one [warm-up] for answering questions, another for journal writing, and yet another for writing poetry." This preparation includes physical exercises, reflection and concentration. Then there are other games before recess in preparation for listening and reading:

We don't call it "recess." They're munching (an apple) while I read aloud, then they discuss and make predictions about what's coming. Then we have to play badminton so we do that for 15 minutes – Nancy and I are partners [playing against Adam]. Now we'll finish our language lesson. Right now we're doing a novel study.

I ask, "They're writing about it?"

"They're writing, discussing, doing a journal response. They're doing critical character sketches." But Ann wants the children to be comfortable when they are working on their novel. "Can I put my feet up, Miss?" asks Adam. They see reading as leisure.

At first, the children only wanted to take turns reading a single paragraph. Now, they have to be stopped after a page or two, to give the other one a turn. Ann lets them read the entire section before suggesting there may have been a mistake or two. She will point to the page or section and the readers will search, identify, and correct the mistake.

There is a great deal of self-assessment and constructive evaluation in Ann's classes. For instance, the children's writing is projected on the wall so that they can pick it apart – “not to say this is ‘wrong.’ We're going to apply our rubric that we use to judge things. I would say this is a 2; what can we do to bring this from a 2 to a 3?”

Ann's children were registered with the Province as a “green school,” that is, they volunteered to accomplish

one hundred environmental projects. We started last week and now have 10 done. They don't have to be elaborate but [the children] must do the write-ups themselves. One example was the use of mason jars in art, drawing circles around the jar tops and making fridge magnets with the lids; this was considered “environmental” because otherwise the lids and jars would be tossed out. Then, we went into the back hills on a nature walk.

Here, the children, familiar with the ponds and vegetation, became the teachers, showing Ann teaberries, ground-heart, and identifying these and other plants by their leaves. “Right now, we're keeping apple seeds. Rather than throw them away, we're going to plant them. We have to get 20 done.”

When Ann's teaching day is over, she has dinner and then returns to the school to see to administrative work, the only part she is “not enjoying.” Ann, like any solitary teacher in a school, is also the principal. All principals in these small schools, on the other hand, are teacher/administrators. The emphasis on one role or the other is an outcome of the person's interest, experience, and/or talent.

### **Case Number 3: Outer Harbour Community and All-Grade Academy**

The third case features a school and community project, as well as illustrative words of a specific teacher. The researchers, Dr. Barbara Barter and I, were involved in the earlier cases, had learned from both, and wanted to apply aspects of these studies to yet another coastal situation. Although now retired, it is hardly surprising that at this stage of our lives—having taught all grades and ages from K to post-secondary graduate levels, worked with school boards and provincial Departments of Education, and studied the professional lives of other teachers—we wished to explore for ourselves pedagogies that work.

Our purposes in Outer Harbour were to

1. Experiment with pedagogies that appeal to public school students, speak to the existing curriculum, and produce results;
2. Practice participatory methods of sharing knowledge with the population of 150 still left in the Harbour;
3. Help to render traditional and local knowledge explicit, and in this way counter deficit thinking about rurality (Sharma & Portelli, 2014); and,
4. Disseminate alternative approaches to rural pedagogy and research among the wider population.

From our critical and place-based design (Gruenewald, 2003b; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004), we asked about historical and present day food practices in the Harbour, when conditions changed from near self-sufficiency to dependency on store-bought foods, why the changes occurred, and whose interests were served in the process (Harris & Barter, 2015). In this article, however, I report primarily on the pedagogies, their applicability to the larger curriculum, and the advantages and disadvantages experienced in this outpost school setting.

Dr. Barter and I visited Outer Harbour a week at a time and, while there, spent each school day taking classes as convenient for the teachers, and evenings talking with community adults. Three pedagogical assumptions guided our study of the school's entire student population of 23 students, grades K-12.<sup>3</sup> The first was that students learn most readily when drawing from their own previous knowledge. Thus, we began with experiential learning through games, the arts, and discussion in which we, the "food ladies," were the main learners about the geography and life experiences of Outer Harbour. The second assumption was that students appreciate readily the information that they, themselves, gather. Students from grades 4 to 12 became "researchers," the younger ones visiting garden farmers and shopkeepers, and the high school students interviewing elders of the community about past and present food practices. The third assumption was that students, in order to maximize their chances of success, need to engage in and express themselves in a wide variety of sentient experiences. Thus almost all lessons were arts-based, involving students in speech rhythms, songs, and games, visual representations, and poetry about their community and its food practices (Harris & Barter, 2013). The arts introduced and enhanced curriculum-based activities of discussion, reading, and writing.

As we have reported extensively on our findings elsewhere, I mention here only those features of the study that speak to this "necessarily existing" school. The first is that multi-grading is a given. In grades 4-6 and grades 7-9, we worked with only 6 and 3 children respectively. In grades 9-12, we met with 7 students in classes designated for Healthy Living, Nutrition, and English Language; we filled in any space offered to us in the daily schedule. As we addressed food studies within the existent curriculum, we attended to such general objectives as the development of research, listening, and writing skills. All lesson plans and class outcomes were shared with the school principal and the director of curriculum for the local school board.

At Rattling Falls, Ann Armstrong had outlined reasons for her preference of a multi-graded classroom. These centered round the mutual learning that takes place as older children become "mentors" to the younger ones. Judy Lord, recently retired after 30 years at Outer Harbour, agreed adding that "in the multi-graded situation, the older ones look at it as the natural thing for them to do. And they love to show what they have learned. You know, to pass it on." Judy always taught more than one grade at a time, first 2 and 3, then 1, 2, and 3 and, as the student body became smaller, K to 3. She also opened "school" to pre-schoolers for an hour each week, from January to June. For the pre-school, a parent or grand-parent "would accompany the young ones at first, and gradually take part in the teaching and learning." This way, "parents as well as children became acquainted with the school and learned that it could be a delightful place." It helped immensely, Judy believes, that she knew the parents and the community and, therefore, was aware of any special circumstances in the children's lives. She found the cooperation between families and school to be one of the great joys of her teaching. Another was "the continuity of having children throughout the four years of their young lives."

When I asked Judy if she saw other advantages in the rural setting, she came back once more to the parent body:

You don't just call a parent if you have trouble with a child. You talk with them on an almost daily basis. It's more personal. They know you, and they know that you are working for the interests of their child. Therefore, you have their support. And I think you *have* to have parental support.

Judy pointed out that the mentoring did not take place only within class time. In their everyday school lives, her younger children

looked up to [the older students in the school]. If they're having something as simple as a Halloween Party, they'll get together and [the bigger ones] will do games for them. They take pride in helping out the little ones. Our early 'buddy reading' is not confined to the classroom either. You can have the whole school involved in that.

Judy recognized disadvantages, as well, in the school's declining enrolment. She pointed out that inter-mural teams are now difficult to organize with "simply not enough students left in the school." In the elementary section of the school, Barter and I also noted a gender imbalance with only one boy among six girls. A few grade levels had only one child, or none at all.

We saw similar disadvantages throughout the high school, where there was a girls' basketball team but insufficient numbers to form a boys' team. Even in the projects we introduced—through literature, poetry writing, and the preparation of interview scripts—the pool of ideas, talents, and social interaction would have benefitted from greater numbers. Nevertheless, our time at Outer Harbour brought us many rewards as we reviewed the quality of student projects, the involvement of teachers, and offers of assistance from community members (Harris & Barter, 2013).

By the end of this third study, I had abandoned the customary urban view of rural areas as problematic. Instead, I became convinced that rural settings provide urban populations important insights into pedagogies that succeed in engaging multi-talented, multi-aged students. Equally important, rurality offers not only general knowledge about survival, but also specific examples that assist everyone in mitigating the effects of food shortages and other environmental crises (Harris & Barter, 2015).

## **Discussion**

The small school, potentially, provides one ideal space within another (the community) for teaching and learning, and for research into alternative school arrangements—what Mills (1959) would call the application of a "sociological imagination," whereby school problems are set within larger issues. These include economic disaster in food production and employment through greed (of both foreign and local fishers), mismanagement of fish stocks, and the valorization of large fishing fleets over the inshore fishery and fish plants. Many centrally initiated schemes have been proffered to alleviate this tragedy for the people of NL. The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy<sup>4</sup> provides an example of the lifeline planned and implemented from Ottawa through St. John's. The objective was to re-train workers for jobs outside the fishery. While this training was successful in some cases, there still were no jobs available in the small communities. Thus, those of working age leave, including almost all youth after completing high school.

The exodus of young people is one problem facing the sustainability of remote communities. Others include ferry transportation (often underserved or inoperative), health care services

(steadily reduced), an aging population, and declining school numbers. Reductions in rural services are commensurate with the “on-going battle against waste” (Sears, 2000, p. 146), a major concept of lean production as is the “flexibility” involved in coping with such reductions.

Despite problems like these, small communities have much to offer the larger populations of the province and nation, and many of these features can be—and have been—captured in the activities of small schools. I speak of the skills and knowledge unique to rural communities, and social arrangements rarely found in urban centres, e.g., the knowledge of sustainable food practices such as gardening, preserving, berry picking, hunting and fishing, and the cooperative research efforts of students and community members in naming and recording such knowledge (Harris & Barter, 2015). Other lessons, learned as the natural outcome of survival under extremely challenging physical conditions of isolation, rocky landscapes, and winter seas, can well be shared with outsiders who, today, with exacerbated conditions of climate change, are becoming increasingly in need of such knowledge (Ommer & Turner, 2004). These are examples of place-based knowledge that contest arguments that traditional/local knowledge belongs to a pre-global understanding of the world. I see, rather, local research as the first, and most significant step, to a more mature reflection upon world-wide conditions of climate change and multi-national cooperation towards ecological preparedness.

Teachers in the three cases above bring years of successful experience to the classroom. Therefore, they do not typify difficulties experienced by new teachers, but rather provide ideal backgrounds in class management, pedagogical knowledge, and curriculum implementation. As this article illustrates, their location in small coastal communities offered them many opportunities to reflect upon and research new approaches to administration, teaching, and learning. Take Ann for instance. Although her descriptions of physical and emotional “warm-ups,” field trips, and the creation of leisure moments can be duplicated in a large regional school, these departures from the norms of traditional teaching are much more easily achievable in the rural, small school setting. Here there are no buses to catch, no extensive parental contacts to make for each field trip, and no other scheduled classes with which to coordinate. The degrees of freedom to innovate are far more numerous than those experienced by urban teachers, especially those in closest proximity to the centralized school board or its sub-administrative offices.

### **Emerging Policy Implications**

An ongoing challenge to public education lies in the transference of teaching, learning, and research skills among practitioners, and between practitioners and teachers-in-training. I believe the first step towards successful pre and in-service education inheres in critique—aided by practising teachers, if possible—of the impositions of standardized curricula, “best pedagogical practices” (Grumet, 2014), and the overweening worth placed on measureable outcomes of research (Gruenewald, 2006; Sharma & Portelli, 2014). This critique would consider all such limits to the sociological imagination, and would foster an examination of each distinctive local situation (and language) before moving on to an exploration of the world beyond. This is surely what Arendt (1956) meant in asking educators if “we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it” (p. 196). Mackler (2010) adds to Arendt’s (1956) message of participation in worldliness by urging us to conceive of an alternative world to that now before us. She asks us, in today’s educational context, to “replace the one-dimensional world of the standardized test curriculum (which one could mistakenly think is the ‘world’) with an

alternative, more multidimensional, pluralistic world” (p. 527).

The second step, following critique, requires revision or reform in teacher training programs. Dramatic changes, of course, demand careful attention to the inter-relationship among the three skill sets: teaching, learning, and research. As demonstrated by the cases above, imaginative teaching involves a lifelong exchange with learners, an exchange that, at times, reverses the roles. This is particularly important for teachers entering a new place and space. Immediately the relevance of research should come into play as new teachers become listeners as well as speakers of reality. A small step is required for school students to join the excitement of learning by becoming both researchers and teachers, first of their own communities and, then, of the larger world.

Apart from this evident and urgent need for revised teacher education, the example of school-as-community centre (or hub) underlines important policy for rural schools. As communities decline in population from out-migration and lower birthrates, a paucity of employment opportunities, the hidden curricula of school emphasizes on “learning to leave” (Corbett, 2007), the dominance of urban-based curricula (Barter, 2009), and the centralization of administration (Foster, 2004; Theobald, 1990), school survival requires cooperation with the wider community and its services. Principal Young exemplified school-community cooperation as she brought together the Southern Inlet public library, adult basic education programmes, gifts of equipment from departing organizations, the local television broadcasting system, adult volunteers for the tuition of students, and a variety of programmes for youth employment within the school.

The genesis of an inclusive community school at Southern Inlet, however, was not without its critics. Some members of the community fought the moves and innovations as disruptions to long-established ways of doing things. For instance, the move from a free-standing public library to the school site was opposed by those who had invested time and effort in establishing the original library. My observation of the library’s operation after the move, however, was of a new spirit of learning between adults and students. In particular, senior students began to take responsibility for helping adults with the new technologies. Yet cutbacks could be seen, even during my research period at Southern Inlet, in the reduction of hours allocated for librarian services. These were always under threat and their maintenance demanded constant vigilance and attention.

### **Pedagogical Lessons**

Each case described here draws attention to exciting innovations in pedagogy, and each exemplifies both resistance to centralized planning and an insistence (i.e., a counter-praxis) on place-based priorities. Principal Young, administratively, brought together different learning groups—adults and youth—and introduced new technologies. Yet she did so through “creative insubordination” (Haynes & Licata, 1995) shown, for instance, by her refusal to comply with standardized templates for reporting her school’s successes and needs. As resident in her community for many years, she felt a more place-based assessment was required, both for school matters and in relation to links with the larger community. Her pedagogical reach extended beyond the school to encompass adult literacy, and to connect special talents in the community with student interests.

Ann Armstrong had the wisdom to respond first to the needs and opportunities of her students and, then, to the curriculum that emanated from afar. She took the learning goals—

accepted widely by educators—of reading, writing, and math, but encased these growing skills in the students' landscape of rural life with its fishing, hiking, and food gathering. For her, literacy and numeracy germinated within the already existent skills and knowledge (the comfort zones) of her students and, from this beginning, moved on to critique.

Ann's approach to teaching and learning was familiar to me as a former Kodaly music educator. Each observed lesson passed through a process of 1) concept preparation, 2) conscious acknowledgement by individual students, 3) reinforcement through follow-up discussion and extension, and 4) assessment (largely self-assessment) through application (Choksy, 1981). Additionally, each stage was accomplished primarily through games, or the ethos of game-playing. The preparation, or evocation of interest, was accomplished informally, allowing for behaviours as practiced by the children in their everyday lives. The length of time devoted to listening, for instance, was determined by interest rather than the bell. The space set aside for this, as well, could be recess or any other time that Ann deemed conducive to engaging the children. Both the consciousness-raising about content and its reinforcement took place during discussions among the teacher and children, as they brought different interpretations to the circle. The assessment was a collaborative undertaking, as well, in which Ann identified the location of problem areas, and the children named the actual issue and how it could be rectified.

The bureaucratic impediment to Ann's continued presence at Rattling Falls was that, following retirement, teachers must wait one year before being posted to a school. With this ruling, the children lost their experienced teacher and, over the next four years, met four different teachers, each at the beginning stage of her career. Although the school—and the community itself—was closed in 2010, this vignette shows that small schools can provide an ideal testing ground for experimentation with progressive, place-based, yet “disciplined” (Ault, 2008), pedagogies. With small numbers of students, experienced teachers are able to attend carefully to the learning processes of individual children (Duckworth, 2001) and, as illustrated here, bend curricular expectations to everyone's advantage.

In the third case, my colleague and I attempted to put our observed and experienced pedagogical lessons into practice in a way that responded to and involved the entire community. As shown, the pedagogies called on students' experience, their developing research abilities, and arts-based means of expression. Our research, of course, did not reflect the reality of everyday teaching for we were occasional visitors, the “food ladies,” with a bag of tricks and promise of a break from the normal school pattern. Nevertheless, an assessment of the pedagogies indicated that our experiments with food study made an impact on students, teachers, and the community. These assessments, detailed elsewhere, were based on the quality of student assignments, the follow up activities of teachers and the principal, and words of teachers, the principal and a school board administrator (Harris & Barter, 2013).

### **Reflecting on the Rationality of Neoliberalism**

In reflecting on Sear's (2000) three major characteristics of the technical rationality that permeates neoliberal ideologies of education, I return to the stripping down of “waste,” insistence on a “flexibility” of workforce, and growing stress and anxiety in the workplace. At first glance, it would seem the cases here show considerable wastage or over-commitment of resources, in that student numbers have dropped dramatically and, as a consequence, the teacher-student ratio is low. However, as teachers are allocated elsewhere according to student numbers, in many instances there are too few rural teachers to meet the demands of the high

school curriculum. Students face the choice of taking courses that are available on-line (and in NL this system has met considerable success), or failing to get the credit they need in a timely manner to enable further study. Strict adherence to teacher allocation, in this case, leads to lost opportunities for students.

Wastage also concerns failure to enlarge and build upon a generic curriculum in a way that would engage students in areas of local and traditional knowledge. One impediment to using such knowledge is that new teachers tend to leave after a year or two. Either they seek employment in a larger settlement, or they are “bounced” by another teacher with greater seniority. As pointed out by Judy in the third case, a teacher familiar with the space and place of community and school—that is, one who calls the community “home”—can much more readily expand the curriculum than can a teacher who comes for a brief assignment, before moving on to a town. The exception here was Ann of Case Number 2 who used, for one year, her extensive experience and the new rural setting as a testing ground for pedagogical ideas.

Flexibility is evident in the call upon rural teachers’ to move from grade to grade and subject to subject as needs arise, and as the teaching complement shrinks. In Case Number 3, my colleague and I found one young man teaching physical education and several academic high school subjects one year and, the next, assigned to all subjects, grades 4-9. As student numbers decrease, moreover, principals must find time to teach several courses as well as perform their administrative duties. Almost all rural school administrators are principal/teachers. This dual responsibility brings many advantages to the school and staff in that perceptions of “us” (teachers) and “them” (administrators) are removed; instead, teachers appreciate that principals are well aware of classroom conditions and the needs of the teaching and support staff (see Newton & Wallin, 2013).

Stress and anxiety surrounded the uncertain viability of each community and its school. One teacher who had been totally dedicated to the school and students was now disheartened about the future as she talked of the reduction in services, and continuous turnover of teaching staff. Her disappointment, fear for the future, and emotional stress were evident. A younger teacher spoke to me of the imposition of bureaucratic tasks such as standardized testing of generic topics (as opposed to topics calling for experiential knowledge). Assessment requirements, as well as materials, tended to be designed from afar, failing too often to engage the lives, skills and knowledge of learners.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have outlined many positive features of rural schools and a few negative ones. My years of coastal school research revealed both the best and worst examples of pedagogy that I have seen. That is, the rural scene was one of extremes. The best are exemplified in the cases above; the less positive examples often involved teachers’ lack of commitment to, and understanding of, small semi-isolated communities. Such problems, I believe, could be alleviated through training that better prepares teachers for rural conditions.

This is a report of possibility, however, and my hope is that lessons gleaned from these rural communities will find resonance and application not only in other rural sites, but in the suburban and urban settings that presently dominate provincial curricula and pedagogies. I have argued here for reciprocity in the sharing of urban and rural knowledge and skills. If this is to take place, curricula must open spaces for rural knowledge, and potential teachers will need special training in accessing and sharing this knowledge.

Within the global socio-economic scene and its most pressing issue, that of an impending environmental collapse, coastal communities have been described as “frontier societies ...where ongoing events such as resource degradation, in- and out-migration, administrative neglect, and other processes are further contributing to their marginalization and vulnerability” (Lutz & Neis, 2008, p. 5). Under these extreme conditions, Lutz and Neis (2008) contend, small communities [of coastal BC and NL] act as a bellwether for society as a whole for, in them, we see the immediate effects of globalization be they on trade, labour relations, regulatory control, or governmental rules and regulations. Ommer and Turner (2004) argue, similarly, that small coastal communities provide invaluable lessons—through their expressed social values as well as economic actions—for those of us who are questioning the wisdom of market logic and governments’ unremitting policies of urbanization.

My objective has been to join others (e.g., Barter, 2009; Corbett, 2013; Lutz & Neis, 2008) in forging links between communities and schools through pedagogical steps that unearth and embrace traditional and local sources of knowledge. Steps taken within schools, with students of all ages, can mark a *Regressionsverbot*—a disruption—that holds knowledge up for examination and, where found beneficial, uses such knowledge both to enhance students’ sense of identity, and to enrich the larger society.

Foster (2004), in reference to “the decline of the local,” attributes decline to what Habermas (1987) calls demands of the *Lifeworld* (driven by norms of community, affiliation, and mutual interaction) and rules of the *Systemworld* (governed by standards of productivity, economics, consumerism, and technology). Foster (2004) contends that the System is driving out the ability of the local to develop citizens who care about their children and the environment in which they are raised. While this claim may apply to the larger society, these three special cases do not present an imposition of *Systemworld* over *Lifeworld*. Rather, they exemplify a disruption, or counter narrative—albeit short-lived in one case—to the wholesale movement to centralize and urbanize populations. Such stories can best be traced in small, coastal, and rural schools which exist in a community setting and natural location “Far From the Madding Crowd.”

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### Notes

- 1 SWASP placements are still available today. In 2013, the Community Sector Council of NL, with funding from Service Canada, administered 298 placements throughout the province (<http://communitysector.nl.ca/swasp>).
- 2 Information about this early computerized learning system (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) is available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PLATO\\_%28computer\\_system%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PLATO_%28computer_system%29).
- 3 Our research of food practices encompassed grades 4 to 12 only. As former music teachers, we also conducted classes in music with primary grades so that children could sample the provincial music curriculum. We contributed to the school in this and other ways, in reciprocity for the cooperation shown us by the principal, teachers, and support staff.
- 4 For TAGS, see <http://gov.nl.ca/publicat/tags/text/content.htm>.

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