

5-20-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Haynes, M. (2022). The impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada: A review. *The Rural Educator*, 43(2), 60-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1321>

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## *Review of Research*

# **The Impacts of School Closure on Rural Communities in Canada: A Review**

**Michael Haynes**

*In rural Canada the issue of school closures and consolidations due to low enrollment and heightened fiscal constraints has become a contentious and highly charged issue for citizens and communities. This literature review synthesizes the major effects of school closure on rural communities, identifying economic impacts, social impacts, and implications for students. The historical context of Canadian rural schools, notions of rurality, urbanormativity and local complexity, along with considerations of urban-centred educational policy, are overarching themes identified in the rural school literature. These concepts were found to subsequently perpetuate the economic, social, and student-centred impacts reported. A relative dearth of research focusing on the community-level impacts of rural school closure, particularly in the Canadian context, supports the need for further in-depth studies that address gaps in the literature. These findings could in turn be used in the development of future educational policy which acknowledges rurality for rural Canadian communities.*

Despite widespread urbanization in Canada, rural areas represent a significant proportion of Canadian society. The 2016 Canadian Census reported that 29% of Canadians, approximately 10.6 million people, live outside of large- or medium-sized cities (Statistics Canada, 2016). Statistics Canada (2016) defines a rural area as being located outside of population centres and includes small towns, villages and other populated places with less than 1,000 people (see Table 1). In 2017, 30% of Canadian students aged 6-18 lived in rural areas (Looker & Bollman, 2020). This equates to over 1.5 million students attending rural Canadian schools (Looker & Bollman, 2020). Data from Statistics Canada estimates that 25% of the nation's schools are located in rural areas (Ertl & Plante, 2004). This translates to approximately 3,600 of Canada's 14,600 elementary and secondary schools being considered rural (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2020).

In rural areas the school fulfills a unique role; it is the heart of the community (Oncescu, 2014). Rural schools shape local identity, are a source of pride and are central in community activities, performing a variety of functions (Lyson, 2002). They provide education, are social and cultural centres and hubs for sports, theatre, music and other community events (Oncescu & Giles, 2014). The closure, consolidation or amalgamation of a local school can be one of the most unsettling and destabilizing experiences that a rural community encounters (Irwin et al., 2017).

In a time of equity-focused education in Canada, urban-centred operational policies enacted by provincial ministries of education and school districts may be producing inequities in some rural areas of

the nation (Bennett, 2013). This review of the literature investigates the impacts that school closures have on rural communities and synthesizes the understanding of the implications and challenges associated with this issue. The inextricable link between rural schools and their local communities is a defining feature that is examined through the lens of closure, consolidation and amalgamation. The body of literature examining disparate impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada was analyzed and synthesized in an effort to organize existing knowledge in the field. The research question employed in conducting this review was: *How are rural communities in Canada impacted when they lose their schools through closure, consolidation or amalgamation?*

### **Methods**

Peer-reviewed sources of literature including primary research and review articles published in academic journals are drawn upon in this review (Table 2). Additionally, books and edited volumes were consulted. Educational policy documents relating to school closure have also been analyzed in an effort to contextualize the realities facing rural schools and the communities served. Some grey literature including newspaper articles and reports prepared and funded by community advocates have been consulted to a lesser extent and applied in order to accurately capture the visceral reactions to school closure announcements and the social implications thrust upon rural communities that have lost a school.

One of the challenges encountered in conducting this literature review has been locating research that

Table 1

*Statistics Canada (2016) Population Centre & Rural Area classifications and corresponding population thresholds.*

Population Centre Classification	Threshold Population Size
Rural Area	< 1,000
Small Population Centre	1,000 – 29,999
Medium Population Centre	30,000 – 99,999
Large Urban Population Centre	≥ 100,000

deals explicitly with rural school closures; especially in the Canadian context (Table 2). While there are well-developed bodies of literature dealing with rural education and rural sociology, the intersection of the two appears to be less frequently studied in its own right and even less so in Canadian rural communities. Furthermore, there is a relative dearth of empirical research which identifies causal links between school closures and impacts on rural communities in Canada (Gamson, 2019; Irwin et al., 2017). There is also a noticeable lack of other types of in-depth research in the Canadian rural school closure literature such as studies which focus on oral histories and community narratives which document the impacts and consequences of rural school closure and consolidation (Bennett, 2013; Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). Literature focusing broadly on school closures is used to identify impacts that were found to exist in an urban or suburban context (e.g., Basu, 2004a; Basu 2004b; Basu 2007; Bishop, 1979; Doern & Prince, 1989; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012; Leach et al., 2010; Stout et al., 1994). Additionally, the body of research on rural education is dominated by American studies, although some Canadian communities have been studied (e.g., Bennett, 2013; Cristall et al., 2020; Oncescu, 2014). While the location in which research is conducted may present contextual variations, overarching themes inherent in the findings are useful for the purposes of this review and in identifying future

research needs and directions in Canadian settings. Despite these challenges, this review allows for the development and construction of new knowledge about the vital relationship that exists between a school and rural community.

To locate peer-reviewed research, the ERIC database was used. To further expand the breadth of the ERIC search, other ProQuest databases were searched simultaneously using the 'change database' function; Canadian Business and Current Affairs, Canadian Research Index and ProQuest Dissertations were included in the search. Finally, the Education Source, PsychINFO and Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index) databases were used, again with similar search terms. In each of the major database searches, multiple strings of search terms and combinations were employed and repeated as necessary. Examples include [rural school\*, rural educat\*, school closure\*, school consolidation\*, school\* communit\* relation\*, value of school\* to communit\*]. Multiple Boolean combinations were searched along with successive lines of related terms as listed above. The publication year range options were not manipulated with the aim of including both seminal works and recent research studies. Additionally, in an attempt to locate articles with greater specificity to the research topic, three journals focusing specifically on rural education – *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Australian and International Journal of Rural*

Table 2

*Summary table of resources (overall and Canadian) cited by type and number cited.*

Resource Type	# of Canadian Sources Cited	Total Number Cited
Journal Articles	22	44
Books	7	8
Edited Volumes	5	8
Newspaper Articles	2	2
Conference Presentation Excerpts	1	3
Professional Reports	5	6
Professional Periodicals	7	7
Policy Documents	2	2
Literature Reviews	2	2
Master's or Doctoral Theses	1	1

*Education* were searched using the index function on the individual journal websites. The same technique was used to scan the contents of the *Journal of Rural Studies* and *Rural Sociology* to identify relevant studies pertaining to education. Another technique employed in locating articles was ‘forward and backward reference chasing’. Studies that were located using the initial search techniques described above, and found to be applicable, had their references carefully examined for more potentially relevant literature. These articles were ‘backward chased’ so that abstracts and full texts could be scanned for applicability to the research topic. ‘Forward reference chasing’ was also conducted in order to locate sources which had subsequently cited articles found pertinent to the research topic in previous searches. Similar search techniques as described above were employed in order to locate relevant books and edited volumes. Authors of pertinent peer-reviewed articles were searched by name in order to locate books in corresponding bodies of literature. This search technique found edited volumes that had relevant chapter contributions by the same authors.

A large proportion of the material found in the search process, upon closer examination, was related to rural education and rural schools, but not necessarily the nature of their relationship to the community or the impact that school closure may have on communities. The literature search process was iteratively refined in an effort to limit sources to only those related to the impacts of school closure, the historical context of school consolidations in Canada, educational policy as it relates to rural schools and closure decisions, and the notions of rurality, urbanormativity and local complexity with respect to diversity, social justice and rural schools. In an effort to write a comprehensive and informative review, the scope of the search was expanded to include literature on the impacts of school closures generally (i.e., in urban areas) and the impacts that closure has directly on rural students. These areas were included in order to provide deeper insight and context to the intended focus on the school-rural community relationship and the community-level impacts that result when a rural school is closed. A final element of the inclusion and exclusion criteria employed in this review relates to the geographic location of the research. Literature from additional geographic and sociopolitical contexts outside of Canada were consulted due to limitations on the availability of Canadian research. Studies from the

United States, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United Kingdom were included in the search process in the absence of Canadian research on the basis of having similar, Western-oriented interpretations of community, rural sociology and organization of schools and school systems, maintaining pertinence to the Canadian context. The need to examine studies outside of Canada illustrates the large gap in knowledge that must be addressed to fully understand the impacts of closing rural schools in Canadian communities.

## Discussion

Rural education scholars have asserted that schools are the heart of the rural communities they serve (Lyson, 2002; Oncescu 2014). As such, they are intrinsically and inextricably embedded in the social fabric of the community (Bennett, 2013; Oncescu, 2014). The impacts of school closures and consolidations on rural communities identified in the peer-reviewed literature can be categorized as economic impacts (e.g. Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Lyson, 2002; Sederberg, 1987; Sell et al., 1996; Sipple et al., 2019), social impacts (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Lucas, 1982; Oncescu, 2014; Oncescu & Giles, 2012) and implications for students (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Borst, 2005; Cristall et al., 2020; Smitheram, 1982; Thompson, 1982) which will each be explored in this review. The connection between the vitality and viability of rural communities and the presence of a school are well documented in the scholarly literature (Irwin et al., 2017).

The relationship between school, community and the associated social, economic and student impacts appear to be influenced by several overarching considerations that extend beyond the physical boundaries of the community. The notion that rural schools are in need of improvement and modernization in an effort to become more ‘urban’ is pervasive in educational policy relating to accommodation provision and closure and consolidation decisions for rural schools (Corbett, 2014a). The concept of rurality as employed by Corbett (2014a) is a way of characterizing the unique circumstances in which rural communities exist. Rurality can be viewed in a human rights and social justice context as a type of diversity that is to be embraced and supported; not as something to be improved upon in an attempt to overcome its shortfalls (Roberts, 2006). These viewpoints coincide with the ‘rural school problem’ identified by early

urban education reformers who focused on rural education systems attaining “a kind of modernity” (Biddle & Azano, 2016, p.298). This urbanormativity, or the view that urban life is normalized and supercilious, while rural life is inferior and deviates from the norm, pervades the interpretations and perceptions held about rural communities and their schools (Corbett, 2006; Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). In an increasingly urbanized world, society’s limited experiential understanding of rural realities is fading and becoming fraught with urbanormative misunderstandings and misconceptions (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016; Sim, 1993). The notion of rurality and the need to accurately characterize rural schools, rural communities and the link between them is an important and recurring theme found in the extant literature. The concepts of rurality and urbanormativity connect the discussions of educational policy and rural school history to the impacts that school closures and consolidations can have on rural communities. There is also a pocket of literature that identifies the benefits of consolidation and supports the closure of small rural schools. This seems to depend on local circumstances. Furthermore, there is another defining feature that extends throughout the literature at an even finer scale. Complexity and local context is another cross-cutting theme that negates simplistic notions of change in cultural, social and historical considerations of rural areas (Corbett, 2014b; Parkins & Reed, 2013). The layers of this complexity contribute to further understanding of the connections and nuances that exist between schools and rural communities and the potential impacts that occur when a school is closed.

### **Historical Context**

Rural education in Canada has been characterized by change and planned improvement since settlers first arrived in Upper Canada in the early nineteenth century (Gidney & Millar, 2012; Smith, 2007). This characterization is a result of rural communities and rural schools being viewed historically as a peripheral concern; as entities lacking ‘modern’ and ‘urban’ improvements. (Corbett, 2006). The purpose of schooling has traditionally been a normalizing force, one which promoted reformation and nationalization (Smith, 2007; Manzer, 2004). For rural schools in Canada, the aim of education was often to modernize and improve what is rural in an attempt to ‘urbanize’

(Corbett, 2014a). The concept of the ‘rural school problem’, developed in the early work of urban education reformers, focused on the attainment of a ‘modernity’ for rural education systems (Blodgett, 1893; Foght, 1915).

The need for rural school consolidation and reform was identified by social and educational reformers dating as far back as the turn of the twentieth century (Foght, 1915). Foght (1915) asserted that rural Canadian one-room schools could not provide students with the necessary preparation for a future that included “most satisfactory living” (p.48) in a modern world. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Canadian education reformers continued to identify consolidation as the most pressing issue for rural education – “larger administrative units and larger schools, they believed, would bring economies of scale, the pedagogical benefits of a greater division of labour, and more varied and improved educational opportunities” (Gidney, 1999, p.13). By 1950 some progress had been made in the establishment of township school districts that absorbed numerous school sections (Boddington, 2010). However, the lasting financial effects of the Great Depression and World War II translated into a lack of funds for new school construction, year-round road maintenance or the procurement of school buses (Gidney, 1999). More prosperous economic times meant rural Canada underwent a profound reform beginning in the early 1950s through to the 1960s when one-room schoolhouses were closed (Boddington, 2010; Gidney, 1999). Students from the countryside and rural hamlets were transported by bus to nearby villages to attend new consolidated central schools (Cork, 2003). These changes in rural schooling represented the culmination of decades of social, educational, economic and political activism, discussion and debate. This also represented a turning point for rural communities; the commencement of an almost continuous period of transformative change and the reconceptualization of social life in rural Canada that would persist into the twenty-first century (Parkins & Reed, 2013).

Many provincial school systems in Canada underwent massive reforms again in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Basu, 2004a; Leach et al., 2010). In the case of Ontario, Canada for example, the amalgamation of sixty-two English public school districts into twenty-five was the first major reorganization of school districts since the creation of central schools in the 1960s (Basu, 2004a; Leach et

al., 2010). An alteration was also made to school funding models so that individual school districts could no longer retain property tax revenues for use within their own district (Griffith, 2001). Many of the central schools established in the 1960s are the institutions that have undergone pupil accommodation review (PAR) processes in recent years in an effort to further consolidate schools within small, rural school districts in order to meet funding shortfalls (Leach et al., 2010). The proposed closure and consolidation of these schools generate vocal opposition from rural community members, which in turn garner a great deal of media attention (Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Golem, 2016 September 15). As Gamson (2019) asserts,

There is surprisingly little work that focuses directly on the nature and dynamics of the transition from rural to urban schools that occurred in virtually every industrialized and industrializing nation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that has continued into the early twenty-first. (p.3)

This historic lack of scholarly research is noteworthy and will be discussed further with respect to educational policy that relates to closure decisions in the rural context. The absence of longitudinal or other types of in-depth study (e.g. oral histories, narratives) of the impacts and broader societal consequences of rural school consolidation by a Canadian institution or educational body is of concern to rural communities and should perhaps be accounted for in policy creation and the decision making process enacted by school districts and ministries of education (Corbett & Tinkham, 2014).

## **Rurality**

In examining the issue of rural school closures and the subsequent impacts on rural communities, it is important that the notion of rurality be defined and positioned with respect to education, rural communities and the scholarly literature. The place of rural schools in Canada is unique, yet often absent or forgotten in the psyche of many Canadians (Sim, 1993). As more people are born into an increasingly urbanized world, the understanding of rural realities and direct experience with rural ways of life is diminishing (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016; Sim, 1993). As such, defining rurality is becoming increasingly difficult and is often viewed with a deficit mentality. Most frequently, rural areas are treated as residual space which cannot be classified as urban (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2016). Rural

areas are often thought to be the origin from which more modern, capitalist, urban societies develop (Corbett, 2014a). In this mindset, education is equated with modern and advanced urban development while rurality is in essence viewed through a lens of isolation, alterity, rusticity, resistance and underdevelopment (Corbett, 2014a). In some instances, rural communities and their schools may not be remote or isolated from neighbouring towns and cities, further complicating the classification of rural areas (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). According to Cristall et al. (2020), “Rurality is more than a geographic place or number of people who live in a place. Rurality must also include who the people are who inhabit those places; their beliefs, their histories and their values” (p.158). It encompasses factors such as rural influence or heritage that leads people to hold a “rural mindset” (Cristall et al., 2020, p.158). Importantly, Cristall et al. (2020) note that “... rural people live in urban places, and there are even some urban people living in rural spaces. In other words, rurality is more about where we have come from than where we are currently living” (p.159).

In the second half of the twentieth century the ‘rural school problem’ has shifted and according to Biddle and Azano (2016), is now focused on “neoliberal economic policy and the precariousness of rural economies” (p. 298). Along the same vein, Wallin (2007) synthesized the policy issues found in provincial jurisdictions across Canada relating to rural education. Wallin (2007) concluded that the majority of policy involving rural education was framed with generic policy concerns and had little connection to the unique context and circumstances in which rural schools operate. In light of these findings, Corbett (2014a) argues that “Canadian rural education policy can arguably be boiled down to consolidation and closure of schools” (p.7). When considering the contentious and heated public debates and provincial media coverage dedicated to following the closure proceedings of community schools in rural Canada (Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Golem, 2016 September 15; Van Brenk, 2016 November 22), Corbett’s (2014a) assertion appears to be accurate.

Relevant to the concept of rurality is the issue of urbanormativity – “the view that urban life is normal and superior, while rural life is aberrant and inferior” (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016, p.3). In the context of characterizing and positioning rurality, urbanormativity highlights the disconnect between policymakers and rural spaces (Sim, 1993). Irwin et

al. (2017) posit that educational policy creation occurs in impenetrable institutional silos through a predominantly urban lens. The local complexities that impact policy enactment, implementation and sensemaking in diverse settings including rural schools and communities present an opportunity for equity and social justice in future policy discourse (Maguire, 2019). This includes educational policy that frames closure and consolidation decision making processes. Maguire's (2019) acknowledgement of the local complexities associated with policy, coincides with Corbett's (2014a) assertion that the deficit discourse in rural education needs to be challenged and a "more complex and rich spatial analysis of Canadian educational phenomena" (p.3) be developed. Both of these observations align with Parkins and Reed's (2013) notion that "attention to complexity and local context" (p.20) is necessary when any aspect of rural life is being studied. This can be attributed to the unique social and cultural context that exists in rural areas. As such, the notion of rurality undergirds much of the understanding about the vital links between rural schools and communities identified in this review.

### **Economic Impacts**

Of the relatively limited body of Canadian rural school closure literature, the research tends to focus primarily on the social impacts of closure and the subsequent implications for students. Little economic or demographic research comparable to that of foundational American scholars like Sederberg (1987) and Lyson (2002) has been conducted in rural Canada. Given the paucity of Canadian primary economic impact research, American and international studies are discussed here. These sources have been consulted on the basis of conducting research in similar, Western-oriented contexts. Parallels can be drawn between the interpretations of community, rural sociology and organization of schools and school systems, employed in these areas to those present in the Canadian context. These studies offer insight into avenues of valuable research for rural Canadian communities which could drive a research agenda that yields more in-depth knowledge for use in policy decisions.

Closure and consolidation of schools is often used by school districts as a primary strategy for fiscal accountability, regardless of geographic context

(Barter, 2014). However, this economic approach fails to recognize the central social and cultural context that schools hold in their communities (Barter, 2014). Furthermore, possible diseconomies of scale that act to contradict the desired fiscal effects have been identified by some researchers (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Bennett, 2013). Increased transportation costs associated with bussing students longer distances to consolidated schools and the creation of larger bureaucracies requiring additional staff are found to result in elevated operating costs (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). The closure and consolidation of rural schools may achieve school districts' objectives of balancing their financial statements, but at a cost to the larger economic system in a particular municipality (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Sederberg, 1987). Employment opportunities, stimulation of retail trade and the purchasing needs of large institutions like schools are stimulants to local rural economies (Sederberg, 1987). Furthermore, the removal of students from the community to attend a consolidated school means some local businesses lose a potential source of customers. As well, students may not be available for after-school employment due to long bus rides (Lauzon & Leahy, 2001). Additionally, the secondary economic effects of school operation including the recapture of locally collected taxes, maintenance of property values and support of local banking services collectively work to offset some of the educational costs, although this is not reflected on school districts' balance sheets in a direct way (Sederberg, 1987). These examples support the need for further, more holistic economic impact assessments that take into consideration the financial affairs of school districts as well as the local economy in which they are situated.

Lyson (2002) conducted research in rural New York State and found that the presence of schools correlated positively with housing prices and improved infrastructure such as municipal water systems. Larger rural communities with schools were found to rate higher on nearly every indicator of social and economic well-being as compared to those villages lacking a school. Even in the smallest villages, schools serve as important markers of social and economic viability (Lyson, 2002). A decline in business and retail trade was observed with the closure of village schools in the research conducted by Sell et al. (1996) in North Dakota. The impact of rural school closure on family livelihood is captured when Lyson (2002) notes, "the fact that considerably

more individuals in villages with schools work in those communities suggests that these places are more economically robust than places without schools” (p. 135). The overall effects of school closures on rural areas may not be immediate and may occur over the course of several years (Sell et al., 1996). Sipple et al. (2019) build upon Lyson’s (2002) research of rural villages in New York State and investigated the rural areas surrounding villages in a five mile boundary. Strong support for the assumed vital link between schools and the economic vitality of surrounding rural communities was found. Significant positive correlations between proximity to schools and housing values, per-capita income and household income were reported. These correlations existed regardless of the effects of age-structure, proportion of households with children, self-employment rates and racial-cultural statistics. Sipple et al. (2019) note that despite the correlations observed, the causal direction of these effects remain uncertain. Further longitudinal or alternate forms of in-depth research such as oral histories and community narratives are needed to determine if the presence of a school promotes enhanced community vitality or if a flourishing community is what is needed to support the presence of a school. This uncertainty is echoed by Egelund and Lausten’s (2006) research in Denmark which identified rural school closure as a symptom of rural community decline rather than the cause.

While the financial plight of many rural school districts is undeniable and the economic repercussions of rural school closure and consolidation is clear, the true impact of the presence of a school in a rural community and its value to citizens extends far beyond economic considerations. Lyson (2002) acknowledges the importance of quantifying what a school means lies in having policymakers, administrators and citizens understand that schools are vital to rural communities.

### **Social Impacts**

The school-community relationship in rural areas is multi-faceted and provides positive economic and social benefits, with schools being indicators of community prosperity and economic well-being (Lyson, 2002; Oncescu, 2014). Schools in small communities fulfill a variety of functions. In addition to being an educational institution, rural schools act as social and cultural centres, serve as hubs for sports, music and the arts and provide a venue for

other community events (Bennett, 2013; Lyson, 2002). Autonomy, vitality and unique identity are traits indicative of a community that has its own school (Lyson, 2002). A publicly funded school in a small community is often the institution with the most far-reaching impacts on citizens’ daily lives as it provides a source of employment, social, cultural and recreational opportunities (Lyson, 2002).

As institutions dedicated to youth, schools are vital to the future of rural Canadian communities. They provide a focal space for community activities and family involvement (Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). In rural communities, these types of community centres are limited when compared with most urban areas (Oncescu, 2014; Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). Rural schools provide their communities with a mechanism for the development of intangible resources such as social capital (Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). It would be beneficial for those charged with policy, funding, and decision making responsibilities to acknowledge and have an understanding of the relationship between schools, rural identity, and rurality (Oncescu, 2014; Oncescu & Giles, 2014). Oncescu (2014) found that rural schools enhance both social and cultural well-being in the community. Closure of rural schools can threaten the lifestyles of residents and result in a reduction of civic engagement, social cohesion and citizens’ involvement in community life (Oncescu, 2014; Sell et al., 1996). School-community partnerships foster a deep sense of belonging and pride among community members and school-related activities cultivate relationships between citizens that strengthen community cohesion and development (Lucas, 1982; Oncescu, 2014). The presence of a school in a particular rural community will act to attract and retain young families, which allows that community to stabilize its population, and in turn makes it a more desirable location for newcomers (Oncescu, 2014).

In research conducted in Saskatchewan, Canada, Oncescu (2014) found that communities that lost a school underwent a significant shift in social dynamics that saw rural citizens lose their connection to the community. As a nexus for social interaction, the local school is a focal point for community gatherings, which generates a sense of spirit among rural residents who may not otherwise have reason or the impetus to interact and socialize. The school’s role as the ‘heart’ of a rural area was also found to promote intergenerational support and engagement as an institution often attended by parents, grandparents



and even great-grandparents (Oncescu, 2014). The notion of the village school being a place that brings local people together for a wide variety of common activities and creating an atmosphere of community is resonated by Lucas' (1982) work in Saskatchewan. Quantifying this 'sense of community' is problematic. It is difficult to articulate to policy makers the value a local school brings to a rural community in a meaningful way that mirrors the quantitative, dollars-and-cents approach that is often used to determine school closure decisions.

Notably, parent disengagement can result following rural school closures (Bennett, 2013; Corbett & Helmer, 2017). The school closure review process is often lengthy and tedious, placing the onus on parent groups and community advocates to lobby school districts and ministries of education for preservation of their school (Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). The time and effort invested by families and communities is often in vain. The large sums of government money spent on the review and frequent negative outcomes leaves parents with a distrust in the political system and local leaders (Bennett, 2013; Corbett & Helmer, 2017). Further to these social costs, rural parents are less likely to engage in their children's new consolidated school to the same extent they did when the school was local (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). Parents cited disenchantment with the political system and intimidation by the larger size and new and different community setting of the consolidated schools (Kearns et al., 2009). While some research shows that communities are able to overcome the loss of cornerstone institutions such as schools and build resiliency long term (e.g. Gieling, 2019; Peters, 2019; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017), the social damage appears to cause deep wounds that are difficult to repair.

### **Implications for Students**

"Excellence is given symbolic prominence, but not sustained financial support" (Stout et al., 1994, p.5). This quotation provides context to the challenges faced by rural schools and school districts and the frustration felt by parents in rural communities whose schools are facing proposed closure (Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Van Brenk, 2016 November 22). Social, emotional and academic upheaval are experienced by students affected by rural school closures and consolidations (Tinkham, 2014). As noted by Lauzon and Leahy (2001), "it is

rare indeed to find empirical support or justification for the large high school" (p.9). Small school environments, like those found in many rural areas, seem to provide more favourable academic, pedagogical, and social outcomes, which are well documented in the North American literature (Gruenewald, 2003; Harris, 2014). Students are able to enter into more meaningful and productive relationships with peers and teachers in a smaller school environment that provides higher levels of participation and engagement (Corbett, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003). Students are also more likely to engage in responsible and constructive community action when there is a sense of belonging and community present in the school (Harris, 2014; Lauzon & Leahy, 2001). Enhanced communication, establishment of genuine relationships, and fewer bureaucratic protocols all work to produce greater parent involvement in small schools (Bennett, 2013). Borst (2005) asserts that the results of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) show some small rural Ontario, Canada secondary schools with success rates two and three times greater than school district and provincial averages. This success is attributed to the close-knit and effective learning environment found in small rural schools (Borst, 2005). Howley (1997) posits that "no one suffers academically from being in a small school" (p.2). While the literature does not make reference to a threshold school population size where the benefits of the 'small' school environment are lost, the removal of students from schools that are producing favourable outcomes is defeating for students, families, and communities.

Cristall et al. (2020) assert that "school closures limit opportunities for youth to be seen and heard and limit a community's ability to build the "mental health capital" – or resilience – needed to sustain its inhabitants" (p.156). They attribute the causal factor of this issue to neoliberal educational policies that privilege economic interests over wellness. The economic priority ultimately hinders the ability to engage as a community of citizens, particularly in the rural context. When schools are closed the community is disrupted, engagement is silenced, and the result is a decline in wellness for all involved – students, families, community members, and other stakeholders (Cristall et al., 2020). The impacts to community resiliency in Cristall et al.'s, (2020) case study in Ontario, Canada mirror the findings of Oncescu's (2014) research in Saskatchewan, Canada

discussed in the *Social Impacts* section above. Cristall et al. (2020) highlight the direct personal impact that school closure in a rural area can have on students' mental health and well-being. The loss or disruption of all that is familiar – friends, classmates, teachers, routines, as well as being present daily in the community that is 'home', can have a profound impact on students.

Bussing students from a community with a closed school to the next town several kilometres away may have a definitively different impact than that which might be observed in an urban school closure scenario, where a neighbouring consolidated institution is located nearby (Bennett, 2013). Lauzon and Leahy (2001) and Pollett (2008) suggest that the effects of bussing students from a community in which the school has been closed to a neighbouring community with a consolidated school need to be considered based on impacts on students, impacts on families, and the true costs of students' travel time. As noted by Ramage and Howley (2005), "Too often, in the absence of systematic research, school leaders consider only the practicalities of bus rides rather than considering the effects of bus rides on students' school performance and home lives" (p.1). Extended travel to and from school by bus impacts students academically, socially, and physically (Bennett, 2013; Smitheram, 1982; Thompson, 1982). The effects of long bus rides on school performance and home lives is a contentious issue recognized by rural parents but often dismissed by school district officials (Bennett, 2013; Pollett, 2008). These long periods of travel affect students' ability to focus and concentrate for extended periods during the school day, shorten available hours for homework completion, discourage or prevent extra-curricular involvement outside of school hours, and do not allow for the time necessary to pursue part-time employment opportunities (Bennett, 2013; Smitheram, 1982). Bennett (2013) suggests that the 'joy of childhood' is being stolen from rural students when attendance consolidated schools requires long bus rides.

### **Benefits of Consolidation**

In examining the benefits of rural school consolidation, Duncombe and Yinger (2007) found that economies of scale and size represent potential financial savings on the part of school districts. A Canadian education advocacy group found that having a larger student population in a single consolidated school building allows for savings from the otherwise elevated operational and maintenance

costs associated with schools below their designated enrollment capacity (People for Education, 2016). This in turn allows school districts to maintain budgets and control costs in order to align with the per-pupil funding received from ministries of education (People for Education, 2016).

According to People for Education (2016), a broadly based education that provides students with a multitude of learning opportunities and experiences in a variety of subject areas works to enhance student success. Many small rural schools lack the benefit of having specialized teachers for health and physical education, music, the arts and library as compared to schools in urban and suburban areas (People for Education, 2016). Proposed closure and consolidation of rural schools permits more specialized instruction in these areas with schools having large enough enrollment to employ specialist teachers and provide enhanced facilities (Prest, 2013).

Additionally, Barber (2015) recognizes that the breadth and depth of curriculum that can be offered to students often improves significantly under school consolidation scenarios. A larger number of course offerings, available on a more frequent basis, acts to provide secondary school students with greater preparation for workplace, college and university pathways in a wider variety of disciplines (Barber, 2015). The school consolidation scenario means fewer classes are comprised of split grades and/or split pathways (Applied, Academic and Locally Developed) (Barber, 2015). The increased course offerings provided in a consolidated school translates to fewer distance education courses (e.g. online courses) being required by rural students in order to obtain the necessary credits for application to post-secondary programs (Arnott, 2004; Barber, 2015).

From a social perspective, school consolidation can have positive effects. The research conducted by Sell et al. (1996) found that most students felt school consolidation offered them increased opportunities for socialization. Meeting new people and forming new friendships was a positive response found in surveys conducted (Sell et al., 1996). Another social improvement noted by Barber (2015) was that the larger enrollments of consolidated schools provided for an increase in breadth and depth of extra-curricular activities similar to that observed in academic programs. More choice in types of extra-curricular activities and having sufficient numbers of students to create teams for certain sports was an improvement compared to some smaller, rural schools (Barber, 2015).

The benefits of rural school consolidation cited in this section are quite contradictory and serve as counter arguments to the other themes synthesized in this review. The most frequently cited motivation for rural school consolidation is fiscal responsibility – an attempt to achieve economies of scale by creating larger administrative units and schools (Bennett, 2013; Bishop, 1979; Brown, 1996; DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; People for Education, 2016). DeYoung and Howley (1990) note that few jurisdictions implementing rural school closure and consolidation actually document and affirm the desired improvements. In fact, Brown (1996) reports diseconomies of scale resulting from increased staff demands in a highly bureaucratic system and the increased transportation costs associated with the bussing network required to shuttle rural students to consolidated schools.

### **Closure-Related Policy**

Corbett (2014a) asserts that “Canadian educational historiography is shot through with a fundamental urban bias” (p.19). It seems logical then that Canadian educational policy too is created with the urban population in mind. Corbett’s (2014a) research along with that of Wallin (2007) confirms this. The fact that rurality is a dimension seldom considered in the formulation of educational policy can be viewed as a social justice concern. As Lauzon and Leahy (2001) argue, “There is an implicit bias in policy formulation that actively excludes the consideration of the unique characteristics, qualities, and needs of rural community life” (p.3). The metro-centric nature of policy making and lack of understanding of the rural context by policy makers is well documented (Corbett, 2001; Corbett & Tinkham, 2014; Fulkerson and Thomas, 2016; Mulcahy, 1997; Nordberg, 2020; Ribchester & Edwards, 1999; Roberts, 2006; Wallin, 2007). Place-based disadvantage for rural and remote education can be viewed as a fundamental human rights and social justice issue where rurality is a form of diversity that could be acknowledged in the same way cultural, sexual, or social class differences are embraced (Roberts, 2006).

When examining the broader school closure literature, incorporating urban and suburban settings, Bishop (1979) provides a framework of planning criteria on which to base closure and consolidation decisions; these include facility conditions, potential for sale/disposability, geographic location, student transportation, and attendance/catchment areas.

Neither these criteria, nor Bishop’s (1979) discussion of school closure planning take into account the impacts on the local community itself and what the removal may mean for local citizens (Basu, 2004b; Basu, 2007; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Such considerations may be unnecessary in urban and suburban settings, but this does not hold true in rural communities (Bennett, 2013; Newton & Knight, 1993). This calls into question whether educational policies relating to school closures employ a framework that was fashioned after similar urban school closure research.

In some provinces within Canada, pupil accommodation review (PAR) policy provides local school districts with an explicit set of protocols and procedures to employ when initiating the closure and/or consolidation process for a school (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). As observed in planning criteria such as those suggested by Bishop (1979), the primary emphasis of PAR policy tends to be on the school district’s fiscal responsibilities and physical plant operations (Corbett & Helmer, 2017). Consideration is also given to academic programming, student well-being, and impacts on the local community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). It is worth noting that under PAR policy in some Canadian jurisdictions, it is the responsibility of school district staff, trustees, and/or community advocacy groups to research and report on these considerations and present their findings as part of a school’s information profile to provincial ministries of education for consideration in a school closure decision (Doern & Prince, 1989; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). The factors to be assessed for closure impacts are listed as bullet points (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018, p.9). In this format and with minimal explanation and instruction provided in the guiding policy documents, it seems unlikely that the analysis of the impact of a school closure on the community will capture the complexity that has been found to exist in the peer-reviewed literature (Basu, 2004b; Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). As Corbett and Tinkham (2014) assert, “[rural] communities typically do not possess the research capacity to be able to meet the requirements of this kind of review” (p.694). The nuanced school-community interactions and multi-faceted impacts of school closure appear to be too complex and interconnected to be accurately articulated by school district reviewers or advocacy groups unless more detailed policy documents that are aligned with the findings of the scholarly literature are provided by ministries of education

(Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). Furthermore, in the interest of equity, such policy documents could provide for the intricacies and local complexities associated with rurality that are found in the specific contexts of rural communities. One-size-fits-all policy documents could be either revised to allow for the nuances of rural schools and communities, or separate procedures and protocols put in place to reflect the unique position and circumstances of rural areas (Lauzon & Leahy, 2001).

### **Conclusion and Future Research Directions**

As noted by Lauzon and Leahy (2001), “the rural school is often the strongest community institution and may play a prominent role in the development of social capital and community development” (p.11). The body of Canadian research, bolstered by the inclusion of other international sources in comparable settings, suggests that the relationship between schools and the rural communities they serve is extremely complex and highly contextual (Corbett, 2014b). Urban-centric, one-size-fits-all educational policies, particularly those related to funding and the enrollment capacity thresholds used to make closure decisions, seem to lack equity and social justice for rural communities (Corbett & Tinkham, 2014). The social and economic consequences of school closures can be far more impactful in less densely populated rural regions than in larger urban and suburban centres that are better able to absorb such alterations to the social fabric (Bennett, 2013; Oncescu, 2014). Closure of a rural area’s only school resulting in students being bussed to the next town several kilometres away may have a very different impact than the closure of an urban or suburban school which has a neighbouring institution located nearby that can accept displaced students (Bennett, 2013). An acknowledgement of rurality and emphasis on the unique positionality and circumstances of rural communities is needed in order to fully understand the value a school brings to a rural community and the impacts that occur when that school is closed.

“The decision to consolidate rural schools has had major implications not just for schools but for rural life in Canada” (Young et al., 2007, p.88). MacKinnon (1998) asserts that the profile of rural education needs enhancement in the eyes of the provincial education ministries. One possible approach is the development of a rural education branch/division within education ministries or a rural education consultant whose mandate would be to

oversee, advocate and lobby for rural education (MacKinnon, 1998). This designation would be an acknowledgement that urban-centred one-size-fits-all policies and procedures may lack equity and social justice for rural communities. This approach could be likened to the provision of rural and remote health care in rural Canada, which acknowledges the unique geography and contextual position of rural communities (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2017). The establishment of such supports by provincial governments would then identify rural education as a priority. It would also act as an attempt to preserve the rural social fabric and the sense of community found in small towns, villages, hamlets and the countryside across the nation (Oncescu, 2014).

Fulkerson and Thomas (2016) highlight the need for place- and space-based diversity to be acknowledged in the same fashion that gender, sexuality, race and socio-economic class intersections are valued in today’s society. Until this is achieved, the spatial privileges of dominant urban groups will continue to marginalize rural residents as they experience the degradation of their existence (Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). Educational funding and consolidation policies that are metropolitan in design sometimes fail to support the continued and sustained presence of future generations in rural communities (Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Irwin et al., 2017). As Corbett (2006) asserts “formal education is designed to normalize and transform by fostering outmigration [from rural areas] and a general orientation to urban life” (p.289). With this urbanormative intent already inherent in the purpose of schooling, the survival and vitality of rural communities is greatly reduced, if not jeopardized entirely (Corbett, 2006). This coupled with fiscally-focused closure and consolidation policies, hold rural schools to the same expectations as urban schools, which increases the likelihood of the demise of rural communities given the inextricable link between the presence of a school and community vitality and generational renewal (Irwin et al., 2017).

In rural areas “schools are the cultural centre of the community, serving many functions that cannot be quantified or calculated in a cost/benefit analysis” (Lauzon & Leahy, 2001, p.12). Schools play an immeasurable role in the viability and longevity of communities and are a critical component of the social and cultural fabric of rural areas (Oncescu, 2014). Greater emphasis and acknowledgement of the importance of rurality and of the unique

circumstances that exist in rural schools and communities is needed. It is the unique local context and complexities that create the immeasurable interdependence between individual facets of everyday life in rural communities (Corbett, 2014b). A significant portion of the existing body of research literature on rural education mistakenly emphasizes the apparent inferiority of rural schools (Corbett, 2014a). The “rural perspectives have generally been taken for granted, understated or overlooked not only by academics but also by policy makers and other stakeholders.” (Pini et al., 2015, p.678). Rurality may need to be considered as more than simply a geographic setting in educational policy and research (Harris, 2014). Positioning rurality as a form of diversity and with an equity and social justice focus would allow rural voices and experiences to be heard and recorded and the unique qualities of their schools and communities documented (Pini et al., 2015).

As Corbett (2006) asserts, “The fact is that we do not know a great deal about rural schools and how they operate in their communities, partly because they are largely absent from most Canadian education policy discussion” (p.297). In light of this observation, more comprehensive and robust research on the extent and long-term impacts of rural school closure in the Canadian context is needed. While many scholars from the United States cite the need for further and more extensive research in the American context (e.g. Lyson, 2002), the availability

of Canadian research is even less prevalent, particularly in terms of the economic and demographic impacts of rural school closure and consolidation (Bennett, 2013). As noted by Irwin et al. (2017), rural school closures continue despite “the absence of any focused, longitudinal, and in-depth examination by any Canadian educational institution or body responsible for their administration, or the broader social consequences of their closing.” (p.25). Further to the assertions of Irwin et al. (2017), in-depth examinations in the Canadian context could also take the form of research involving oral histories and narratives, similar to that conducted by Cristall (2018). As observed by Hanushek et al. (2013), with respect to attracting the attention of governments and policy makers to important educational policy issues, “what gets measured gets done” (p.18). Regardless of the methodological approach used to ‘measure’, meaningful change will not ‘get done’ without in-depth studies being conducted, and reliable, albeit contextual data becoming available. Until then, school consolidation and closure policies will be lacking a clear conceptualization and quantification of the importance of rural schools as pillar institutions to the survival and prosperity of communities in rural Canada.

**Acknowledgement.** *I wish to acknowledge Dr. Jim Ryan at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for his constructive comments on a previous version of this manuscript*

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**Suggested Citation:** Haynes, M. (2022). The impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada: A review. *The Rural Educator*, 43(2), 60-74. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1321>