

## **Introduction**

# **From Shinjuku to River John: The Neoliberal Juggernaut, Efficiency, and Small Rural Schools**

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It may seem a bit odd to begin an article that introduces a series of pieces about small rural schools in Canada, Norway and in Australia by referring to Tokyo's Shinjuku Station; but that is how I want to begin. Shinjuku is the world's busiest railway station, moving approximately 3.4 million people each day through its turnstiles. I was there last summer. One of the great ironies of being a scholar of rural education is that I am able to go to major urban centres to speak about my research in small rural places. Shinjuku is a fascinating place, remarkably efficient and a feat of modern engineering. I lived for a time in a small town, rural railway station with my family in southwestern Nova Scotia. My father was a railway stationmaster, and I worked my way through university laboring on track gangs in the summers. I love trains. I'm a bit of an efficiency expert because my experience working for the Canadian National Railway trained me to think in terms of safety and efficiency.

When the company business is about moving bodies and freight efficiently through space—aboard massive steel containers that hurtle over steel rails—this is a sensible perspective. But when this logic is applied to decisions about how and where to educate children, things can and do go awry. The evidence-based decision making movement in education is a key example of how educational thought and analysis has shifted from a grand conversation about human values—and the key curriculum questions concerning what knowledge is worth most, to essentially technocratic questions about how to promote “what works” (Biesta, 2007, 2015) and how to increase educational productivity or human capital (Becker, 2009).

I think Shinjuku is a model for the way we tend to think about schooling in advanced societies today. As the neoliberal revolution has swept away most vestiges of the idea of schooling as a matter of social welfare, democratic entitlement and universal public services, the twin ideologies of choice and efficiency have come to characterize educational discourse. We no longer simply provide schools as a universal public service to people living different lives in different geographies in an attempt to establish a basic structure of opportunity to all citizens. Now, there seems to be a recognition that schooling ought to be a market, or a quasi-market supported by the state which allows individual families to make consumer choices about the education they think is best suited to their particular children (Ball, 2012). At the same time, there is an emerging global regulatory framework that supports a measure of standardization that allows for comparison of the relative “efficiency” of different systems (Rizvi & Lingard, 2013).

Novelist Haruki Murakami has risen to international distinction in recent years with a series of arresting Kafkaesque novels that present ordinary characters in an extraordinary light. The Japanese rail system has figured prominently in some of his recent work. Murakami's most recent novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2015), includes a young protagonist who designs railway stations. He is an engineer who considers himself to be "colourless" because—unlike his close friends whose names all evoke colour—his name simply identifies him as a builder. Toward the latter part of the novel, the protagonist Tazaki comments that, following the economic collapse in Japan, an image was circulated in the international press depicting Japanese commuters with downcast expressions, either reflecting the country's economic trouble, the long commutes they faced each day, or both. Tazaki comes to realize that he has never considered how the people commuting those distances felt about their lives. Indeed, he failed to see the full scope and emotional colour of their lives. He was only concerned with the movement of millions of people through the buildings he designed. He even realized that he knew nothing about the towns and villages connected to Shinjuku and that he had never visited the place of his father's birth, although he knew it was a stop on a rail line that entered a station he designed.

But these were not issues that Tsukuru Tazaki, a railroad company employee tasked with designing stations, needed to worry about. It wasn't his life. Let people live their own lives. Each person should decide for himself how happy, or unhappy, our society might be. All Tsukuru had to think about was what might be the safest and most efficient way to keep this massive flow of people moving. For a job like this, reflection is not required, as it simply calls for accurate, tested, best practices. He was no thinker or sociologist, but a mere engineer (Murakami, 2015, p. 296).

Educational policy in many Canadian jurisdictions seems to work in a way that is similar to Tsukuru Tazaki's perspective. Systems are managed centrally and seek to efficiently "process" large numbers of people in an assemblage that draws them in to central spaces of governance. To rural citizens, those who administer these bureaucratic systems often appear to be largely uninterested in the lives of people living in disparate places outside the centre. The central concern often seems to be how to bring people into the centre from the periphery, and efficiently draw from them the labour necessary to keep the system running. "Everything proceeds smoothly, efficiently, without a hitch, down to the second. This is Tsukuru Tazaki's world" (Murakami, 2014, p. 297).

A key problem for contemporary governance in Canadian education is the management of schooling in rural geographies. Although only around one in five Canadians live in rural communities, most Canadian schools are still found in rural areas. Despite the steady decline of the proportion of Canadians living in rural places, the raw population of rural Canada has actually grown slightly through the years. In Atlantic Canada for instance, more than two in five people still live in rural places

I have spent most of my working life in rural Nova Scotia where much of my research is located. My children attended small rural schools. I fought for two years in the early 1990s to stave off a school consolidation move that, in 1993, closed our village school. I watched the changes in my village as the focus of families shifted away from our little school to centralized locations. Ultimately, the school was closed by a process that allowed the community to appeal to a committee of three. Two of the members of this committee were efficiency experts. One of these was an education bureaucrat while the other was an architect. These people presented our village school to community members as an engineering problem and as a question of the

efficient use of space. The conversation about the closure of the school was framed by this panel—not in terms of the quality of education or the importance of the institution to the community, but in terms of efficiencies. How long would it be before the roof had to be replaced? How much would it cost to heat the building with its old oil-fired boiler system? How much “excess” space would the building contain as enrolment declined? How old was the structure?

Rural schools, particularly very small ones, are very often depicted as declining, inefficient and inadequate institutional locations for the education of modern children. They have been presented for more than a century as places in need of modernization, reform, professionalization, specialization and greater efficiency. Indeed, in June of 2015 (CBC Radio, 2015), the Nova Scotia Education Minister—when remarking on the closure of three small schools in rural Nova Scotia—repeated the words “financial viability,” a centralized perspective that alleges waste and inefficiency in rural schools. That underutilized small schools should be rebuilt or reconfigured is seldom suggested by those in authority. In administrative and school governance discourse, the story has been much the same since the days of Elwood Cubberley (1922) the father of the “rural school problem” which he defined as a subset of the “rural life problem.” To this day, the focus is almost always on what small rural schools lack.

Indeed, the strengths of small, rural schools—their embeddedness in community and deep, supportive educational relationships as highlighted by Paul Theobald (1997) and others (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Howley & Eckman, 2005; Jimerson, 2005; Tieken, 2014)—are presented as problems. The Nova Scotia Minister of Education did not question the quality of education in rural schools when she refused to overturn school boards decisions to close rural school in June of 2015. What tends to happen is that these schools are presented as anachronistic, unsustainable, community-focused institutions that have served their purpose but have been overtaken by modernity and the inevitability of rural decline. There is little evidence of any kind to support the contention that small rural schools are deficient and indeed, given that rural communities in North America tend to be economically disadvantaged, it is possible to argue that these schools produce excellent results.

The trouble nested in this discourse of decline (Corbett, 2006) is that it tends to be focused at the wrong scale. As governance and assessment structures have scaled up from the level of villages and towns to the level of municipalities and eventually to large regions, states/provinces, nations—and now to the international level, the small rural school and the local community tend to be effaced from policy conversations. Each of the articles in this special issue speaks in different ways to the uniqueness of rural schools and the people who work in them and care about them. A number of the articles address the tensions that are introduced into education policy discourse by more or less organized and resilient rural communities that struggle to be seen and heard against a metrocentric backdrop of educational change discourse that presupposes efficiency principles, not entirely unlike those explored by Murakami in Tsukuru Tazaki’s world.

It is tempting here to think in stereotypical binary terms about the juxtaposition of community and state, small scale to large, and relating the rural to a cozy naturalism, and the urban to modernity. This is not the direction taken in this series of articles. The complex interplay of scales of analysis are illustrated nicely in a theoretically sophisticated analysis of the tension between the local and the broader state level policyscapes written by Hernan Cuervo of the University of Melbourne. Cuervo draws on the sociology of education and youth studies literatures to problematize the simple binaries that often operate in rural education research.

While rural schools are central to the functioning of their communities, as most of these articles demonstrate in one way or another, it is important for rural education researchers not to “naturalize” or sentimentalize this connection.

Rural communities are not homogenous and harmonious remnants of some construction of a true community that sits in opposition or in resistance to urban heterogeneity, alienation, and anomie. Cuervo also points to similar homogenous and simplified misconceptions of youth and of education itself, tends to obscure the complexity and unevenness of what Richard Florida (2009) calls a “spiky” social structure that is riven with difference and inequality. Rurality is not a space outside modernity in this sense; it is one spatial representation of the endemic inequality that is glossed over, individualized, blamed on “bad apples” (typically parents or teachers in neoliberal educational discourse). In Cuervo’s analysis (and in the analysis of a number of the other authors in this issue), who benefits from these arrangements is a question well worth asking. A key challenge for rural education research and for the analysis of small rural schools particularly, is to situate the politics and social dynamics of economic, political and cultural change within the broader flows of theory and analysis that problematize easy binaries and simple unified identities. Cuervo offers a crucial analysis of the interplay of communitarian and neoliberal discourses to examine how the rural subject has tended to be constructed as an insufficiently educated, and mobile subject in the context of neoliberal educational discourse.

This is a subject who is positioned as much by geographic location as by the classic linguistic and cultural deficiencies that have been assigned to rural students. Indeed, in Cuervo’s analysis, neoliberalism rearticulated the central mission of schooling aligning it with an imagined individual student who is “liberated” from the “bonds” of community and reconstituted as a striving individual. At the same time this striving individual is also constituted as a data point in a human capital matrix. What we find, Cuervo argues, drawing on Gramsci is “new civilization design” (2015, p. 645) or what Michael Foucault (2010, p.140) describes as a reformulation of economics as morality in which the “free” market is not just seen as a method for distributing resources and assigning *value*, but rather as a “fine and reliable mechanism for assigning and measuring values”. As such, the economy becomes the model for regulating governmentality rather than government operating to regulate the economy (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999).

In neoliberal discourse, everything about the small rural school is out of step. It is difficult to measure the importance of a school to a rural community. It is much easier to measure the square footage of the building and divide it by the number of students educated there and this is typically how rural schools are evaluated, and thus, valued. The very scale of the rural community appears in this neoliberal discourse as a problem in itself. The schools are too small to be “efficient” or suitably specialized and comprehensive. Rural communities lack a critical mass of population necessary for the operation of a fully functional suite of educational programs. The discussion is always about where the child is going rather than where he or she lives. Will this child be able to make the transition from the allegedly declining rural space to the vital and sustainable urban spaces of the future? In the discourse of aspirations (Purcell, 2011; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2015), pathways and trajectories (Cairns, 2013; Corbett 2010) it is striking how mobilities (Corbett, 2009a; Farrigua, Smythe & Harrison, 2014; Forsey, 2014) are what seems to be most prominently at stake rather than the sustainability of communities. It is not surprising how in this framing, the small rural school is constructed as an educational problem space regardless of how important it is to its community or how well it educates its children.

In the articles by Michael Corbett and Jennifer Tinkham, and by Barbara Barter respectively,

this erasure is presented as a core problem for school governance officials whose mandate is to provide full-service, inclusive schooling to all children within a region. The problem is defined as one of equity, rationality and the provision of relatively equitable service to all children. In order to do this, a seemingly logical solution is to consolidate children and youth into larger centralized facilities where it is easier to offer a wide range of programs. The world view of these governance officials and the mandate within which they work creates the conditions for the erasure of “small operations” which parallels the erasure of small resource operations of all sorts, peasants, petit bourgeoisie, and aboriginal people: in short, anyone who has a stake in place (Corbett, 2009b; Scott, 1999). This worldview however, bumps up against the logic of place-attached rural activists who live in communities outside the metaphorical Shinjuku Station of educational governance. Here the efficiency experts encounter a communitarian logic is focused on improving and enhancing community services rather than diminishing them.

Indeed, in the spring and summer of 2015 this is precisely what happened in Nova Scotia when the idea of the community “hub” school (Clandfield, 2010) was presented by an organization of small rural schools activists as an alternative to closing small rural schools in Nova Scotia (Bennett, 2014). The province had just completed a review of the school closure process that recommended that the idea of the hub school be given consideration in the school review process (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014). What transpired subsequently was that the provincial government tasked school board officials (efficiency experts) to delineate guidelines for the creation of hub schools. The guidelines that they came up with made it virtually impossible for small, multiply-stressed rural communities to meet the conditions the bureaucrats set for a community hub. These conditions included income generation to match the money the school boards would ostensibly save by closing the schools. Not surprisingly, the first school board to test this process, the Chignecto Central Regional School Board, found three separate community applications for hub school projects to be wanting and voted in all three cases to close the schools. At this writing, there seems little hope that the Minister of Education will intervene.

The closure of the three schools in rural Nova Scotia in the early summer of 2015 is one particular issue within a larger discourse about the inevitable decline of small communities outside metropolitan centres. The articles in this special issue challenge this view by presenting a different picture of contemporary small rural schools. Indeed, what these articles demonstrate tends to confirm the arguments that have been pressed by generations of small rural school activists who have advanced the claim that their schools are not only necessary pieces of community infrastructure, but that they actually do a very good job of educating children for the modern world.

Barter’s article provides a history of consolidation of rural schools as an efficiency-driven strategy that is articulated with a well-established broader strategy of emptying out rural Newfoundland. The irony of tourism advertisement that play emotionally on the theme on rurality as a therapeutic space outside modernity (Kelly, 2013) might be understood as brutal counterpoint to an established strategy of relentlessly consolidating rural schools and actually closing the very kind of rural communities depicted in the iconic “find yourself” Newfoundland tourism advertisements analyzed by Kelly.

Barter’s analysis is situated in her own teaching practice at Memorial University in St. John’s Newfoundland where, in an online course, students who live and teach in rural communities were invited to reflect on the meaning of school in their communities. Barter finds that when schools are taken out of communities, those communities change forever and they become less

vibrant and sustainable. Not surprisingly she also finds concerned teachers who understand that their schools and their communities are more vulnerable than those in central locations. She also finds that teachers in rural locales enact pedagogies that are community-based as a matter of course in order to be effective teachers. Another irony that surfaces in Barter's analysis is the way that established "progressive" teaching practices that begin with the experience of the learner may be inefficient, but they are effective. Here again we see the metaphor of Tsukuru Tazaki, the planner whose macro worldview imagines a place outside the metropolis as an external node to be linked in to the centre.

In a piece located in rural Manitoba, Dawn Wallin and Paul Newton speak to the challenges and rewards of the rural teaching-principal. Various waves of efficiency movement that have swept through education through the last century have imagined increasingly large and increasingly specialized schools. Yet, the persistence of the small rural school in rural Manitoba indicates that multiple contexts and structures remain evident on the landscape of rural regions. Wallin and Newton's work highlights the multi-skilled, relational leadership required of small school administrators who teach part of the time.

They find hard-working and multi-talented improvisational leaders whose work spans a number of diverse skill sets. Wallin and Newton focus on the relationality and connectedness experienced and enacted by these educational leaders. While the work is difficult and non-specialized, it is also rewarding because teaching principals are well connected to the communities they serve, to the children they come to know very well, and to the teachers whose daily pedagogical experience they share as well as support.

All of the pieces in this collection address the multiple ways that rural educators are called upon to connect with a wider variety of constituencies in the community, subject areas, and grade levels. Wallin and Newton illustrate that while the work is challenging, it is also rich and satisfying. Unlike Tsukuru Tazaki's highly specialized work of ushering people through time and space, or from places of insignificance to places that matter, the rural principles in this study are embedded in the complexities of what Bourdieu (1992) has called the "logic of practice" within the community itself.

The logic of practice operative in rural communities is taken up in different ways by a number of the articles in this collection. In a "think piece" located primarily in northern Norway, Andrew Kristiansen presents an argument for a form of teaching that stands between national standards and local culture. His argument is that without a connection to local culture, teachers in small rural schools will be ineffective. Kristiansen argues that teacher education must specifically address the particular challenges and demeanour required by a rural teacher. He points in particular to the importance for rural teachers to develop deep relationships not only with rural children and their families, but also with local cultural practices and the particular pedagogies that are required in small isolated schools. He addresses, for example, the issue of multi-grade teaching as an important consideration for the education of rural teachers.

The tendency in outcome-based systems of education with pre-defined learning outcomes is for teachers to develop standardized approaches to pedagogy. Kristiansen argues to the contrary that desired outcomes can only be met if the teacher meets the student halfway, and in ways that connect with the student's experience. This requires a lot of the teacher. Drawing on his own work and that of Henry Giroux and Roger Dale, Kristiansen develops a three-part model of teacher competence that combines subject content knowledge with pedagogical/didactic knowledge and the ability to reflect on practice. He then suggests an original model that imagines a space of reciprocity and negotiation.

Again, centering the rural experience in educational conversations is what is at stake here, as opposed to seeing rural places as way-stations out of which human capital is drawn. Like Wallin and Newton, as well as Barter, Kristiansen suggests that in rural teaching, and in the context of small schools, there is a greater need for the kind of bridging discourse described by Corbett and Tinkham that attends to locally enacted “funds of knowledge” (Gonzales, Moll & Amante, 2005) or social capital in rural communities (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Because they are often small and community-based small rural schools often represent a kind of “last stand” (Bennett, 2013) for community life, rural teachers should be particularly sensitive to reaching out to students across spaces of identity and location. Here we encounter a conception of inclusive education that highlights the “multiple realities,” diversity and difference represented by students living in places on the margins that highlights work in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tromsø in north Norway (Baeck & Paulgard, 2012; Baerenholdt & Granås, 2008; Kristiansen, 2014; Nyseth & Viken, 2009).

Carol Harris’ work in rural Newfoundland introduces the idea of “necessarily existing schools.” In many discussions around the politics of rural schooling we encounter the idea of the small school that in its community context is small, but at the same time, too “big” to fail. In this case the size of the school has nothing to do with the number of students it contains, it is rather a measure of the importance of the school to a community and the lack of alternative options for the children living there. As a great deal of research and activist work in support of small, rural schools has shown, the importance of a school to a community that is stressed by multiple economic and demographic pressures is crucial. At what point does a school become necessary? Harris argues that in the standardized and quantitative frameworks that are employed by neoliberal governance and policy regimes, small, rural schools are under threat essentially because they do not conform to a metrocentric model of what a contemporary school should look like. Here we encounter the wicked policy problem what Corbett and Tinkham describe as a clash of worldviews, or in the words of Latour and Porter (2013), colliding and competing “modes of existence.”

The schools Harris works with in her research are community-connected places where teachers serve multiple roles. Such schools operate against the bureaucratic grain of increasing specialization in professional roles and economies of scale. At the same time, this analysis along with that of Barbara Barter, Dawn Wallin and Paul Newton opposes the simplistic notion that small, rural schools are pedagogically inferior, unsustainable and backward. Rather, both these analyses find highly engaged, community activist-teachers, whose work is complex, challenging and rewarding at the same time. Small rural teachers and administrators appear in this issue as exceptionally hard working, committed and most notably, community-accountable educators. In a small, rural school there seems to be less room to hide out and to and to float along, performing a purely bureaucratic service. In order to support reflective practice in rural education, the analysis in this issue points to the importance of thinking about leadership in relational terms.

This relational emphasis is another consistent theme in the articles in this special issue. Methodologically, forms of educational research and policy that ignore the relational nature of governance and indeed, of education itself, are bound to generate tension. The policy frameworks in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia that are described in this issue are essentially dictatorial. Communities are not authentically consulted, but rather, are managed in bureaucratic processes that are skewed toward a singular view of efficiency. The engineers and the efficiency experts are in charge. The goal is to efficiently produce standard outcomes or at

least to produce nonstandard outcomes in central locations.

When Tsukuru Tazaki realizes that his colourless, efficiency-driven, centralized work world is actually a metaphor for his own failure to achieve happiness, he wonders whether the people living beyond the centre might actually be happier than he is. He also wonders what spending two to three hours each day commuting to work does to those who are drawn into the vortex. Many of the children in those Nova Scotian communities who lost their schools in September of 2015 – in the service of greater efficiency – will also be travelling for similar durations each day to attend school. There is a level of cruelty to all of this. As many commentators in provincial papers have been pointing out, this situation represents a failure of leadership and a lost opportunity to build stronger rural communities. It is also a kind of abandonment of those communities to what will probably be a permanent marginality. These villages are now places that will be less likely to attract young families and grow in the future.

This is the argument that was made valiantly by the citizens of the village of River John in rural Nova Scotia in the spring and summer of 2015. These citizens did not want their children bussed into the educational equivalent of Shinjuku. The village school was slated for closure but in 2014, the community was offered hope in the form of the possibility of a hub school that would see a number of services offered under a single roof. For a little while in Nova Scotia, there was hope that a new model of community schooling would become a reality in at least some rural locations chosen to receive support as necessarily existing schools. Community members worked hard to develop a proposal for a hub centre that included a regional cultural centre, an arts space, and enhanced elementary level educational offerings. They got sponsorship and support for their various initiatives and generated a good deal of excitement in a community that has not had a lot of good news in the last few decades. A couple of weeks before the end of the academic year, the school board met and rejected this and two other hub proposals from small rural school communities.

The story of River John illustrates how the efficiency experts have the ultimate power in contemporary school governance in this heavily rural part of Canada. If there is a rural education policy in most parts of Canada today, it remains one of school consolidation and closure much as it has been since the days of Elwood Cubberley. The story seems to be similar around the world where the management of flows of mobile individuals, rather than the sustenance of community and rural stewardship, seems to be the order of the day. Of course, not all rural regions are in decline. Some are experiencing resource booms or waiting for the next one to take off. Others are highly desirable tourist destinations or retirement havens for the global middle classes. Few though seem to be places that are strategically planned as multiage regional communities. For the most part, rural communities remain places that are actively emptied out whenever possible with their schools often playing the part of the last remaining impediment to a form of growth that does not require children. Nevertheless, rural citizens struggle on to promote an alternative vision of sustainability, persistence and resilience.

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