

Education Reform: The Effects of School Consolidation on Teachers and Teaching

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At least as early as the nineteenth century, the two most related approaches to societal improvement have been restructuring and systemic reform. For education, that has meant school closures as well as consolidation of schools and school districts. Although there exists a substantive literature on educational reform there appears to be little discussion on the impact such actions have on schools. This paper briefly describes research on current issues in rural education with a focus on consolidation. The methodology emphasizes teachers' knowledge of practice and is followed by the findings, which highlight the impact these reforms have on practicing teachers. The argument is made that government reforms have adopted consolidation of schools and districts as a primary strategy for fiscal accountability. This focus singles out economics, while excluding the cultural and social context embedded within schools and central to the communities in which the schools are situated. In this paper, the argument put forth is that consolidation as a single-minded strategy of education reform is an inadequate framework that places teachers' work and student learning at risk. The accounts of practicing educators speak for using consolidation only where absolutely necessary and maintaining as many small schools as possible.

Depuis au moins le 19e siècle, les deux approches visant l'amélioration de la société les plus liées sont la restructuration et la réforme systémique. Dans le domaine de l'éducation, cela s'est traduit par la fermeture d'écoles et la consolidation d'écoles et de districts scolaires. Malgré la documentation significative portant sur la réforme éducationnelle, peu de discussion semble exister sur l'impact de telles actions sur les écoles. Cet article décrit brièvement la recherche sur les enjeux actuels en éducation rurale et porte une attention particulière à la consolidation. La méthodologie met l'accent sur les connaissances qu'ont les enseignants de la pratique. Les résultats soulignent l'impact de ces réformes sur les enseignants en exercice. On affirme que les réformes gouvernementales ont adopté la consolidation des écoles et des districts comme stratégie principale pour des raisons de responsabilité financière. Cette concentration sur l'économie exclut le contexte culturel et social qu'on retrouve au sein des écoles et qui est intégré aux communautés dans lesquelles se trouvent ces écoles. Cet article maintient que la consolidation comme stratégie résolue en réforme de l'éducation constitue un cadre inadéquat qui met à risque le travail des enseignants et l'apprentissage par les élèves. Les témoignages des enseignants en exercice militent en faveur de maintenir ouvertes autant de petites écoles que possible et de recourir à la consolidation uniquement lorsque cela est absolument nécessaire.

In more recent years, many provinces in Canada have initiated various forms of educational reform to address issues such as declining student enrolment and higher expectations for student and teacher performance. In Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) this began with the

integration of denominational schools within communities that then shifted to amalgamating school boards and consolidating schools beyond the local community. These initiatives accentuated by religion (denominational education), geography, demographic shifts, and economics, have been met with both promise and challenge and hence, have also met with support and resistance.

Many of those who support consolidation, out-migration, fiscal restraints, and service inefficiencies have provided the common rationale for closing schools and the bussing of students to schools in other communities (Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown, 2013; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Mulcahy, 1999a; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The argument put forth is that larger schools can offer more choice at a lesser cost with more specialty teaching free of such strategies as multi-grading.¹ In many cases, those who support consolidation purport that better curricular and extra-curricular services for children as well as financial advantages outweigh the negatives of school closures. One common assumption is that “increased size, class differentiation, and economics of scale [are] progress. Bigger is better the old faith [goes]” (Swidler, 2005, p. 1). This genre of literature focuses on those who hold the mandate for reform and plan for successful implementation. Quite often those invested with the mandate to implement are system administrators such as ministry civil servants and school district level personnel (e.g. superintendents and assistant superintendents) with support from the business sector.

Critics of consolidation maintain that system administrator thinking is based on a corporate model that has little regard for the practicalities of schooling or the quality of working and learning conditions of students and teachers (Mulcahy, 1999b). It is contended that larger school districts create unmanageable bureaucracies that challenge a district’s ability to connect with schools and communities (e.g. see Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Williams, 2003). According to Galway et al. (2013) a lack of connection with community values and local needs decreases the value of the school and the school district. Community members argue that school consolidations affect community identity and attachment (Bauch, 2001; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Nachtigal, 1982). Historically, for NL, the loss of community has also meant community resettlement (see www.cbc.ca/player/shows/shows/more+shows/.../1420435431). Other writers (e.g. Fleming, 1996; Kendall, 2001; Sekulich, 2003) question the validity of having one best way to reform education and its economic benefits (e.g. Bard, Gardener, & Weiland, 2005; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Galway, 2012). And there exists a counterargument to the “bigger is better” argument that is often espoused during times of fiscal restraints and population declines (see Clinchy, 2000; Elmore, 1996; Mulcahy 1999b). Within this view, much of the literature on community reaction to consolidation has been expressed through a sense of mistrust towards system administrators that leads to resistance (Mulcahy, 1999a) or ambivalence (Corbett, 2009) on the part of parents and teachers at the local level. Teachers, in particular have much to say about the day-to-day effects of consolidation on their work but are rarely asked. When they are asked, they often reflect on how it impacts teaching and learning—its effects on them as well as their students and parents. They discuss both the promise and the compromise.

This paper focuses on teachers directly affected by the implementation of education reform. The primary aim is to create a body of research that provides critical perspectives on consolidation from practicing rural educators. The main question addressed is: how are rural teachers and teaching principals affected by consolidation?

Drawing on research conducted over a three year period (2006-2009) in Newfoundland and Labrador, a selection of the existing literature, and teacher accounts, the author describes the

challenges rural educators experience in their efforts to teach in rural schools that have been exposed to consolidation. The dialogue participants provide is used as an indicator of how their experiences are often at odds with external stakeholder promises of the profits and benefits that would occur for rural children through the process of consolidation. In the paper, the author retraces how a distance education university level course became a data source for research, discusses one specific area of the findings of the research—the effects of school consolidation on teacher work in rural schools—and responds to the discourse.

Researching Work and Learning in Rural Environments

From Teaching to Research

In 2005 I began teaching a distance education graduate course on current issues in rural education. Since the course was web-based, most students were full-time educators, mainly in rural areas (75%), who held a minimum of one pre-graduate university degree. The 13-week course, developed by a colleague, was set up electronically with weekly readings on topics of interest to rural teachers including rural education as a field of study, the rural context, consolidation, bussing, pedagogies for small schools, distance education, among others.

With permission, I adapted the design to allow for more student/teacher sharing of ideas set up similar to chat rooms² but in asynchronous time, where students could engage in on-going conversations about current issues in rural education. Weekly topics focused on a suggested reading list (with students encouraged to add more) and a set of guiding questions. Electronically these were set up as forums where students could go to share their reactions/thoughts to the readings and add stories of their own experiences or other readings as examples of what happens in the practice of teaching. Sometimes they agreed with authors, other times they countered and challenged each other. Students were also placed in small groups (three/four) where they were required to focus on one specific issue which was to be researched and presented to the class in composite form (one agreed upon group response with opposing views also recorded) to which others could respond. Each student posted a summary of one article or book chapter on rural education. The intent was to introduce students to an extant literature on rural education that might be used in their final papers on rural education topics that were of interest to them. In all cases the forums, both individual and group, were left accessible to students so that they could add thoughts, shift opinions, and so forth as they progressed towards the end of the course. These, similar to other electronic applications, once posted, were designed to be saved.

My overall aim, as the instructor, was to make the course as electronically conversational/interactive as possible. After two encounters (semesters of teaching), I began to recognize students' consistent arguments that they find themselves devalued as teachers and that more diverse types of research are needed—research that tells of what rural teachers do rather than what they do not do. In other words, more positive stories are required. At the same time I began to realize that the research, as recommended by DeYoung (1987), needs to be coming from educators themselves—they are the ones with the stories of practice and that the electronic design of the course provided an immediate opportunity. Hence, I applied to the ethical review board of the university and, with their consent, began the research at the beginning of my third semester of teaching.

The decision to move forward with the research was based on two principle assumptions.

First, teachers learn through teaching. Practice makes them “knowledgeable and knowing persons” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) who are capable of exchanging, talking about, modifying, and amplifying ideas (Smyth, 1989). As such, teaching becomes part of teachers’ professional lives “to be understood...in terms of its significance and value in an ongoing narrative of personal and social experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 25). This interconnection between teaching, learning, and research may explain my second assumption, that it is becoming more common to have students, especially graduate students, participate in research, especially when the course is web-based. At least three other research projects pointed me in that direction.

One comes from Russo and Campbell (2005) who draw on “the experience of students with two simultaneous 14-week asynchronous online courses” (p. 220) to study student perceptions of mediated presence. Although the whole class was encouraged to become participants, they were not required to. Similarly, Murphy and Coleman (2004) present findings that provide insight into the challenges that a group of students all working towards a Master of Education experienced with online discussions. In the final example, Brennan and Noffke (2001) invited their student teachers to participate in action research as a university requirement. The research took place through a weekly group seminar which provided the instructors an opportunity “to undertake action research [themselves] and [their] students to do it as a university project requirement, forming part of their final placement in schools for student teaching experience” (p. 24). Brennan and Noffke’s rationale was to enable dialogue about student teaching and action research and how that dialogue was interwoven into the instructors’ teaching. The central question for the study pertained to how data can be used as part of “both the teaching and research processes in ways that explore how redefining research and teaching occurs in practice” (p. 24).

The course I was teaching lent itself to this type of research in which knowledge is the information of the knower and becomes “the conceptual means to [making] sense of experience, rather than a ‘representation’ of something that is supposed to lie beyond it” (Von Glaserfeld, 1990, p. 27). The electronic forums allowed space for ongoing conversations of consenting research participants that could be separated from non-participating students and archived by a department technician once the course was completed. Graduate students who consented to being participants, at the end of the course, gave permission to have their portfolios moved to a separate database.³ Students were not identified by class or semester. Names of graduate students, schools, or communities were not used but, rather, were mentioned through non-identifiable descriptors such as one educator, one group, or some small schools. Full postings or narratives of individual students were not used. Data were reported in part with some notable quotes⁴ and categorized with all the ideas of other students which served to create anonymity for the students as well as to develop themes.

The Study

Although the distance education course explored several questions, three were used to separate the archived discussion threads as research: (a) what are the current issues in rural education? (b) how are these issues reflected in the literature? (c) what do supporting agencies need to do to advance rural education? Over a period of three teaching semesters, teachers and teaching principals enrolling in the course were notified, prior to its commencement, of my intent to use specific electronic forums as field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for research. They were

also informed that they would not be asked to participate until all course work was completed and marks had been submitted. Students were also provided a neutral third party from the university to whom they could anonymously voice any concerns they might have about the research and the effect it might have on the course. In such cases, the electronically compiled research data would be withdrawn.

For the purpose of the study and upon completion of the course, seventeen consenting student electronic threads of conversation were separated from non-participating students as well as small group composite responses of approximately 60 students and instructor comments. Group composite responses (approximately 20 in total) derived from small group (3-4 students) discussions. All conversation threads were sorted according to the three research questions with multiple topics being color-coded. Examples included multi-aging, distance education, and bussing. Other themes that surfaced through student reflection and discourse were noted as unintended outcomes. These were issues that were unexpected and included: a sense of being devalued professionally, having no voice in decision making, expressing a call for research in rural education that validates teacher accounts, and the need to depict rural schools in positive ways, as contributing to society rather than as something that “needs to be fixed” (see Barter, 2008).

It is worth noting that the strategies used to teach the course were an attempt at good teaching, intended to raise awareness of rural education through the combined use of a literature review and the recounting of graduate student experiences. These two sources were meant to provide opportunities to share and to advance knowledge on rural education as well as to provide a forum for the discussion of issues. Therefore, although the initial intent was not to conduct this course as a research study, there was the possibility that my teaching, practised as a process of engaging graduate students in trying to make sense of rural education, might be, as Duckworth (2006) explains, “the sine qua non of such research” (p. 191). The process and the medium of delivery naturally evolved through the creation of shared knowledge and understandings that informed the practice of students and my own. Within this context, the inquiry design and implementation is grounded in theories of constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Glesne, 2006; Schwandt, 1997) and personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Elbaz, 1981, 1983; Gadamer, 1977/2000; Pagano, 1991).

Conceptual Framework

Constructivism, a Deweyan concept, depicts knowledge as an activity in which subject matter is derived from the current experience of the learner. Knowledge is selected and formulated in a way that ensures “the progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and also more organized form” (Dewey, 1938, p. 87), and centers on the social nature of life both in and out of school. It implies that diversity of perspective is involved in the formation of community and is especially found in “a community of inquirers and learners” (see Torres, 1999). Knowledge that comes from such understandings is built from a social process that connects learning, inquiry and teaching.

Similarly, personal practical knowledge consists of knowledge “embedded with all the experiences that make up a person’s being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of, a person’s experiential history, both professional and personal” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362) and, in the case of teachers, not only positions them as learners but also as learned. It draws attention to “the individual local factor” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 361) where knowledge can be

discovered through both the actions and discourse of the person. Thinking about educators from this perspective situates teaching at the graduate level beyond a relationship between teacher and student or the transmission and the creation of knowledge for students.

Both constructivism and personal practical knowledge position teachers as holders and makers of knowledge. Gubrium and Holstein (as cited by Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) maintain that the practices of everyday life are not mere extensions of organizational thinking but rather “they exercise interpretive discretions, mediated by complex layerings of interpretive influence” (p. 150). Gadamer (1977/2000) draws attention to the idea that “practice requires knowledge” (p. 532) and teachers are creatures of practice. According to Clandinin (1985), teachers use a special kind of knowledge that is both theoretical and practical—“blended by the personal background and characteristics of the teacher and expressed by her in particular situations” (p. 361). This implies that what educators make of what there is comes from the sharing of what they know because of what they practise. Looking from the outside in, it moves policy into praxis, as Greenfield ascertains in the foreword to Hodgkinson (1991) (see also, Greenfield, 1993), “into the specific, into the politics of day-to-day living and their justification” (p. 8). In reference to Hodgkinson’s view of administration, Greenfield says, it speaks to the “mundane but inevitable and *valuable* question of how to get through the day” (p. 8). The sharing of education experiences among educators as well as the practices used to deal with the experiences are deemed by many (e.g. Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1981, 1983; Hammett & Collins, 2002) to be vital to teachers’ professional growth. As such and with regards to the study, through the course readings, individual dialogue, and group discussions, both students and instructor became reflective practitioners, active agents, engaged in their own professional growth.

This framework supports the argument that interaction is understood as a constructed engagement and that, through engagement, teachers have stories by which they live that are of value not only to themselves but to others in their attempts to understand education. This methodological process became a personal journey for me (see Barter, 2014) as I came to recognize the significance of teacher knowledge and the need to understand epistemologies that unearth the perspectives of these graduate students as practicing teachers.

Findings from the Study

Setting the Context for Issues

Teachers identified several topics central to rural school issues during the study: teacher recruitment and retention, school consolidation, resource cut-backs, out-of-context policy implementation, distance education, curriculum implementation, and bussing, to name a few. This paper focuses on school consolidation for one significant reason: discourse about consolidation seemed to permeate many of the other issues and hence, posed as a specific area of stress in participants’ personal and professional lives. Teachers not only saw themselves as conduits (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) for reform but also believed that many of the reform attempts created some of the teaching and learning challenges they were encountering.

Participants in the study described rural schools as being targets for closure. As one group explained, “the small school concept is constantly under siege from those who advocate a one-best system and who assume that improving rural schools means to make them more like urban schools.” Small group discussions (field texts, 2006) provided several reasons as to why participants thought rural schools are the frequent target of educational reform initiatives.

These included:

1. “During times of fiscal restraints, it is easier to close a small school affecting only a few children”—“there are fewer people ‘complaining’ (politically)”
2. “moving children to a larger school in a larger centre is presented as ‘a bonus’: there will be more resources, more teachers, more friends, and more curriculum choices”
3. “small schools are frequently seen as not being receptive to change and therefore become targets for improvement”
4. “There already exists the perception that a rural education is a lesser education.”

Many participants felt that things never improved in the education system as they always seemed to be in a constant mode of reform. And, the most common strategy, at least from an economic point of view, was to make schools bigger, which also left the perception that bigger is better.

Field texts from individual participants and group discussions further suggested that processes of consolidation contributed to many of the issues concerning relationships between teachers and families (parents and students) and associated issues such as curricular and extracurricular activities.

Separating the Issues

According to participants in the study, some school issues arose that became more pronounced with consolidation (e.g. decreased communication, increased work load for teachers) or arose because consolidations took place (e.g. long distance bussing, lack of student participation). For instance, teachers saw communication with the district office as being extremely important. There were times when teachers needed to speak to someone at the district office immediately, but because newly formed districts were geographically large, it could be days before anyone got back to them. As one participant noted, “emails are just not going to cut it.” Other participants agreed that this was indeed their experience. The bigger the district grew, the further away many schools became—in time as well as space—from their support base.

Second, when teachers attempted in their communities to vocalize rational points as to the negative impact of consolidating schools, they felt as if their voices fell on deaf ears or their voices were silenced. One participant wrote the following in response to a question I asked regarding teachers having voice:

I agree that we should be and could be the voice. However, recent events re discipline measures taken against teachers who spoke out against the employer have shown that teachers do not always have the freedom to say what they think. I was part of that consolidation process in the late 90's, being made redundant twice in 2 years. I had opinions but was cautioned to keep my mouth shut for fear of gaining enemies who might have some sway over my future. So, to answer your question, Dr. Barter, yes, we could be the voice of reason, but can the caged bird really sing?

Third, mergers and consolidations often threatened lay-offs for some teachers. Despite increased enrollments, the larger school may still require only one music teacher, one principal, and so forth, leaving some staff in the consolidating schools facing potential lay-offs or transfers. Lay-off meant no job, and transfer meant movement to another school or community. Teachers had to decide whether they would drive long distances or move closer to the school to which

they had been transferred. To move meant uprooting the lives of both their families and themselves, selling their homes and trying to acquire another home or land on which to build.⁵ To remain in their community and transfer to a school in another meant longer hours of driving time and more hours at school (staying for lunch and so forth). There was also an indication that living in one community while teaching in another created a social displacement in the teachers' personal lives. When one teacher was asked if she knew a particular person in the community in which she lived, she responded, "No, I live in [Otter's Point] but I teach in [Our Harbour]. With so much correcting and planning to do, I don't get to know many folks around here, unfortunately." Another wrote,

Now that I'm teaching in [Baie de Loup] the [teaching] experience is totally different as now at 3:40 I can't wait to get home. With the...commute in the morning and the afternoon it makes for a long day and it is hard to get involved in any 'extra-curricular' activities. This in turn, means there is less time spent getting to know the students and their families.

Further, a transfer to another school often also meant a change in teaching duties—new grades, new courses, some of which teachers were not trained for. It seemed to be a constant battle for teaching security. One teacher wrote,

I really thought that it is unfair that one should have to fight and devote so much of their lives to setting things right....This causes stress, upheaval and takes a lot of effort that for the most of us is already almost all used up just getting by everyday with jobs, children, maintaining a house, car, etc...

Fourth, and most important, participants in the study believed that consolidation negatively impacted student learning. Teachers spoke intensively over conditions encountered by children who had to attend school in another community. These included: long hours on a bus; having to meet bus schedules for transportation home that forcibly excluded them from sports and other extra-curricular routines; after school tutoring, and other academic activities; fewer chances to participate in extracurricular activities in that only a prescribed number of players are required to form a team; and less time with family. As an example of how a student can become disengaged from a school that requires long-distance bussing, one participant wrote:

It is a sad way to end your school day if you want to be in school playing sports or being in drama but you cannot because you have no way home. The same thing holds true for night time activities like preteen dances, and other activities, you rarely get the students from the...outlying communities.

One participant provided an example of how long a bussed student's day can be. Their school began its regular daily schedule at 9:00 a.m. Students who were bussed from other communities arrived at school at 8:20 a.m. in order that the same bus could pick up another group of students from the school-based community. The school day ended at 3:10 p.m., but the students from the outlying community had to wait until the bus transported students home in the school-based community. It was pointed out that if one adds the time children require to get up in the morning to prepare for school and the length of the bus ride (sometimes as long as one hour) to and from school, it increases the school day substantially.

According to participants, busses only made one regular run at a specific time and if students did not get that bus they had no way home if parents were unable to pick them up. One participant explained "many of the parents/guardians do not have vehicles or they work in

another community and cannot be there to pick up their children after extra-curricular.” If there were students who really wanted to stay behind, some of them resorted to hitchhiking their way back to their community—a practice that was of concern to teachers. To add to the challenge, participants in the study also pointed out other ongoing issues including: the inappropriate behaviour that often occurs on busses, especially on long distance runs (e.g. bullying), loss of instructional time during inclement weather, and not having a healthy eating environment in schools where students ate lunch either in the gymnasium or in their classrooms at their desks. All were seen as having a negative impact. One example of loss of instructional time was presented in the following comment:

The school in which I teach buses students from several communities....Many of the roads are very narrow [with little or no pavement]. Many of the communities are situated in hilly terrain which can make traveling treacherous. Needless to say, when the snow comes, there are many days when school is shut down all together. One year we loss [a month] of instructional days! To complicate matters further, there are [some] communities whose roads are almost impassable during certain times in the winter. For these students, there have been many days when school has been open for everyone else, but they had to stay at home, missing even more time.

Participants questioned both the mental and physical costs of consolidation policies for both students and teachers. Students, in particular, were seen by participating teachers, to lose their sense of community on both ends of the social spectrum—at school and at home. I saw a similar loss in teachers. After one discussion around rural schools being community schools, one participant in the study recounted a personal childhood experience:

As a student, there was a high turnover rate of teachers and administrators in my school. Many of the teachers lived in [a larger town] and commuted to work. The school was situated between [two communities]. The closest building of any sort was a few kilometers away. It was unique in that it was rural, but its location was not in any community—it was in the woods. So even though the school was rural, I don't think that I would refer to it as a community school. It was clear to me that the school served as a stepping stone to schools in larger areas. I guess the rationale for building it in the woods was to have one school that could serve several communities. Ah, the benefits of consolidation! After school sports? Only for those who had transportation. (It was a 30-40 minute bus ride!) Community access to school? Unlikely!

The consolidation pattern in NL seemed to be that one community school would be chosen over another or a new school would be built between communities, “in the woods” so to speak, or “in the middle of nowhere” as was expressed by another participant.

Fifth, participants as practicing teachers also spoke of the difficulty they had involving parents. Once consolidation occurred, parents, for a variety of reasons, were less open to attending school activities, such as parent nights, in schools outside of their own community. One participant pointed out that “parents frequent schools [outside their own community] far less,” even parents who teachers recognized as being actively engaged prior to consolidation. And, for some parents who may have been promised more choice for their children, more opportunity, and less distance education in the new school, they found that in many cases, these conditions were not met. Teachers in the study often felt caught between the tensions of the community and the school district. One wrote this about her experience of school closure, “The small school was the focus of the community and the loss has been tremendous. At times I still

hear the children say things about ‘what if our school was still open’. I really feel for these children, and what they have experienced.” She continued by writing, “I also still recall the pressures and tensions that existed amongst teachers here at my school and with the district during this process. It was most uncomfortable and very hard to deal with.” Participants felt that both teachers and parents “were bearing the brunt of an uncontrollable issue” (field texts, 2006). They felt that it was out of their control. Many of them believed that the only cost considered in the decisions to consolidate schools was related to economics. This is a point that is consistently made in the literature (e.g. Bard et al., 2005; DeYoung & Theobald, 1991; Galway, 2012; Mulcahy, 1996 & 1999b; Ungerleider, 2003).

Listening to the Discourse

Government actions, at least in NL, increasingly show that educational decision-making tends to be based on a corporate model, one that strives for the delivery of services at the least cost. Within this framework, participants in the study felt that operational efficiencies have been achieved to the detriment of teaching and learning. The unconsidered costs included “children’s developmental and emotional needs, quality of life, optimum learning frames of mind, socialization, access, and impact on family and community life” (field texts, 2006) and the impact on teachers themselves.

Participants further believed that rural schools are more vulnerable to consolidation and closure than urban schools and that, they were expected to be passive participants in the reform. Ignored in the process of policy-making was the negative impact consolidation had on teachers—their ability to teach, their students’ opportunity to learn, and their accounts of those experiences. Not surprisingly, they wondered about the conclusiveness, or lack thereof, of research to substantiate the benefits of a consolidation process and why government would continue with the practice as a prime strategy without investigating its effects. One composite group in the study clearly expressed the doubt by writing:

We can’t help but question the validity of the forces that are driving restructuring measures, and the overall effectiveness of such initiatives in significantly increasing students’ achievement. The motives and rationale offered by provincial ministries and educational reports make sense in theory, however, there is no clear conceptual map, or hard evidence, at this point, that illustrates how restructuring (closure and consolidation) will improve how schools operate or how restructuring is positively correlated to increased student achievement and educational equity. Skepticism is amplified to a greater extent when considering the fact that current educational decisions are often based primarily on cost saving measures.

In the view of participants, students not having the same access to teacher support, after school tutorials, extra time to complete tests or having the same access to sports practices, drama rehearsals, and school dances as other students, infringed on their ability to develop to their potential. One participant summed up the issue by writing, regarding children having to go to school in another community, that the “opportunity to be part of either school life or community life is reduced by the demands of bus schedules.” Here lies the irony—the opportunities that are used as positive strategies to achieve community agreement of a school closure are the same opportunities that inhibit children from acquiring the same education as other children. It appears as if the farther away they live from the school the greater the increase

of missed opportunity. One participant summed up the points succinctly by writing that school consolidation and the use of bussing

[m]ay lead to better educational opportunity if certain conditions are improved upon. If a student has access to more direct instruction in a class, there is increased opportunity. If a student has more opportunity after school...there is increased opportunity. If a student has access to any academic-related event that was not previously available then bussing has increased the educational opportunity for that student....larger class sizes is a positive in that it allows for single-grading...more opportunities for group work, more children at the same academic/developmental level, more specialist teachers...more guidance time, better for socializing for the students, more students to create teams, more and larger facilities such as a gym, science lab, computer lab, music room, and a larger library facility, and more services for children with special needs.

This response was qualified with a “but”—“but where a bus leaves right after the regular school day is finished, children cannot avail of any of these opportunities.” Couple this with health and social issues such as long hours on a bus, earlier mornings and later evenings traveling between home and school and the opportunities, according to most participating teachers in the study, begin to diminish.

What many participating teachers, if not most of them, saw in their day-to-day practice were the ill-effects of these reforms leading them to believe that, although the intent of consolidation as a strategy is to provide better educational services, there are many negative impacts associated with it. As one composite group response stated, “we were left with many questions regarding this issue” (field texts, 2006). These included: Does consolidation transfer into proportional cost savings? Are acts of consolidation “better framed in terms of saving money or in terms of improving education for children?” Can consolidation do both? Are larger schools better than smaller ones? Does transporting children on busses to schools beyond their own communities help or hinder learning? Does it do both? Where are the studies to show the long term effects?

The extant literature and the field texts for this paper demonstrate that these findings are not new, but rather are recurring themes built from “an antiquated policy framework” (Galway, 2012, p. 11) that have been reported over decades of research and continue to manifest problems within education. As one participant in the research study wrote, “We continue to hear students and parents making the same points to try to save their schools as were given 10 years ago!” Participating teachers agreed that they have not seen any changes in this reform approach since restructuring first started in NL in the early 1990s and reiterated that more needs to be done to revitalize dialogue on the issues. They consistently called for research on student safety, loss of instructional time, the effects of long distance bussing, parental engagement, and so forth as additional factors to consider when determining a need for consolidation.

Listening to the discourse concerning educational cost-cutting policies, lack of attention to the significance of place (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008) and people, and to the long-term consequences of consolidation, has made me re-think the act of consolidation. Research has been presented over the last three decades and, in my view, is sufficiently established in the literature to constitute a reasonable argument for exploring alternate ways to manage rural schools. Writers who raise these concerns call for a paradigm shift away from the espoused universal system to a system of education that is broader and more flexible and includes more determinants during the assessment for closure process. These concerns raise more questions:

how do we arrive at an appropriate balance given the limited resources afforded to districts? What is deemed to be appropriate balance? Whose balance and for what purpose? Do we arrive at an appropriate balance by placing the resources in one larger school but then spending significant dollars on a bussing system in order to transport children from one community to the next? Who benefits?

Concluding Remarks

The main section of this paper began with an in-depth discussion of researching work and learning that emphasizes teachers' knowledge of practice and ends with findings that highlight the impact of the reforms as recounted by teachers-in-the-field. Within this framework, there are consistent threads that weave the paper together and are of significance to understanding the experience of consolidation. One is that there appears to be a lack of desire to change on the part of implementers (system administrators), or to listen to counter-arguments, or to have a much needed debate concerning working with and within rural schools. Instead we thrive on economics and unification, a single-minded view in a diverse learning system. Another is that teacher knowledge is uniquely practical for considering problems of policy implementation—policy-in-practice that can help provide some checks and balances that are seen by many to be needed in the education reform process.

According to writers such as Greenfield (1993) and Smyth (1989), many system administrators, both inside (district office and ministry personnel, researchers, scholars) and outside (business organizations) the field of education give little credence to teachers for creating any knowledge worthwhile about teaching and learning. Smyth (1989) insists that there is “a good deal of negativism reflecting upon the alleged lack of rigour, and the absence of disciplined thinking by teachers in what they do” (p. 186). Teachers' reliance on the spontaneous day-to-day actions of their students and parents are often perceived as being conceptually simplistic. Such criticisms of teachers' knowledge also suggest that teachers are unable to share what they know (see Berlak & Berlak, 1981). In the study from which this paper derives, participants expressed a perceived inability of system administrators to accept that teachers may see what is happening to children and the school system through policy and speak to how things might be different. Hence, one of the challenges for us as researchers is to figure out how to redirect thinking away from a despondent view about rural teachers and rural schools and their capabilities towards more productive possibilities. As Elbaz (1981) writes about teachers in general:

The view of teachers as lacking in knowledge is, I believe, mistaken and misleading, and has maintained credibility partly because of conceptions of...teaching through which teachers have been viewed. Once these conceptions are suspended, a very different picture of teachers' knowledge comes to the fore. (p. 45)

In an earlier writing (Barter, 2011), I noted that “teachers are grounded in the concrete, empirical realities of their communities and, therefore, have knowledge from which to contribute to theoretical and pedagogical discussions on rural education” (p. 39). Teachers know what they see and hear. They are in observation/assessment mode on a daily basis. As Gadamer (1977/2000) maintains, “there is the empirical knowledge of so-called practice that everyone accumulates in the midst of life—the doctor...the clergyman, educator, judge” (p. 529). It is a

knowledge that cannot be ignored. Hearing teachers tell of the issues they believe have emerged through the process of school consolidation is of significance and requires researchers and policy makers to pay attention to what is being said and why. As Smyth (1989) notes, “generating knowledge in a social context...enables meanings to be viewed as social artefacts capable of being exchanged, talked about, modified, and amplified” (p. 181). This is a process that is of critical importance in listening to teacher discourse.

Based on participant accounts and supporting literature, government ministries in collaboration with communities and school districts are well advised to be prepared to make well-informed decisions based on all teaching and learning factors (fiscal, educational, and community impact) before moving to consolidation. That is not to say that in some cases consolidation is not an appropriate mechanism for reform. The question is: how far do policy makers go in its implementation? A re-conceptualization of schools that minimizes consolidation as a prime strategy towards educational reform may be required. Such re-conceptualization implies that schools must be viewed as communities rather than as “taxpayer-funded institutions to be managed” (Galway, 2012, p. 4) on a business model. More emphasis must be placed on finding the long term values each community holds, not only economically, but also culturally and socially.

Green (2014) reminds us, as educators, that “although the dominant discourse in educational policy is driven by economic rationalism, educators have a responsibility to resist policies that are inconsistent with more humanistic ways of working” (p. 237). Green, although referring specifically to educational leaders implementing ministry policy, makes a good point to which I would add, educators have a responsibility to resist policies that are inconsistent with good teaching and learning practices some of which occur in rural schools. In other words, closing as many rural schools as possible is not necessarily a sound educative decision in all situations, and teachers know that. Smyth (1989), in speaking more radically of teachers as critics in general, maintains that “teachers must reclaim their rightful leadership role by continually raising critical questions about the social, cultural, political and moral nature of their work” (p. 180). From this perspective, there is an important role for rural teachers.

In my view—as a former teacher, principal, and board administrator, and now, as the recipient of these participants’ messages—if we educators continue to ignore people and places, we do a disservice to both our children and to ourselves as professionals. And as Green (2014) points out, “the voices of those who have been at the core of educational change must be heard among the new calls for reform efforts in order to meet the challenges of the new order” (p. 237), to which I add, or at least to question the new order. To answer one participant’s question, the bird has to be allowed to sing. Here is one of the places where change needs to occur. Smyth (1989) calls for a “reclaiming of control through reflection based upon rationally informed discourse” (p. 185). In other words, persuasion, argumentation, debate and critical analysis of both sides of the argument are core practices that are required. This, as Smyth argues, allows for change to be rejected or accepted “on the basis of reason, rather than having to be followed because of administrative fiat” (p. 185). The former speaks to valued professionalism; the latter has a conduit effect.

Based on participant discourse, the argument put forth in this paper is that consolidation as a single-minded strategy of education reform is an inadequate framework that places teachers’ work and student learning at risk. Teachers’ experiences show the irony of what is promised in meeting the aims of consolidation and leaves enough doubt to question if it has to be the only strategy. In this paper participating teachers advocate for research that shows both the promise

and the compromise of rural education, the benefits of rural teacher knowledge, and for maintaining as many small schools as possible in a context where teachers' voices mean something.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the editors and reviewers who provided insight and expertise that assisted the writing of this paper.

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Notes

1 This was clearly noted in the field texts of the research. Participants spoke of how multi-grading/multi-aging was often used by district personnel as a reason to consolidate. The rationale was that as student enrolment decreased multiple grades had to be grouped together placing students at a disadvantage. But, if student enrolment were to increase through consolidating schools, single stream classes could be maintained. In NL, when this trend began, seminars were provided by the ministry entitled "Multi-age classrooms: A new approach to an old problem" (Mulcahy, 1998) implying that there was something wrong with the strategy and that the solution was to eliminate it.

2 Chat rooms are often set up in synchronous time where all students have to be online at a specified time. Asynchronous time allows students to check in and make comments at any time. This mode of operation was chosen to accommodate students (practicing teachers) in the course who were in other provinces or countries and hence, in different time zones, as well as students who preferred to work at times convenient to them. Teachers often have other things happening during their teaching day that may hinder them from meeting synchronously. Teacher-parent interviews, staff meetings, and extra-curricular activities are examples.

3 Electronic forums as teaching tools are set up similar to other electronic applications (e.g. chat rooms, emails, etc.) in that one can enter a person's name and bring up, by week (forum) or term, what is written

by that person.

4 Direct quotations used as examples in the paper are taken verbatim, including any nuances to language use—grammar, spelling, and syntax—of the participants.

5 Extant literature on rurality highlights the importance of place in rural lives. A sense of place involves a rootedness in one's community and the "desire to cherish and cultivate one's local community (Bauch, 2001, p. 212). Orr (1992) refers to the experience as "sustainable living" that "requires detailed knowledge of a place...and a sense of care and rootedness" (p. 5) and Gruenewald (2003) defines it as a "fluid 'human experience of geographical contexts'" (p. 2). Such studies show that rural communities and the teachers within them have a very strong attachment to place.

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