

A Community Based Perspective on Accommodation Reviews:
The Rural and Small Town Experience

by
Robert John Rappolt

A thesis
Presented to the University of Waterloo
In fulfillment of the
Thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Planning

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2015

© Robert John Rappolt

DISCLAIMER

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This study concerns the role of public schools and the process of accommodation reviews in rural Southwestern Ontario. It brings together complementary groups of theory and practice from the related fields of community planning and rural development. A common theme to both disciplines is the role of schools in shaping or improving the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural communities. This consideration is heightened given the dynamic and often deleterious consequences from changing demographic and economic structures occurring within rural regions across the province. At the same time, small schools that are under capacity or underutilized are being closed in favour of fiscal austerity and efficiency; a process that has emerged as highly contentious and divisive despite a provincially crafted decision-making framework that is ostensibly designed as a deliberative method of public participation. A previously unanswered but imperative question then follows: *Are the generic accommodation review guidelines appropriate for the context of rural Ontario?*

The findings of this single qualitative case study demonstrate that schools are widely perceived to be a 'safety blanket' by ensuring overall community well-being; the corollary to these findings suggest that closing the school would precipitate community decline. Meanwhile, the review process itself emerges as a largely polarizing experience that leaves the community feeling co-opted and with an ineffective outcome. This conclusion indicates that the current review framework is not appropriate given that the process is misaligned with the local context by devaluing the community perspective and dismissing the important role of schools in community vitality and resilience. Moreover, there is strong potential for school closure outcomes to further exacerbate the unique challenges found throughout rural Ontario and in doing so, debase efforts toward rural development and revitalization. Instead, it is called for a more nuanced and holistic decision-making model that formally recognizes rural schools as an important community asset and empowers local stakeholders through a process that not only builds trust but also evenly distributes decision-making authority. Remarkably, there is a paucity of discourse from the academy of planning on the topic of rural school closures; here, this study makes an important contribution by highlighting a number of areas where further research is required.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foremost, I owe a deep sense of gratitude and sincere appreciation to my adviser, Dr. Mark Seasons. It has been a privilege to collaborate and study under the guidance of your supervision, encouragement, and most of all, mentorship. Without your unwavering support (including patience and constructive criticism), my academic journey would have surely fallen short on a number of occasions. Thank you for taking the time to work with me and becoming a friend along the way.

To my committee members, Dr. Pierre Filion and Dr. Wayne Caldwell, a special thank you is in order. I am also very appreciative to the faculty at the School of Planning and my fellow colleagues; it is truly fortunate to have befriended and worked with many of you and I wish all of the very best. Similarly, to the participants of this study who made this research possible; I am deeply indebted to each of you. Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

To my more immediate friends: you know who you are. I could not ask for more genuine, true, and great people in my life as both role models and mentors. I am truly indebted to all of you for this journey and success. I am also particularly grateful to Aylin for her unrelenting encouragement and confidence; this has been truly amazing.

To my family: in particular my best friend – my Dad – as well as Yvonne and Aunt Gail; a heartfelt thank you. Without your selfless generosity and unrelenting support, I certainly would not have been successful on many fronts; most of all with respect to completing this thesis. This success is yours too.

And last, but certainly not least: to my Mom, who throughout her entire life always demonstrated a great deal of care and concern for the well-being of the people and communities around her. This one is for you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	VIII
LIST OF TABLES	IX
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT	1
1.2 STUDY RATIONALE	2
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES	4
1.4 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE	5
1.5 THESIS STRUCTURE	7
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	8
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	8
2.2 THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS AND IMPLICATIONS OF CLOSURE	9
2.2.1 <i>The Community Role of Rural Schools</i>	9
2.2.2 <i>Outcomes and Implications of Rural School Closures</i>	14
2.3 RATIONALIZING SCHOOL CLOSURES	19
2.3.1 <i>Ontario Education Policy</i>	19
2.3.2 <i>Education Funding and Declining Enrolment</i>	22
2.3.3 <i>Economies of Scale and The Quality of Rural Education</i>	26
2.4 CLOSING SCHOOLS: PROCESS, POLITICS, AND OUTCOMES	27
2.4.1 <i>School Closure Policy: The Accommodation Review Guidelines</i>	27
2.4.2 <i>Challenging a School Closure Decision</i>	30
2.4.3 <i>School Closures: The Politics of Resistance</i>	31
2.5 COMMUNITY PLANNING AND SCHOOL CLOSURES.....	39
2.6 EVALUATING SCHOOL CLOSURES THROUGH A RURAL LENS	48
2.7 CONCLUSION	57
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	59
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	59
3.2 RESEARCH PROCESS	60
3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	61
3.3.1 <i>The Qualitative Case Study</i>	61
3.3.2 <i>Quantitative and Mixed-methods</i>	62
3.3.3 <i>Case Study Design</i>	63
3.3.4 <i>Case Selection</i>	64
3.4 DATA COLLECTION	65
3.4.1 <i>Study Protocol</i>	65
3.4.2 <i>Documentation</i>	67
3.4.3 <i>Semi-structured Interviews</i>	67

3.4.6 <i>Sampling Method and Sample Population</i>	68
3.5 DATA ANALYSIS	70
3.5.1 <i>Data Management</i>	70
3.5.1 <i>Thematic Analysis</i>	71
3.5.2 <i>Rigour and Evaluation</i>	71
3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND STUDY LIMITATIONS	73
3.6.1 <i>Ethics Approval, Confidentiality, and Anonymity</i>	73
3.6.3 <i>Study Limitations and Bias</i>	74
3.7 SUMMARY	75
CHAPTER FOUR: THE CASE STUDY SETTING	77
4.1 CASE STUDY LOCATION	77
4.2 CASE STUDY RATIONALE	78
4.3 CASE STUDY TIMELINE AND PROCESS	82
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	89
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	89
5.2 THE ROLE OF A RURAL SCHOOL	90
5.2.1 <i>Introduction</i>	90
5.2.1 <i>Community Builder</i>	91
5.2.3 <i>A Place Maker</i>	97
5.2.3 <i>Local Pedagogy</i>	103
5.3 THE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW PROCESS	107
5.3.1 <i>Introduction</i>	107
5.3.2 <i>School Board Governance and Management</i>	108
5.3.3 <i>Power, Agency, and Politicization</i>	117
5.3.4 <i>Polarization</i>	128
5.3.5 <i>Dismissive Engagement</i>	134
5.4 RURAL SCHOOL CLOSURES: PROCESS CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES	141
5.4.1 <i>Introduction</i>	141
5.4.2 <i>For the Community</i>	142
5.4.3 <i>For the Municipality</i>	147
5.5 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS.....	156
5.5.1 <i>The Role of Rural Schools</i>	156
5.5.2 <i>The Accommodation Review Process</i>	159
5.5.3 <i>School Closures and Rural Development</i>	167
5.5.4 <i>An Alternative Decision Making Model for Rural Ontario</i>	172
5.6 CONCLUSION	178
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	179
6.1 MOVING THE AGENDA FORWARD.....	179
6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	181
6.2.1 <i>Recommendations for Accommodation Review Policy</i>	181

6.2.2 <i>Recommendations for Immediate Action</i>	190
6.3 STUDY LIMITATIONS IN REFLECTION	193
6.3.1 <i>Study Limitations</i>	193
6.3.2 <i>In Reflection</i>	194
6.4 CONTRIBUTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH	195
6.4.1 <i>Contributions to the Research Community of Planning</i>	195
6.4.2 <i>Contributions to the Profession of Planning</i>	198
6.4.3 <i>Considerations for Further Research</i>	199
WORKS CITED	203
APPENDIX A: HOLLOWED OUT ‘POST-WELFARE’ STATE	216
APPENDIX B: PUPIL ACCOMMODATION REVIEW GUIDELINE VALUES.....	217
APPENDIX C: MODELS OF RURAL COMMUNITY	218
APPENDIX D: RESEARCH INVITATION AND STUDY QUESTIONS	219
APPENDIX E: LOCATION MAP OF KILSYTH, ONTARIO	221
APPENDIX F: DERBY PS ACCOMMODATION REVIEW TIMELINE	222
APPENDIX G: BWDSB ARC PROCESS FLOW CHART	223
APPENDIX H: ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW POLICY CONTEXT	224

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.2: Enrolment in Ontario Public Education..... 23

Figure 3.1: The Research Process..... 60

Figure 4.1: Derby PS Enrolment 2009 to 2022..... 80

Figure 4.2: Derby PS Projected Enrolment versus Capacity 2009 to 2022..... 81

Figure 5.1: Current and Alternative Decision Making Context..... 172

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Number of Catholic and Public Schools in Ontario 1995 to 2010..... 20

Table 3.2: The Study Protocol..... 65

Table 3.3: Case Study Evaluation..... 72

Table 4.3: Bluewater DSB Utilization and Finances..... 83

Table 4.4: Derby Public School ARC Meetings Summary..... 85

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study concerns the perennially fractious process of rural school closures and consolidations. It contributes to a well-established yet still emerging body of academic discussion on the unintended policy consequences of education reform and the lasting but dynamic impact of its implementation. The foundation of this research emerges for three reasons. First, there is a strong policy disconnect between the rationale used to close schools on one hand, and the intrinsic role of these institutions as part of the overall community fabric on the other. Here, it appears that rural communities and the province are at ideological odds with another. Second, the process of closing schools remains a bitterly contested affair despite provincial guidelines that are designed to ameliorate these difficult exercises. Much of this criticism rests with a generic decision-making framework that ignores the particularities of rural Ontario but, is applied ubiquitously across the province. Third, school closures are often thought to result in the ‘destruction of community’ by disrupting the social fabric and infrastructure of rural places. Remarkably, critical analysis appears to have escaped the academy and profession of planning, despite an ethos for representing the ‘public good’ and collectively acting in the best interest of the general public. Therefore, the focus of this study represents a departure from the traditional locus of discussion on rural school closures. Instead, it reflects an emerging but yet limited body of literature borne from the academy of planning and as told from the rural community perspective.

1.2 STUDY RATIONALE

Underpinning the rationale of this research are several seminal studies on the topic of school closures and consolidations within a Canadian context (Andres, 2013; Basu, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Bushrod, 1999; Doern & Prince, 1989; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012; Lauzon & McCallum, 2001; Lucas, 1982; Oncescu, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) It is now well documented that these divisive exercises are politically and administratively demanding (Doern & Prince, 1989); but also, as an exercise of democratic participation are at odds with community expectations of fairness, accountability, and transparency (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Interestingly, similar experiences have been shared from other countries and across different contexts, including Denmark (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006), the United Kingdom (Bondi, 1987; Hargreaves, 2009; Slee & Miller, 2015), New Zealand (Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, & Witten, 2009; Witten, Kearns, Lewis, Coster, & McCreanor, 2003; Witten, McCreanor, Kearns, & Ramasubramanian, 2001) Finland (Autti, Outi & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014), and the United States (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Miller, 1993, 1995; Valencia, 1984).

At the same time, a parallel conversation has emerged placing greater emphasis on the dynamic role of schools beyond their primary pedagogical purpose. In these less intuitive ways, schools are increasingly valued for their capacity as place makers and community builders; they are, for all intents and purposes, intrinsic to the community fabric. Further to this, schools have been demonstrated as contributing to community and rural development, social capital, and as catalysts of resiliency. The role of a rural school is therefore heightened, as they can be one of the few remaining organic sources of revitalization efforts when detrimental economic and

demographic conditions have otherwise eroded the rural landscape. It follows that the presence of a rural school represents promise for the future; when a school is threatened by closure, it is felt that the entire community is threatened too. For this reason, school closure processes become visceral, contentious, and arenas for political contestation. This has led many to question the very foundation and merits of school closure decisions, as they may exacerbate the vulnerabilities that small rural communities are particularly susceptible to.

Perhaps more alarming is the relative paucity of formal investigation on rural school closure processes and outcomes from the academy of planning. To an extent, the associated discourse has provided commentary on the role of schools within the community and the outcomes of permanently closing school facilities; an area of research that is much debated yet remains altogether understudied. Even less explored is the school closure process itself. The dearth of criticisms made in this regard are placed on the provincially crafted school review policy, formally referred to as the *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines*, and the enduring outcomes of education reform that occurred nearly twenty years ago; many of which continue to have unintended and often detrimental implications at the community and municipal level. Notably, these reforms placed an emphasis on fiscal austerity within Ontario's public education system. The most visible outcome of these measures being a dramatic rate of school closures and consolidations, as boards across the province hasten to conform and realize true cost savings under the auspice of Ministry directives. More critical observers note that rationalizing the education system has challenged those school boards with particularly large rural jurisdictions as they struggle with declining enrolments and decrepit facilities that are well above the provincial

average; meanwhile, accommodation reviews have done little to explore alternatives, or at the very least, ameliorate the emotionally visceral and contentious process of closing schools.

Although the accommodation review decision-making framework is ostensibly designed as an instrument rooted in deliberative democracy and public consultation, they have all together emerged as failing to build community capacity, to reach consensus, or to be genuinely collaborative in nature. More to the point: the current decision-making framework appears to devalue the community perspective and dismiss the important role of schools to community vitality and resilience. Alarming, this has altogether ignored more than thirty years of evidence demonstrating otherwise, including from the fields' community planning and rural development. Ergo, it is remarkable that there has been a dearth of investigation to connect community planning, rural development, and school closures. To this end, the academy and profession of planning may be in a unique position to offer a more nuanced decision-making model and in doing so, better reflect the true value of these community institutions and their potential role in fostering long-term rural community well-being.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The following primary research question is addressed to investigate the rationale as outlined above and to operationalize the study:

- *Are the generic accommodation review guidelines appropriate for the context of rural Ontario?*

To further guide the research, the following secondary questions are established:

- *What is the role of public schools in rural and small town communities?*
- *Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?*
- *What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?*

The main objective of this study is to determine if the current accommodation review model is appropriate for school closure processes occurring in rural areas of Ontario. There are three subsequent objectives to this. First, the study will investigate and document the role of a rural school and the process of an accommodation review in this setting. In doing so, it will focus on the community and municipal perspective by reflecting on the research perspective described in the following section. The next objective is to identify the themes and patterns that emerge from these findings as a basis for further evaluation. The third and final objective is to provide recommendations by comparing and contrasting these findings with existing literature and best practices from rural development and community planning.

1.4 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The research perspective of this paper borrows from contemporary literature and discourse on citizen engagement, participation, and the use of narratives to both inform and critique public policy. For the purpose of this study, we are particularly drawn to Hampton (2009) who asserts:

‘Narrative policy analysis and planning is an approach which facilitates the expression of views from divergent parties in a controversy and provides a method of analysis which can suggest a way forward in a dilemma. The process allows for the juxtaposition of expert and local knowledge as the views of experts and local participants are included in the stories and counter stories.’ (p.240).

With respect to creating a policy narrative, Fischer (2003) contends that it usually begins with a difficult and complex public policy challenge, the development and implementation of a policy intervention, and concludes with a policy outcome. Similarly, Roe (1994) asserts that policy narratives deal with issues of 'uncertainty, complexity, and polarization' (p.2) and interpreting the narrative leads to a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the issue or phenomenon. Policy narratives are synonymous with telling a sort of story, but with a particular focus on the experiences and interpretations of policy problems from the contextual and subjective perspective of the actors.

This is in contrast to the traditional model of policymaking that has tended to be imperialistic, technocratic, esoteric, and expert driven. Local knowledge and the 'common citizen' are not often considered in the policymaking process, and therefore their perspective and opinion are often devalued or wholly ignored. To this end, citizen participation within the policy community has remained largely negligible. In consideration of this, Epstein, Farina, and Heidt (2014) note that 'technological or procedural strategies have limited ability to overcome this barrier: Bridging the gap requires rethinking what is perceived as legitimate evidence in policymaking and, consequently, what counts as effective civic engagement in the process' (p. 7). Moreover, Epstein et al. (2014), while reflecting on power disparity between government decision-makers and the public, suggest that many engagement and consultation efforts remain ineffectual because of what constitutes as valid knowledge. It is then concluded:

'Our proposed initial typology of narratives of complexity, causal context, unintended consequences, and reframing... is a first step towards making the situated knowledge of

non-professional participants accessible and relevant to the policymakers' (p.20).

Further to this, and with respect to the particular design of this research, we refer to Stake (2000) who asserts: 'a case study can be a disciplined force in public policy setting and reflection on the human experience' (p.448). It is from these collective thoughts that the research is disseminated and told largely from the community perspective.

1.5 THESIS STRUCTURE

The remaining structure of this thesis is as follows. **Chapter Two** provides a detailed review of the literature concerning the role of rural schools, rationalizing school closures and consolidations, and the policy and politics associated with the school closure decision-making process. This section is concluded by drawing parallels between rural development and community planning, and linking these related fields to the broader discourse on public schools. **Chapter Three** addresses the research methodology, including: an overview of qualitative methods, the instrumental case study design, and data collection methods and analysis. Research ethics and study limitations are subsequently addressed. **Chapter Four** describes the case study setting, including location, rationale, and a timeline of the particular case being studied. **Chapter Five** presents the findings. Three themes emerge in this regard: the role of rural schools, the accommodation review process itself, and implications and outcomes to the community and municipality associated with closing a rural school. **Chapter Six** is written in conclusion, and provides a discussion of the key findings and recommendations, including study contributions and areas to consider for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The following literature review introduces several themes that ultimately emerge as central to the topic of rural school closures and consolidations. The discussion begins with the role of rural schools and the outcomes and implications associated with closure. Next, we explore how school closures are rationalized; a combination of political and economic ideology, public policy, and economies of scale. The third theme that emerges concerns the school closure process itself. This includes a review of the accommodation review policy and the ‘politics of resistance’ that is universally common to these experiences. Fourth, we review the literature on planning and school closures. Here, there is a dearth of evidence explicitly linking the two traditionally siloed practices; however, there is some evidence to suggest that contemporary planning theory may offer an alternative model of policy design and implementation. The fifth theme that emerges through the literature concerns evaluating school closures through a rural lens and perspective. This discussion focuses on concepts of rural community well-being, community development, and community resilience. Central to this analysis are detrimental outcomes to social capital and community capacity that result from permanently closing rural school facilities.

Altogether, the subject of rural school closures and consolidations is complex; it draws from multiple disciplines and across different geographies. However, it appears the subject has largely escaped the academy of planning, despite evidence that we may be in a position to offer a more effective, amicable, and equitable decision-making model with balanced outcomes. Ergo, the

overall intent of the literature review is to weave these various themes together and subsequently operationalize the research questions. In conclusion, we suggest that a planning based evaluation of rural school closures may offer an opportunity to establish a more appropriate model of policy development and implementation.

2.2 THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS AND IMPLICATIONS OF CLOSURE

2.2.1 *THE COMMUNITY ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS*

Establishing the connection between the local school and rural community is an important consideration that emphasizes the rationale for this study. Existing research and literature overwhelmingly demonstrates that public schools are critically important to rural communities in a number of ways that go far beyond their primary pedagogical purpose. This includes fostering greater social cohesion and wellbeing (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Kearns et al., 2009; Witten et al., 2003, 2001), contributing to community identity and autonomy (Downey, 2003; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Irwin, 2012; Kearns et al., 2009), and creating greater capacity for community development and social capital (Autti, Outi & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Hanifan, 1916; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Lauzon & McCallum, 2001; Miller, 1993, 1995; Nachtigal, 1994; Oncescu & Giles, 2014; Oncescu, 2013; Witten et al., 2001). Discussion on the role of schools in rural communities suggest that they embody a dynamic but intrinsic role to everyday life, and in doing so, foster greater community resilience and vitality (Miller, 1993, 1995; Oncescu & Giles, 2014; Oncescu, 2014a). Moreover, schools are central to community well-being, and this appears to be nearly universal regardless of geography or context. For example, Witten et al. (2003, 2001) concisely summarize the dynamic role of schools as providing sets of community resources ranging from

the informational, the material and physical, to the social. In this way, schools become 'placed', as schools are central to the production and reproduction of communities (Kearns et al., 2009).

Schools also support rural communities in a number of other ways; some of which are obvious, while others are more subtle and therefore difficult to observe or measure (Miller, 1993, 1995).

In one way, schools provide an opportunity for basic education by servicing the pedagogical needs of the local community (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Kearns et al., 2009; Lyson, 2002; Nachtigal, 1994). Less intuitively, the role of a rural school has been demonstrated to be far more dynamic and varied; they are a subtle but intrinsic part of the community fabric and therefore continue to be central to rural life (Autti, 2014; Bushrod, 1999; Irwin, 2012; Kearns et al., 2009; Oncescu; 2013; Witten, 2003). Indeed, it seems that rural schools are integral because they build a strong sense of place and community through their dynamic, complex, but often overlooked capacities (Witten, 2001; 2003). In his report to the Ontario government, *'Strengthening Education in Rural and Northern Ontario'*, Downey (2003) succinctly described the vital role that schools have in quality of rural life and local identity:

'...it is generally acknowledged that, particularly in small towns and rural areas, the local school plays an important role in shaping community identity. In single school communities, the school is frequently the only public institution. It serves as a centre for entertainment, local activity, and political involvement, and its educational achievements are a source of local pride' (p.7).

Downey's description highlights an important point; in addition to places of education, schools are social, cultural, and community institutions by their very nature. In places where there may be limited access to social or cultural infrastructure, rural schools are in a unique position to

offer a range of programs, services, and facilities that bring people together. In doing so, they foster greater social cohesiveness and overall well-being. In this way, they become a hub of community activity and are an integral part of the social fabric.

Further to this, schools have continued to provide rural communities with a sense of local identity and autonomy by reflecting contextual values, mores, and ways (Bushrod, 1999; Irwin, 2012; Nachtigal, 1994; Oncescu, 2013). They are tightly linked with the production and reproduction of community, and anchor people to place through nurturing participation in civic and social affairs (Lyson, 2002; Oncescu, 2013; Witten et al., 2003). As Harmon and Schafft (2009) describe:

‘Well functioning schools help to increase the social integration of communities and neighbourhoods by strengthening local identity and sense of community activity and nurture public participation in civic and community affairs. They also provide physical spaces that enable community members to come together as a community, for sporting events, theatrical productions, and school board meetings. Rural schools, in particular, serve as symbols of community autonomy, vitality, and identity. Given their essentially integrative and interactive nature, schools naturally tend to enhance a sense of collective identity and attachment to place, and thus have socially developmental outcomes’ (p. 5).

Similarly, schools are often a place where multiple generations come together and interact, further strengthening this distinct sense of local identity (Fuller, 1982; as cited in Lyson, 2002).

On the other hand, many other public services have become regionalized, homogenous, and de-localized over time; they no longer represent the ethos or uniqueness of rural place as local schools continue to do (Nachtigal, 1994).

Considerable evidence also suggests that schools have a positive bearing on the social and economic wellbeing of rural communities (Lyson, 2002). Much of this research has focused on enhanced community development through social cohesion and social capital. In fact, some of the earliest work on social capital occurred within the context of rural schools and communities:

‘In the use of the phrase social capital I make no reference to the usual acceptation of the term capital, except in a figurative sense. I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit, the rural community, whose logical center is the school’ (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130).

Moreover, Miller (1993) finds that rural schools are an important resource to counter rural decline through enhanced social capital and cohesion. The author concludes that the most promising direction for rural revitalization rests with education through both the formal and informal linkages existing between school and community (Miller, 1993). As Oncescu (2013 citing: Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Wright, 2007) states, social capital is a particularly important consideration because it fosters greater trust and willingness among residents to accomplish goals that benefit the well-being of the broader community and it’s long-term vitality. In their comprehensive study on rural school leadership and community development, Harmon and Schafft (2009) conclude that ‘cultivating collaborative and meaningful school-community development will be a hallmark of good public schools that can meet the challenges facing rural communities and their students in the 21st century’ (p.8).

Other research has further explored how rural schools directly benefit the local economy and subsequently resident's quality of life. For example, Lyson (2002) found that rural places are disproportionately benefited by the presence of a local school. This research demonstrates that rural schools are associated with better housing values, positive occupational structures, more meaningful employment including civic occupations, and less income inequality and welfare dependence (Lyson, 2002). The school itself is an important economic consideration as well; by providing a degree of employment, social, and educational opportunities, it has the capacity to attract and retain families with school-aged children (Oncescu, 2013). Consequently, rural schools foster a positive feedback loop that creates larger tax bases for increased municipal revenue and services (Miller, 1993). In a broader context, Harmon and Schafft (2009) cite Weiss's (2004) conclusion that rural schools benefit economic development in a number of ways, ranging from national and local economic growth, quality and quantity of education opportunities, national productivity, higher wages, and greater social opportunities. Weiss (2004) also finds that rural schools have a positive impact on local economies by increasing property values and attracting businesses that foster local economic growth (p. 31 as cited in Harmon and Schafft, 2009).

Further to all of the above, it has been thoroughly demonstrated that rural communities have a strong sense of attachment to their local school, sometimes referred to as 'personal connectedness' (Irwin, 2012). Bushrod (1999) elaborates on this connection:

'The school is a place where the community members socialize and participate in activities together, where they discuss, make decisions and establish values that form the

foundation of their community, and where they are there to support one another in times of joy or times of need. In a rural community, many of the community's functions cease to exist or diminish once the school is gone. The school is a central institution in a community that continues to play an important role, as the call for stronger community ties and closer association of its members becomes the trend of a society embracing the twenty-first century' (p.185).'

Autti (2014) came to a similar conclusion in noting that rural schools are often a focal point of the community, and where local identity is constructed. In this way, the presence of a school signifies a healthy community (Autti, Outi & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Lyson, 2002; Nachtigal, 1994; Oncescu, 2013). It is through schools that meaningful interaction takes place, and where social capital and social networks are both sustained and enhanced (Autti, Outi & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Basu, 2004a; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Oncescu, 2013; Witten et al., 2003).

As Irwin (2012) concludes from his research, 'the school was represented as an essential element of the community's DNA' (p.46).

2.2.2 OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS OF RURAL SCHOOL CLOSURES

While the role of schools has been the focus of much research and discussion, there has been a relative paucity of investigation evaluating community implications once a school facility has been permanently closed. Much of the evidence in this regard is associated with the corollary of those imperative functions that schools embody. For example, while studying a rural school closure in Alberta, Bushrod (1999) finds an overall weakening of community life. This includes declining socialization, social participation, and social control. In this particular case, it is concluded that 'many of the community's functions cease to exist or diminish once the school is

gone' (p.185). In a comprehensive review of the literature, Lauzon and Leahy (2000) cite a study by Sell et al. (1996) that finds communities who experience a school closure demonstrate decreased participation in community organizations, decreased quality of life scores, and less involvement in school organization and administration. Lauzon and Leahy (2000) also describe schools as the cultural centre of the community, but it is difficult if not impossible to quantify or calculate those measures. In conclusion the authors write: 'we need to challenge the very assumptions upon which public education has been built and the relationship of school to community. If rural communities are to not only survive, but thrive, then educational solutions must acknowledge and account for the necessary relationship between rural communities and their schools' (p.15).

Oncescu (Oncescu & Giles, 2014; Oncescu, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) has examined and written extensively on the event of a rural school closure in Limerick, Saskatchewan. Here, there is evidence that closing the school impacts rural community well-being. In particular, this occurs by creating constraints to resilience and vitality by closing the school (2014a). In Limerick, the school was a highly valued institution, but when permanently closed, it 'severed many school-community relationships, and the closure extended beyond education and disrupted Limerick resident's usual way of life' (Oncescu, 2014a, p.16). This also negatively impacted residents' sense of community, as social networks and relationships were subsequently broken. Moreover, the community experienced a heightened degree of social isolation and increased barriers to community engagement and participation. As the author argues in reference to geographic isolation, 'social isolation is just as much a barrier to community resiliency' (Oncescu, 2014a,

p.16). This occurs because once an important public institution is closed, such as a school, residents begin to look outward, resulting in less time, resources, and effort dedicated to their own community (Oncescu, 2014a). In a separate discussion based on the same research, Giles and Oncescu (2014) reach a similar conclusion, including a diminished sense of community and an overall concern for long-term vitality. However, this particular discussion is interesting because it highlights how the community is able to reorganize and adjust post-closure. In particular, the social network and interpersonal relationships that the school previously maintained is a critical factor in rebuilding a sense of community, including social relationships and networks (Oncescu & Giles, 2014). As the authors conclude, this research demonstrates ‘...how the school – and its absence – is connected to the whole community’ (p.312).

There is considerably more evidence from the international perspective with regards to evaluating the implications of school closures. Writing in the context of New Zealand, Witten et al. (2001) found that closing schools represents an immediate disruption and fragmentation of social networks and increased vulnerability, but also a loss of social ties and the absence of links to other locus’ of community activity and integration. As the authors note: ‘potential health consequences lie in the observation that socially isolated individuals living in less cohesive communities are more likely to experience poor health than those living in more cohesive communities’ (p.315). In this way, public schools were observed as a unique catalyst for social integration and community participation, ultimately contributing to a community’s overall well-being (Witten, 2001). Again, writing on the New Zealand experience, Kearns et al. (2009) determine that rural school closures disconnect communities from their past, removes an

important community asset, and prohibits access to other community based services and resources. They conclude: 'as the narratives in the latter part of our paper revealed, closure and its threat generates not only tangible *effects* but also discernable *affects* that range from a sense of betrayal to feelings of grief' (p.139). Interestingly, research from Denmark demonstrates mixed findings (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). While school closures were demonstrably related to declining populations, there were no clear indications that it encouraged people to move away or avoid those communities altogether (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). Moreover, the authors determine that if human and social capital is strong enough, closed schools are often replaced by another reliable institution that once again fosters social cohesion. To the contrary, if human and social capital is weak or absent, school closures and their subsequent outcomes are 'irreversible' (p.438). Nonetheless, the authors presuppose their research by stating there has been little formal investigation on the topic, while 'most of these references are concerned with deliberations about individual school closures, but few concern the effects on the local society' (p.430).

Other researchers have been more critical regarding community implications associated with school closures. For instance, Hargreaves (2009) determines that in the British context, there is significant variation in the veracity of research formally linking rural schools to the local community. As such, the negative outcomes from closing schools are greatly exaggerated. In other words: 'the assumed closeness of the rural school-community relationship is a modern myth' (Hargreaves, 2009, p.81). Moreover, the authors point out that Falk and Kilpatrick (2000), who write extensively on the school-community relationship, admits that most discussion

concerning outcomes and implications from closure are largely anecdotal and lacking hard evidence. In a similar fashion, Slee and Miller (2015) describe the vast amount of existing literature and public discourse on rural school closures as '[ripping] the heart out of rural communities' (p.2). The authors proposition their research with the following assertion:

'What becomes immediately apparent is that the highly contentious nature of school closures has given rise to remarkably little research that could provide any European government with an adequate evidence base to determine whether or not school closures do have an adverse effect on the wellbeing of rural communities. At a time when evidence-based policy making is perceived as desirable, if not the norm, the evidence base surrounding the social and economic aspects of school closures on rural communities is remarkably limited' (p.3).

Indeed, Slee and Miller (2015) conclude that school closures are an unavoidable outcome amid a myriad of other forces, including social, economic, and demographic restructuring. In another recent European study, Barakat (2014) examines the relationship between school closures and depopulation in the Saxony region of East Germany. Studying a period from 1994 to 2007, the author notes that a relationship between the two is 'theoretically ill-founded (p.1) with little causation between closing primary schools and out-migration. Moreover, there is only a marginal decrease associated with in-migration to areas without a school. Barakat (2014) continues by noting that there is no evidence of a universal, localised depopulating effect from school closures. In conclusion, the author states:

'These resulted in similar trajectories for municipalities that lost their only primary school, retained it, or had no schools to begin with. With respect to the notion that school closures lead to inevitable demographic decline, it remains true that 'despite the

plausibility of the argument and its very widespread acceptance, the evidence for it is not compelling” (p.14).

However, the author points out that these conclusions do not translate into a policy recommendation to close schools without consideration for adverse consequences. To this end, Barakat’s (2014) study does not address the more imperative questions around whether school closures affect the overall quality of life for local residents and the community. A brief survey of the literature suggests that evidence associated with the outcomes of rural school closures is insubstantial, and as Lauzon and McCallum (2001) conclude, there is very little known about the actual implications for rural communities when rural schools are permanently closed.

2.3 RATIONALIZING SCHOOL CLOSURES

2.3.1 *ONTARIO EDUCATION POLICY*

The intersection of public policy and education reform emerges through the literature as a central consideration in the discussion of school closures and consolidation. Critical to this assertion are lasting outcomes of restructuring Ontario’s public sector through neoliberal political and economic doctrine. This policy paradigm is widely cited as an instrument to enhance economic competitiveness and meet the demands of a global economy by prescribing measures of decentralization and privatization in the regulation and planning of public goods and services; otherwise referred to as the marketization of efficiencies (Basu, 2004a, 2004b; Sattler, 2012). Under the auspice of neoliberal policy, education has become an investment in human capital rather than a public good. This has largely been accomplished through a number of widespread

structural changes made in the pursuit of greater fiscal efficiency and accountability. Taylor (2001) likens this period of reform to the ‘Klein Revolution’ in Alberta that saw a decreased role of government in the economy and a shift in the management of government functions; all in a vigorous pursuit of reducing provincial deficit (as cited in Basu, 2004b).

This was partially accomplished through a complete overhaul of Ontario’s education system against backdrop of a ‘failing and inefficient’ public administration (Basu, 2004b, p.1). In its place was a more rationalized approach that restructured funding and school board governance, largely achieved through *Bill 160 The Education Quality Improvement Act* and *Bill 104 The Fewer School Boards Act*. Collectively, these are intended to improve fiscal efficiency in education, while simultaneously cutting costs, increasing educational standards, improving outcomes, and ensuring greater accountability through standardized testing and evaluation (Basu, 2004b; Taylor, 2001). This legislation also realigns taxation and spending between the province of Ontario, the school boards, and the municipalities, including the authority for school boards to levy and adjust local taxes to offset funding shortfalls. As a result, many school boards vigorously pursue closures and consolidations as an efficient and effective means to realize true cost savings and balance the fiscal books. Moreover, the number of school boards across the province have been reduced from 168 to 72, which has dramatically increased the geographic size and diversity among jurisdictions.

Table 2.1: Number of Catholic and Public Schools in Ontario 1995 - 2010		
Year	Number of Total Public and Catholic Schools	Net Change in Number of Schools
1995	5174	
2000	4790	-384

2005	4848	58
2010	4913	65

Adapted From: Morgulis, 2015

As one outcome, many amalgamated boards have experienced excess underutilized and vacant pupil spaces, resulting in the widespread closing of schools as Table 2.1 depicts. This includes the closure of 384 schools across both of the Catholic and Public systems over a five year period, from 1995 and 2000 (Morgulis, 2015). As the Morgulis (2015) notes: ‘funding education in this new era of limited resources and direct competition for funding dollars with other public sectors means that boards need to have schools that are financially sound, fully used, and at a sustainable size’ (p.7).

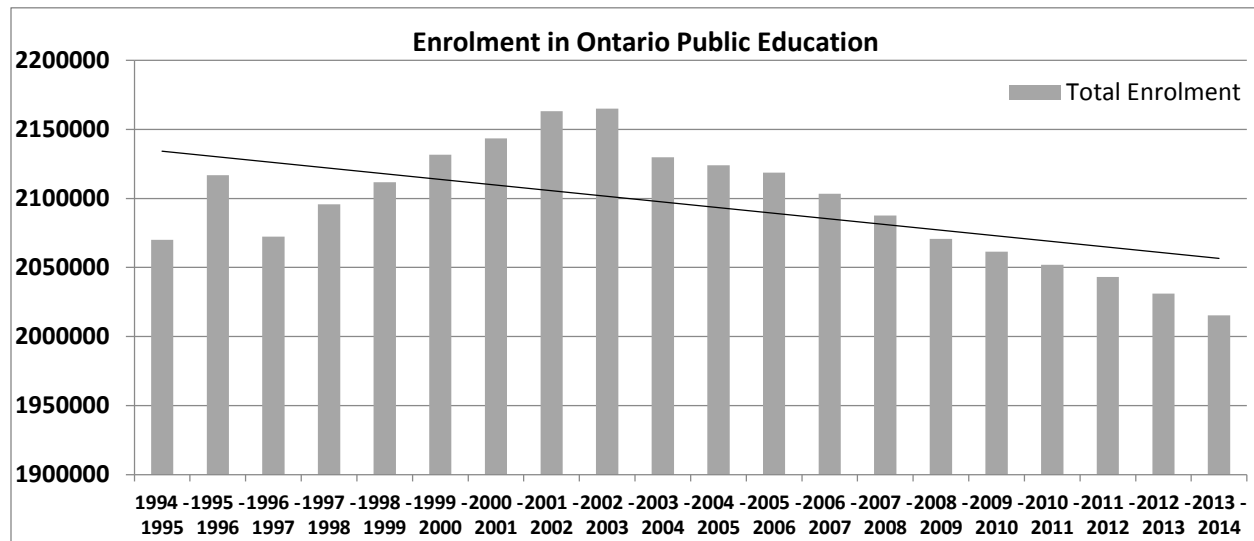
The new neoliberal state was not unique to Ontario; it was widely adopted in other countries, and had similar outcomes there too. Of particular note is New Zealand, where Witten et al. (2003) likens the implication of neoliberalism to a ‘hollowed out’ post-welfare state (Appendix A). In this way, Bennett (2000) asserts that the state retains ownership and funding of schools, but applies responsibility for efficiency, management, and markets as policy instruments to school boards (as cited in Witten et al., 2003). Education policy is now primarily concerned with both performance, as well as spatial and fiscal efficiency. Therefore, widespread declining enrolments result in schools with excess space which are then considered ‘inefficiencies’ in the system. The outcome is often results school closures where the process then emerges as contentious (Witten et al., 2001; 2003). The Ontario context is similar, where the quasi-provincial control of school boards is often described as ‘the centralisation of control, and the

decentralisation of accountability'. Here, the provincial government maintains absolute control in the distribution and application of education funding. Meanwhile, school boards are accountable to the province for responsible governance and balanced budgets; and as some critics observe, consolidating or closing schools is a *de facto* strategy of school boards to create greater long-term savings, while arguing that the outcomes offer better quality education and accountability.

2.3.2 EDUCATION FUNDING AND DECLINING ENROLMENT

With the promulgation of the *Fewer School Boards Act* and the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, education in Ontario became centralised, but also focused on equity and accountability. Though this was achieved through a number of channels, a standardized education funding formula was the cornerstone of this legislation. Allocation of school board funding occurs through the all-encompassing and centralized Grant for Students Needs (GSN). There are a number of factors that the funding formula is based upon, including local and contextual considerations such as the demographic and geographic profile of individual boards; but, to a large extent the funding calculus is directly related to pupil enrolment. Thus, as illustrated in *Figure 2.2: Enrolment in Ontario Public Education*, the trend of declining enrolment is of particular concern as it directly results in decreased revenue for school boards.

Figure 2.2 Enrolment in Ontario Public Education 1994 – 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2015)



Ultimately, this impacts a number of school board responsibilities as administrators seek to find and implement cost saving measures as baseline expenses such as owning and operating schools remain constant, while revenue continues to decrease. Though the Ministry of Education does provide additional funding through Special Purpose Grants to mitigate the impact of enrolment-based funding, school boards struggle to produce balanced budgets (See: p.9 and p.11, Mackenzie, 2007). As the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009; citing Ministry of Education, 2008) note:

‘Boards’ costs... do not decline in a way that is strictly proportional to declining enrolment. Some costs can be adjusted easily. For example, the cost of classroom teachers can be reduced by changing the arrangement of classes to adjust to reduced enrolment. Other costs cannot be adjusted easily... it takes time for boards to adjust cost structures to declines in enrolment’ (p.75)

As has been noted by others, a sustained decline in school-aged children and excess education infrastructure since the 1970s has created significant inefficiencies in the system (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009; Morgulis, 2015; People for Education, 2009). Without the

ability to offset decreased revenues and accommodate increasing capital costs through local taxation, school board administrators and policymakers are tasked with the difficult budgetary exercise of meeting provincial education standards, providing quality education programs, and continuing to operate and maintain school facilities; many of which are relatively expensive to operate or are in complete disrepair. This funding challenge is further exacerbated by regional variation. For example, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) projects that all regions outside of the Greater Toronto Area are expected to experience declining enrolment, from as little as 6-percent in Central Ontario, to upwards of 15-percent in Northern areas. This variation relates to a number of factors, but ultimately enrolment trends directly correlate with population trends. Therefore, declining enrolment in rural areas further increase the rate of school closures in rural areas (Valencia, 1984). The net outcome is that the regional impact of declining enrolment will vary greatly over time, with a particularly strong consequence for school boards with large rural jurisdictions.

Recent adjustments to the provincial funding model further underlines this approach. The *2015-2016 Education Consultation Funding Guide* (2015) places education funding squarely in relation to the provincial fiscal imperative, stating ‘a crucial component of this consultation is identifying savings and efficiencies. This requirement is particularly important now, as Ontario follows the path to a balanced Budget in 2017-2018’ (p.6). The document continues ‘the reality of today’s fiscal climate means that permanent savings need to be found’ (p.7), and that funding ‘must be aligned to cost structures in order find immediate savings’ (p.7). The Consultation Guide also

outlines the various strategies found in the 2014-2015 budget used to promote the more efficient use of school space as a top priority for the government. These include:

- Revising the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline to make the process more effective for boards and the community;
- A reinvestment of over \$8 million in funding to boards to build planning capacity to address underutilized schools;
- Incenting boards to make more efficient use of school space through changes to school operations funding resulting in \$42 million in savings; and;
- Investing \$15 million in isolated schools that combine secondary and elementary panels (p.7).

Indeed, the above strategies indicate that provincial policymakers believe that school boards have been irresponsibly funding unused school space, something that Mackenzie (2015) has instead argued is the result of 'the provinces narrow, arbitrary, and inflexible approach to funding school space' (p.12). As Mackenzie also notes, most experts agree that the funding system should permit a limited, locally determined, and discretionary revenue totalling 10-percent of a board's total expenditure. Instead, the funding system and structure is indicative rather than prescriptive (Mackenzie, 2015). Moreover, there is widespread belief that the cumulative effect of declining enrolment and subsequent funding shortfalls will challenge provincial policy makers and school board administrators well into the future. In the *Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services* (2012), colloquially referred to as Drummond Report, recommendations on education reform are prefaced by stating: 'we believe that this era of restraint presents an opportunity for the government to ensure that education is delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible' (p.203, 2012). Education has become a favourable avenue

to reduce spending within the public sector as part of a broader strategy to curb the provincial deficit. In conclusion, the funding formula continues to be the most significant contributing factor to school closures and consolidations (Mackenzie, 2007; People for Education, 2009).

2.3.3 ECONOMIES OF SCALE AND THE QUALITY OF RURAL EDUCATION

Factors leading to rural school consolidations and closures go beyond shifts in public sector management, education funding, or demographic trends (McKibben, 1996). As DeYoung & Howley (1990) note, contemporary education reforms have altogether ‘ignored that smallness or local contexts ought to play vital roles in the educational process’ (p.3, 1990). Under the principle of economies of scale, many rural schools have been deemed too small or unnecessarily small, and therefore relatively expensive to operate and maintain (Mathis, 2003). In an effort to be more cost effective and accountable, policy makers and school board administrators have fully embraced school closures and consolidation as a rational response (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Mathis, 2003). Advocates and proponents of rural school closures often justify these actions by citing that consolidation leads to an improved depth and breadth of programming, better student experience, and better academic results (Mathis, 2003). Others have pointed out that due to the unique nature and ethos of rural teaching, rural schools must be inferior to their larger urban counterparts (Reynolds, 1992).

However, a widely cited Canadian study questions the efficacy of these assertions. Corbett and Mulchaly’s (2006) comprehensive study concludes that there is no substantial evidence to substantiate that larger consolidated schools are better for students. Across a number of

measurements, these authors found the following: school size and number of program offerings have no impact on student achievement, the argument that consolidated schools result in better educational quality is circular and, school closures and consolidation do not actually result in financial savings. In their conclusion, Corbett and Mulchaly (2006) offer a particularly pertinent anecdote:

‘The trend to close schools was intensified by a culturally popular assumption... schools need to be big to be good. In fact, for many decades of the 20th century, school consolidation was considered synonymous with school improvement, despite the fact that there was virtually no evidence to support the assumption. While naïve views related to consolidation still exist, and the practice continues to be one of the first cost-cutting measures examined when states face serious fiscal difficulties, we have at last reached the point where consolidation advocates are forced to submit evidence for claims of greater efficiency and improved instruction’ (p.121, Theobald, 2005).

Under the rubric of academic ‘improvement’ and ‘education standardization’, many rural schools have been ‘improved’ out of existence (DeYoung & Howley, 1990); but there appears to be little evidence to support these justifications within the Canadian context.

2.4 CLOSING SCHOOLS: PROCESS, POLITICS, AND OUTCOMES

2.4.1 SCHOOL CLOSURE POLICY: THE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW GUIDELINES

Over the last thirty years, the Ontario Ministry of Education has periodically developed regulations to help facilitate the difficult exercise of closing schools. A recent iteration of this doctrine was published in 2006 titled *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 2006). Recognizing the sensitive and high impact nature of these decisions, the

overall intent of the guidelines are to create a more fair, equitable, and balanced decision-making model: 'The Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines serve as an important tool for parents and communities – because they will ensure that such decisions are transparent and made with meaningful participation and consultation' (p1). Responding to considerable pressure from school boards, communities and municipalities for a reformed process, the *Guidelines* were most recently revised in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009). It places a greater emphasis on consultation and comprehensive evaluation as central considerations to the overall decision-making process than the previous version.

The policy itself has two principle objectives. First, it outlines the review process and establishes the minimum standards for consultation; and two, it includes four criteria by which the school or group of schools under review are to be measured by. Above all else, the overall intent and purpose of the *Accommodation Review Guidelines* is established:

'The *Guideline* ensures that where a decision is taken by a school board regarding the future of a school, that decision is made with the full involvement of an informed local community and it is based on a broad range of criteria regarding the quality of the learning experience for students

In recognition of the important role schools play in strengthening rural and urban communities and the importance of healthy communities for student success, it is also expected that decisions consider the value of the school to the community, taking into account other government initiatives aimed at strengthening communities' (p.1).

As an initial step in the process, the *Guidelines* direct school boards to convene an *Accommodation Review Committee (ARC)* once a school or group of schools has been identified

for review. The ARC acts as a principle facilitator between the community and school board, and may comprise of parents, educators, board officials, and residents of the broader community.. Throughout the review, the ARC works diligently towards publishing the *Accommodation Review Committee Report*, which is submitted to the school board administration and trustees for final review and consideration. Trustees are not required to serve on an accommodation review committee, but in some cases do. A further principle mandate of the committee is to further consult, and as necessary modify, the *School Information Profile*. This document is originally developed by the school board senior administration team, and includes the four value criteria by which the school or group of schools under review are measured. These include: value to the student, value to the school board, value to the community, and value to the economy. The Guidelines include examples of what factors may be considered for further evaluation by the ARC. Examples of these are located in Appendix A. Moreover, the ARC is tasked to explore alternative accommodation options, in addition to those initially offered by the school board.

The second principle purpose of the Guidelines is to establish the minimum requirements for consultation. This includes ensuring that public information is widely and easily accessible, providing and detailing accommodation options, and outlining the community consultation and public meeting procedures. More specifically, the Committee must consult and engage a wide range of school and community stakeholders through a minimum of four public meetings. The location, timing, and purpose of the meeting must be well publicized in advance and detailed minutes are to be taken and subsequently made available to the general public. Both members of the accommodation review committee and school board administrators are required to

answer any relevant questions from the public during the meetings, including those received in writing. The process timeline is considerably more concise and specific than the content of the consultation process as outlined above. For example, there must be no less than 30 calendar days' notice before the first public meeting, and no more than 60 calendar days before the first official meeting is held. The entire consultation process concludes with the Accommodation Review Report which contains a set of recommendations and alternative solutions that are reflective of the consultation process. It is then submitted to the senior administration team for separate analysis, who also make a separate recommendation to the trustees. In a final decision, the Trustees vote on whether the school or group of schools under review are to remain open or be permanently closed. There must be no less than 60 days' notice prior to this final resolution.

2.4.2 CHALLENGING A SCHOOL CLOSURE DECISION

There are a limited number of channels through which a school closure decision can be challenged. The first is by requesting that the Ministry conduct an *Administrative Review*, otherwise referred to as a petition. As the Ministry states, the only grounds for filing a petition is if during the course of the consultation process the school board did not adhere and strictly follow its own accommodation review policy. If this can be proven, there are specific steps outlined for filing a review. First, areas where the board did not follow its own policy must be clearly identified and outlined. Second, signatures from individuals who participated in the accommodation review process must be collected, the total of which must represent 30 percent of the school's student population; and third, a detailed letter outlining the grounds for petition and including signatures must be submitted and provided to both the Ministry of Education and

the school board. Filing for an administrative review must be completed within a 30-day period following the final accommodation review decision. The second means to challenge a school closure decision is through legal action but this rarely occurs. Further to this, there is little precedent in the legal system that rules in favour of the community position (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). Decisions on school closure challenges have historically supported the administrative autonomy and absolute decision-making power of school boards (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). Moreover, as this author concludes: 'the above analyses have demonstrated that school boards have a significant administrative power to close down a school, if only they adhere to the spirit of their own closure policies and that of ministry guidelines (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, p.19).

2.4.3 SCHOOL CLOSURES: THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Existing evidence from both Canada and abroad suggests that school closures are an intensely visceral and contentious process regardless of context or geography. Almost universally, school closures are met with strong community resistance and protest. There are several seminal studies that have come to define the Canadian discourse on this topic. Lucas (1982) writes early based on the Saskatchewan experience. The author describes rural communities as 'ultimately powerless' (p. 254) in the school closure process, with associated actions ranging from petitions and briefs, to formal deputations made to provincial administrators and politicians. Lucas (1982) observes that protest is largely the result of community interests not being adequately addressed or represented by school board officials. This is further exacerbated by several other factors, including: the issue of community survival (p.255), the value of objective school board data over subjective community data including 'feelings, attitudes, traditions, and the like'

(p.255), and whether a school closure precipitates community decline, or is an outcome of a declining community (p.256). Also at issue is the question of educational quality in small rural schools, something the author observes to be fundamentally political:

‘The issue reveals that in rural systems it is not simply a matter of small hinterland communities unanimously opposing urban-oriented policies which threaten community survival. Opposition to “urban” policies also involves denial of “urban” opportunities, and in this study, community protest against school closure and the transfer of students to larger more comprehensive town schools was associated with bitter controversy within the community itself.’ (p.259).

Lucas (1982) concludes that admittedly small rural schools have little to justify their existence by standards of efficiency and fiscal responsibility. However; there is an onus to implement a decision-making framework that creates a positive scenario where the long-term vitality and well-being of rural institutions and communities is better ensured.

A short while later, Doern and Prince (1989) investigate school closure processes in Ottawa. Using a report published by the Bureau of Municipal Research (1980), the authors proposition that alternatives to school closures are rarely embraced or sought after when faced with declining enrolments. Instead, boards across Ontario generally believe that ‘school closures are positive steps in solving the problems faced by declining enrolments’ (p.23) and school closures are seen as a ‘fact of life’ (as cited in Doern and Prince, 1989). In this particular case, the authors find the nature of participation in these decisions more amicable when communities are proactively involved in formal review and planning procedures. As they note: ‘the corollary is that if early and genuine participation does not occur then neighbourhood groups that are more

politically aggressive and sophisticated frequently arise outside the official structures' (p. 467).

Three conclusions are reached: one, the extent to which the school closure decision process 'takes on a life of its own' (p.467); two, each of the players involved in these processes '[have] delusions of authority and flexibility' (p.467); and three, that the 'standards of evaluating the outcome are inevitably political' (p.468). Hence, the authors coin school closure decision-making processes as politically and administratively demanding (Doern and Prince, 1989).

Subsequent studies have further corroborated the nature of these findings. For example, Phipps (1993) conducts an institutional analysis of the school closure process in two Canadian cities: Saskatoon and Windsor. It is concluded that community members and organizations only become involved in these decisions if the closure of a local school 'impinged upon a social base of their lives associated with their individual attachment to their school' (Phipps, 1993, p.1620). Moreover, community organizations and the school boards equally leverage agency skills and structural powers to influence the process (Phipps, 1993). A particularly poignant conclusion in this regard reads: '...school boards exploited their real legal powers to implement the procedures for restructuring that enabled their agency skills and constrained those of the affected community representatives' (p.1620). Four years later, Samson (1997) writes on the experience of two rural communities in Newfoundland and Labrador. Here, it is found that consolidation was pursued under the auspices of efficiency, equity and equality. Despite the best efforts of each community, both schools are ultimately closed and 'they were now fighting, not only to keep their school, but their community, too' (p.122). Bushrod's (1999) dissertation is focused on rural Alberta, where the decision was met with much deliberation, but ultimately the school is

permanently closed. Here, community concerns are associated with losing social values and opportunities once the school is gone, and less for issues associated with fiscal responsibility and rationalization.

More recent literature on these processes has become increasingly critical. In 2001, Lauzon and McCallum conducted a cross case analysis of rural school closure experiences in Southwestern Ontario. They find the relationships between communities and school boards tend to be defined by tension, animosity, and frustration. Overall, Lauzon and McCallum (2001) conclude that these decision-making processes are 'poorly researched, poorly designed, and poorly implemented' (p.45). Disenchantment with losing a local school is heightened because it mirrors the simultaneous loss of other public institutions and service centres as well. In this way, school closures are part of the larger and more gradual erosion of rural life (Lauzon and McCallum, 2001). In conclusion, the authors call for a more context-sensitive approach to policy development that 'meaningfully engages citizens about the future of their schools and subsequently their communities' (p.45). The authors make a total of five recommendations to better reconcile the decision-making process: (i) inter-ministerial coordination of policy development; (ii) a need for honesty where both school boards and the province recognize the literature and associated evidence that questions closing rural schools in favour of fiscal austerity; (iii) a more transparent and accountable governance model; (iv) a flexible policy that considers the uniqueness and diversity of rural communities; and (v) the Ministry of Education needs to monitor the implications of educational restructuring on rural communities.

In evaluating the decision-making process itself, Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) contends that although 'the expectation of open and fair procedure and full participation are theoretically sound democratic values, boards may not want to achieve that in practice' (p.12). As the author describes, open and meaningful participation in these decisions is not always pursued wholeheartedly by school boards, because the process is often too time consuming or perceived to be costly. Nonetheless, at the core of this issue is the 'detachment and alienation of communities from influencing board policies' (p.17), often resulting in a sense of powerlessness followed by protest, as well as political and legal action on behalf of the community. In the author's final analysis, it is concluded that:

'The principle of procedural fairness does not obscure the fact that school boards are the real makers of school closure decisions, not communities affected by closure decisions. In terms of governmentality, public participation in the form of consultation – hearings, meetings, publicity and presentations – are often used to create the impression that school closure is a community business and that community members whose interests or privileges are impacted could influence the outcome of closure decisions' (p.20).

In other words, participation is used to legitimize and rationalize the review process and in doing so, obscures the real power of school boards to make unilateral decisions (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005).

Basu (2007) writes on the experience of school closures in Toronto. Drawing upon the work of Foucault, the author describes school closures as 'constant tensions and contestations between neoliberal governmentalities on one hand, and the conformance, disobedience and opposition of groups on the other' (p.11). In this sense, the author contends that school closures represent

a planning instrument implemented through neoliberal regimes, in this case the province, to 'shoulder off' (p.111) or divest responsibility related to local planning and long-term community well-being. In discussion, Basu (2007) demonstrates two ideological approaches to school closures: one, bureaucratic decisions of accountability on the one hand; and two, neighbourhood attachment and loss of community on the other. The author posits that more fundamentally, school closures are a problem of public policy that entails a 'stark separation of education policies from a social policy and civil society framework' (p.123). In other words, the provincially crafted accommodation review guidelines are designed to represent true cost savings guised in deliberative democracy; but at the local level, the policy is interpreted differently and instead represents the loss of community ties and social cohesion (Basu, 2007; Witten et al., 2003). Similarly, Irwin's (2012) comprehensive study of school closure processes comes to the same conclusion. Here too, the author observes that school boards have the authority and legal ability to close schools, as long as they adhere to the provincial guidelines, and subsequently their own internal policy (Irwin, 2012). Again, the efficacy of engaging the community through deliberation is suspect. Moreover, the process becomes 'politically charged', as residents are also concerned with the long-term viability and resilience of their own community (Irwin, 2012). In this regard, school boards are 'policy takers rather than policy makers' while both the process and policy represent a significant value distance (Irwin, 2012).

From a more distinctly community planning perspective, Irwin and Seasons (2012) observe school closure processes as 'highly (and bitterly) contested, rife with conflict, and with few exceptions, harshly criticized by school and community stakeholders' (p.46). The authors

compare the current state of accommodation reviews and school closures to that of a 'wicked and messy' problem (citing Rittel & Webber, 1973). These are public policy challenges that are ill-defined, poorly understood, have multiple causalities and causations, and for which rational models of decision making are ineffective. Drawing upon discourse in public participation and planning, Irwin and Seasons (2012) place the process of accommodation reviews in the context of Arnstein's (1969) seminal 'Ladder of Participation'. Here, the authors argue that school closure processes are 'situated in the bottom third of Arnstein's ladder' (p.61), defined as non-participation where 'their real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable powerholders to "educate" or "cure" the participants' (Arnstein, 1969, p.217). When compared to current best practices in public participation, the authors observe that the accommodation review guidelines are dated and unresponsive to public expectations of fairness, accountability, and transparency; it also fails to authentically engage the public as well as other stakeholders. Drawing from more contemporary planning theory and practice, Irwin and Seasons (2012) call for a more balanced and nuanced approach that recognizes the political and contentious nature of these decisions. The authors specifically point to communicative and collaborative approaches that are 'characterized by interactions with stakeholders that would be inclusive, equitable, meaningful and foster mutual learning and respect' (p.61). Moreover, an appropriate decision-making framework would be one that integrates school board and municipal planning goals and objectives, effectively breaking down 'planning and policy silos' (Irwin & Seasons, 2012; Vincent, 2006).

A concise review of international literature on the subject of school closures further

substantiates the Canadian experience. Bondi's (1987) early work in England demonstrates the impact of rationalizing the education system in favour of fiscal austerity. Here, the author finds two forms of interactions between school boards and communities: either pluralist or corporatist. In the end, pluralist methods of engagement are largely 'cosmetic' (p.203) and used to legitimate school closure decisions (Bondi, 1987). In New Zealand, Witten et al. (2001) concludes that the school closure experience is considered an 'imposition by the state' (p.315), demonstrating a tension between the economic imperatives of the government against the more broad considerations for social needs and societal costs of the community. In 2003, Witten et al. note that neoliberal policy is found to be closely associated with rural school closures, and that these processes expose different understandings of community. In the end, when closure debates were not aligned with the fiscal interests of the government, the Ministry of Education ultimately took authoritative action and in doing so, demonstrated absolute power to close the school down. This was experienced as '...a loss of local control over matters of central importance to lives of local families' (p.219).

Again, more evidence from Denmark (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006), Finland (Autti, 2014), New Zealand (Kearns et al., 2009), Scotland (Miller & Slee, 2015), and the United States (Valencia, 1984) all reach a similar conclusion: that the school closure processes fail to recognize the centrality of schools to their communities, and where the community perspective is subjective and therefore devalued or inherently less relevant (Kearns et al., 2009); schools influence a community's well-being through social and human capital, but local residents often have little say in the school closure process (Autti, 2014); rural demographics and fiscal considerations are

a stimulus for closure (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006); that a more appropriate process is one where there is compelling evidence for closure, especially related to adverse impacts, and a need to meaningfully involve local communities to ensure common approaches which builds trust between stakeholders (Miller & Slee, 2015). In the United States, the school closure process is largely a practice of 'divide and conquer', creating 'clear winners and losers' (Valencia, 1984, 1985) and to rectify a negative mind set toward decline, school boards must evolve to have 'clear, shared missions and have positive visionary attitudes towards change' (Valencia, 1985; citing Shakeshaft and Gardner, 1983).

2.5 COMMUNITY PLANNING AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

Existing academic research and literature connecting community planning, public schools, and school closures is remarkably thin. Moreover, there are very few studies that have been conducted from the academy of planning and in a Canadian context that focus on school closure policy and process specifically (See: Andres, 2013; Irwin and Seasons, 2012; Sauve, 2014). For example, Andres' (2013) study, titled '*Connecting School Closures and Community Planning*', found the following: a strong policy disconnect between school board and municipal planning goals and objectives; that the respective mandates and outcomes of education and municipal policy are sometimes at odds with one another; and, there is often little collaboration that occurs between school boards and municipalities. In his conclusion, Andres (2013) advocates for municipal planning authorities having a greater role in the school closure process due to the interdisciplinary nature of the profession and its focus on evaluating the economic, social, and environmental costs of policy decisions. Irwin and Seasons' (2012) discussion serves as one of

the only concrete examples directly linking community planning and school closures. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of the issue, largely from a policy perspective but with a specific frame of reference to contemporary planning theory and practice. In particular, the authors call for a decision-making process that more closely reflects the following:

‘We believe that school board decision-making processes would benefit significantly from the experiences gained by urban planners over the past 50 years... School boards, for their part, need to coordinate and integrate Board planning and decision – making processes with those of their municipal government planning counterparts (and vice versa), especially in the downtown and inner city communities which tend to be affected significantly and adversely by school closures. Municipal planners and school board planners seem to operate in parallel planning universes; this is usually counter-productive and inefficient as well as ineffective’ (p.12).

Similarly, Sauve’s (2014) case study of the Niagara Region in Ontario found inconsistent provincial and local land use policies pertaining to school closures, and an institutional gap that would otherwise allow municipal and school board planners to better collaborate and cooperate. Sauve (2014) recommends the need to ‘update [the] Accommodation Review Guidelines to provide a clear framework for collaboration with municipal governments and planning authorities in order to extend the reach and parameters of their school closure studies’ (p.51).

While there may be a dearth of academic literature connecting rural school closures and community planning, the issue has seemingly not been lost on municipal leaders, practitioners, and various planning authorities across the province of Ontario. In an open letter titled ‘*Re: Closing Schools and Provincial Funding Formula*’, the Regional Planning Commissioners of

Ontario (2014) outline how school closures result in a number of negative planning outcomes, including: loss of schools as community hubs, challenging planners to build healthy and complete communities, and destabilizing resilient development and regeneration. With respect to specific rural implications from school closures, the Planning Commissioners of Ontario (2014) note:

‘The sustainability of rural communities can also be significantly impacted by the closure of schools in rural neighbourhoods. These schools are often clustered with other public facilities such as playing fields, arenas, community centres and other social infrastructure. These hubs are critical focal points for rural neighbourhoods, where residences are often spread out beyond reasonable walking distances. They represent a rural community’s identity and social binder. Losing these schools can be disastrous for rural neighbourhoods’ (p.4).

In much the same way, school closures and the sustained provision of local education have been identified as both a policy priority and challenge for rural planners, as identified by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (2012). This discussion paper is written in response to issues brought forth by planners practicing in rural areas of the province. It has identified that a decline in economic activity and adverse demographic trends often result in the closure of local institutions like schools, ultimately threatening the identity and vitality of many rural communities (Ontario Professional Planners Institute, 2012).

Similarly, school closures and declining enrolment have also been a topic of concern for rural municipal governments. For example, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (2011) identifies education and schools as a policy priority, indicating:

‘In rural and northern communities, as in all of Ontario, there is a real need to provide and maintain access to quality education. Declining enrolment in rural and northern areas is one issue that effects access to quality education and needs to be addressed. Many communities have only single schools and in certain areas, school boards find it challenging to keep small schools open. Declining enrolment means declining provincial funding and the cost of maintaining local schools facing declining enrolment, given the current funding formula, is becoming prohibitive. When a rural or northern school is shut down, the entire way of life in a community is impacted. This includes spin off economic impacts. School closures go beyond impacting educational services in rural and northern areas making it very difficult to keep and attract new families to a community when a school is lost. It is fair to say that the viability of communities in rural and northern Ontario is directly related to local access to elementary and secondary education’ (p.8).

There have also been coordinated efforts from municipal leaders in Southwestern Ontario to challenge school closures in rural communities. One such organization, the Community Schools Alliance, is lobbying to have municipalities become partners with school boards in decisions on how and where rural schools are closed. They propose a ‘smart moratorium’ on all school closings that are disputed by municipalities, until a more effective and equitable process is developed which might ensure greater collaboration, accountability, and a better governance model for school boards (Community Schools Alliance, 2015).

For its part, the province has largely been unresponsive to these varied perspectives and concerns. In its most recent Provincial Policy Statement (2014), there is a focus on rural Ontario but it seems to largely ignore the direct link between rural schools and community well-being. The Policy Statement is ostensibly designed to: ‘provide a framework for comprehensive,

integrated, place-based and long-term planning that supports and integrates the principles of strong communities, a clean and healthy environment and economic growth...' (p.1). The policy vision has a strong emphasis on creating healthy, integrated and viable rural areas through a coordinated approach. Interestingly, it is suggested that this should include such matters as: managing and/or promoting growth and development; economic development strategies; public service facilities and population, housing and employment projections, among others. Despite this comprehensive approach espoused by the Policy Statement, as well as the specific rural focus of the entire document, there is no specific mention of schools or education. Perhaps even more telling of this apparent policy disconnect are the proposed revisions to the current Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (2014). In reference to this discussion, particularly concerning is the proposal to reduce the number of days required for consultation from 90 to 60 (p.16). However, school boards will also be afforded the latitude to develop a shortened process with no requirement for committee consultations given certain conditions are met. For example when a group of schools is under review that are also geographically close (p.17). Moreover, a schools value to the local community and economy will no longer be evaluated as part of the decision-making framework, altogether negating the one positive component of the recommendations that would require school boards to formally consult their municipal counterparts during the review process (p.18).

The basis for drawing a connection between public schools and community planning is not abstract. Although there has been little formal integration between community planning and school board facility planning, the two are inextricably linked and there is now an emerging body

of discussion to reflect this. For example, Vincent (2006; 2008; 2014) has written extensively on the topic of public schools, public infrastructure, and healthy communities. As the author notes, far too often planning outcomes are not evaluated with respect to how they benefit or disadvantage local schools (Vincent, 2006). As such, both the academy and profession of planning need to be 'concerned with the role of our public school system – a social and physical infrastructure that is vital for the health of cities' (Vincent, 2006, p.434). As Vincent (2006) continues, a critical challenge to this is the institutional separation of school facility planning and municipal land use planning, as well as the absence of a formal framework for greater collaboration and cooperation between the two bodies. In response, the author proposes a multiagency governance approach to improve both communities and schools (Vincent, 2006). This includes institutional linkages, local 'civic capacity' (p.436), and shared learning between the two disciplines. Though writing in the American context, there are parallels to the Canadian experience given that municipalities and school boards are governed by different provincial legislation, and this is viewed as an impetus to greater collaboration and cooperation (Andres, 2013; Doern & Prince, 1989; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012).

Writing later on the joint use of public schools and healthy communities, Vincent (2014) also notes that terms such as 'community-centered [sic] schools, 'smart growth schools', and 'schools as centres of communities' are becoming more common to the planning lexicon. As described, this reflects a growing belief that schools 'act as a central public space to foster events and community building...' (p.154), while also contributing to community social capital (Vincent, 2014). The study concludes that the joint-use of public schools is a novel concept that has been

demonstrated to have positive outcomes on overall community well-being, but the findings suggest that there are significant implementation challenges associated with such a model. Moreover, as public agencies are increasingly tasked to do more with fewer resources, the joint-use of schools may be a viable alternative, but: 'joint use partnerships ought to structure financing supports among partners that realistically capture the facility and ground-related expenses for which school districts are responsible' (p.164). Interestingly, this seems to resonate within the Ontario context, where recently the Premier appointed the Community Hub Framework Advisory Group who are tasked to develop a framework for adapting existing public infrastructure to become community hubs, including schools (Office of the Premier, 2015). The rationale for this is to provide: 'high quality, accessible and efficient community services [as] part of the government's plan for Ontario'. This mirrors a growing discussion of evidence-based academic discussion demonstrating how the planning and construction of public schools is moving towards an integrated approach that combines community services, revitalization, and educational planning (Bierbaum, Vincent, & Tate, 2008).

Through both theory and practice, the academy and profession of planning may be well positioned to offer a more nuanced, balanced, equitable, and effective decision-making process (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Tracing the genesis of contemporary planning efforts offers an opportunity to demonstrate how the lessons learned within the discipline can offer an alternative path forward in the school closure process debate. Contemporary planning theory is largely borne in response to the instrumental rational model and its successor, the rational comprehensive model (RCM). These models of decision making emerged as mainstream

planning theory in the post-World War II, and as Innes and Booher (2015) observe '[the] rational model was a major pre-occupation of planning theory from the 1960s, and by the 1980s it had become deeply integrated in to planning education' (p.197). Similarly, the rational model of policymaking is grounded in measurable objective data while also being preoccupied with notions of efficiency and accountability. It also subverts or completely ignores the particularities of place. This model required planners to be neutral analysts and apply scientific methods to complex public policy challenges of the time, seminally referred to as 'wicked and messy' (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Though certain attributes of rational planning remain a cornerstone of contemporary planning, 'the RCM was attractive in its simplicity and perceived analytical power...[but] in its early versions, it was an expert-driven model that favoured technical analyses of urban issues and excluded citizen participation' (Irwin and Seasons, 2012; citing Friedmann, 1987). There was little regard for the notion of community or more fundamentally, the public's role in establishing values and preferences in planning processes and outcomes. It offered 'little or nothing' (Innes & Booher, 2015, p.197) about the realities of politics, ambiguity, unequal power relations, conflict or the validity of community values and goals (Innes & Booher, 2015; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). As Irwin and Seasons (2012) conclude: 'we make this point because it could be argued that school boards rely heavily on rational planning methods, and under-value planning models and processes that encourage meaningful participation by community stakeholders in school closure reviews' (p.59).

Contemporary planning theory is now firmly planted in more collaborative and communicative based approaches to policy and process. Meaningful citizen engagement (Arnstein, 1969) is now

a cornerstone of the planning practice as are decision-making models that reflect inclusion, meaningful stakeholder engagement and trust-building, incorporation of diverse values and views, identify and advance the public interest, and encourage shared responsibility for decision making (Irwin & Seasons, 2012; citing Booher & Innes, 2002; Goldstein & Butler, 2010). For example, Innes and Booher (2002; 1999, 2004; 1996) write extensively on consensus building and collaborative policymaking in complex adaptive systems. Here, there is a focus on reaching consensus through communication rather than making decisions based solely on majority rule. Such methods are employed to assure that all stakeholders are meaningfully involved and where discussions are based on stakeholder interests and 'not simply on arguments about predetermined positions' (Innes & Booher, 1999, p. 412). Moreover, Innes & Booher (2004) make an argument for increased citizen participation and collaborative approaches to planning processes and policies:

'Collaborative participation dissolves many dilemmas of theory and practice. For example, there is no need for citizens or planners to choose between the collective and individual interest. In these dialogues the effort to meet individual interests produces a collective interest, unlike the pluralist model, where individual interests are packaged without being integrated. In collaborative participation, interdependencies are uncovered and participants can discover how all may benefit from improving a resource (Innes, 1996). The issue of whether citizens know enough to be listened to also disappears as they become knowledgeable, and as agencies or other players work with them on participatory research and joint-fact finding... finally these processes help planners and administrators to become more in touch with their communities and citizens to understanding political and economic realities' (p.430).

As Innes and Booher (2004) conclude, public agencies that are mired in conflict with stakeholders or other agencies can explore changes in procedures that encourage deliberative processes.

Critical to these contemporary models of planning is communication, where values and interests are not viewed as given and unchanging, but instead participants are enabled to rethink their positions, interests, and even values through the course of dialogue (Innes & Booher, 2015). The penultimate theory being that 'communication has power' (p.198). These models of decision and policymaking often result in high quality agreements that are not only viewed to be fair, but are 'regarded as fair' (p.414) with benefits ranging from formal agreements, new partnerships between agencies, innovations, as well as increased capacity through greater social, intellectual, and political capital (Innes & Booher, 1999). As Healey (1999) writes on place-focused and place-conscious governance 'communicative planning theory provides suggestions for the design of interactive governance practices in which creative responses can be encouraged, social learning improved, and institutional capacity transformed' (p.120). This requires a more collaborative approach that includes horizontal networks and partnerships; finding ways to involve stakeholders in policy development; creating and maintain an open environment for constructive debate; and connecting local strategies and opportunities to macro-policy (Healey, 1998).

2.6 EVALUATING SCHOOL CLOSURES THROUGH A RURAL LENS

Bringing together the various narratives that have emerged through reviewing the pertinent literature are the related fields of rural planning, community development, and public schools. As Caldwell (2005) describes at length, the Canadian context of rural planning concerns the process of planning for rural areas, with a focus on rural issues, and conducted from a rural perspective. Rural planners tend to be 'adaptive generalists' (p.26) and are necessarily involved with a diversity of issues, strategies, and approaches in response to the various challenges and opportunities that are specific to the rural context. These include: depopulation, environmental degradation, land use conflicts, local economic development, or threats to education, health care, and other public goods and services, among others. Rural practitioners are therefore involved in a diversity of issues and processes associated with community development through building relations, capacity building, and often embracing community initiatives rather than relying exclusively on formal processes. Altogether, rural planning can be understood as efforts to ensure the long-term and overall vitality of rural communities. This also reflects the essence of 'good' community planning that is broadly defined as making decisions that are reflective of the public good and are in the best interest of the public writ large (Hodge & Gordon, 2008).

A prominent theme from the literature on school closures is criticism of the accommodation review guidelines, where many authors argue that it ought to include a more comprehensive and holistic evaluation framework. As described throughout this discussion at length, the current decision-making model lacks both depth and breadth. Instead, it heavily favours rational measures while largely dismissing any social, environmental, cultural, and individual outcomes. At the same time, the literature often refers to terms such as 'rural well-being', 'community

development', and 'resiliency'. By unpacking these concepts, a more complete and critical discussion emerges that offers an opportunity to explore an alternative decision-making model. First, we refer to the work of Ramsey and Smit (2002) in defining a comprehensive interpretation of rural community well-being:

'Rural community well-being is interpreted as the interrelated structural and functional conditions (physical, psychological, social, and economic) of a community, including individuals and their interactions, within a non-urban environment' (p.371).

Ramsey and Smit's (2002) definition is useful because it illustrates a comprehensive model of rural community well-being, and depicts outcomes at both the individual and community level (Appendix B). As the authors describe, rural communities are dynamic, including changes to the structural and functional conditions that ultimately contribute or determine overall well-being.

This can occur at three foci: forces, changes, and responses (Appendix B). The authors explain:

'As rural community functions (e.g. economic) change, the structures of the rural community also change (e.g. economic, political, institutional, social). If the economy function declines, the structures of the rural community could change (e.g. closure of rural extension offices, population decline). Certain processes related to changes have more direct implications on rural community well-being' (p.372).

This model of well-being (Appendix B) is concerned with how the forces of process related changes affect community well-being, and therefore it provides a 'useful framework for further analysis of how rural communities are impacted by the external environments within which they operate...' (Ramsey and Smit, 2002).

With respect to community development, Miller (1995) offers a simple yet comprehensive interpretation by defining it as 'any effort designed to improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of the community' (p.6). Reflecting on the author's own research, Miller (1995) describes the gradual breakdown of rural community solidarity through school closures as threatening to not only efforts of community development, but also social capital. Here, Miller (1995) refers to the work of Putnam (1993) in describing social capital as '...features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (p.6). Therefore, successful communities hinge on 'strong traditions of civic engagement' (p.6) that in turn reflect such values as solidarity, civic participation, and integrity (Miller, 1995). The corollary of these is described by Kretzman and McKnight (1993; as cited in Miller, 1995):

'As schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many rural and urban communities have lost their power as a valuable community resource. And many economically distressed towns, communities, and neighbourhoods have begun to struggle toward economic revitalization without the valuable contributions of the local school' (p.209).

As Miller (1993; 1995) concludes, many rural practitioners have experienced a promising direction for community development efforts through social capital and by fostering a stronger association between communities and schools. However: '...without building strong support among community organizations, groups, individuals, and leaders and shoring up that support

through policy development, it is unlikely community-based program [community development] initiatives will last' (p.18).

There are three other authors that provide applicable interpretations of community development for the purpose of this study. First, Reimer defines these efforts as 'strategies and frameworks' (p.156) that are proactively initiated at the community level to ensure lasting vitality. This includes identifying assets and liabilities, participation and bottom-up capacity-building, democratic governance, and transparency; all of which contribute to creating opportunities for prosperity in small towns and rural areas (Reimer, 2006). Bhattacharyya (2004) defines community development as fostering social relations through both solidarity and agency. Here, solidarity refers to a 'shared identity and norms' (p.12) through 'networks, trust, and mutual obligations enabling people to take collective measures to address shared problems' (Bhattacharyya, 2004; citing Putnam, 1995). Subsequently, the author defines agency as the ability to 'act otherwise' (citing Giddens, 1984) where communities develop a collective and critical consciousness, addressing problems that the affected people own and define, as well as take active measures to solve. Similarly, Cavaye (2001) interprets community development as a response to detrimental social and economic changes that require 'local people using assets in new ways, working cooperatively, improving networks, mobilizing existing skills, and putting innovative ideas into action' (p.110). In this way, the more 'soft' aspects such as community networks, social cohesion, and participation often underwrite the 'hard benefits' of economic prosperity.

However, Reimer (2006), Bhattacharyya (2004), and Cavaye (2001) all note several caveats to their respective models of community development. First, Reimer (2006) points out that many community assets and institutions that create capacity are often regarded as local, yet may in fact be controlled outside of the community. In this way, such assets can make a significant difference on the range of community development opportunities available, but: 'it is important to recognize that there are significant constraints on it due to conditions beyond local control' (p.157). Ergo, contextual conditions can be detrimental or beneficial in creating capacity and fostering community development. Bhattacharyya's (2004) critique of community development offers a more theoretical perspective. The author argues that society is experiencing an erosion, rather than the transformation, of solidarity at both the micro and macro scales. A number of explanations are offered, but the most compelling is the systemic utilization of instrumental, technical, and positivist reason as a means to achieve the most efficient end; only when human or environmental benefits or costs affect efficiency are they then factored into the equation. In this way, the calculus for reason as efficiency is measured by 'market-price computation of benefit-cost ratios' (p.19). As the author argues, this often results in the subversion of community by 'expropriating the authority to judge and validate traditions, worldviews, and the entire range of human subjectivity' (p.19); and almost every modern institution has come under the purview of instrumental reason. Therefore, local challenges are in fact manifestations of problems originating 'farther upstream' (p.24), and community development efforts necessarily require simultaneous actions at both the micro and macro levels.

Lastly, Cavaye (2001) contends that an expanded rural agenda, including community development strategies, require new approaches to community and citizen participation. This includes two fundamental departures from current practice. First, Cavaye (2001) argues that when organizing for community development, rural citizens are growing tired of ‘committees, public meetings and other “traditional” forms of participation, which often appear to be used by default’ (p.120). Instead, the author recommends more informal, temporary and social ways of participation. Second, Cavaye (2001) suggests that government responsiveness to communities is generally ‘mediated through unempowering “consultation” processes and a complex system of agency based decision-making’ (p.120); this is where citizens often express disenchantment with these process on the whole. An alternative solution requires embracing non-traditional forms of community involvement through coalitions, informal and temporary commitments, and networks of community groups; altogether being more responsive to ‘grass roots movements’ (p.120). In this way, it challenges the current governance status-quo by requiring a dual-role model that reflects both service delivery and support for community capacity. As Cavaye (2001) suggests, this requires not only technical expertise on behalf of policy makers and public officials, but also the ability to ‘facilitate a process that engages a diversity of people, supports community “champions”, helps people plan action, networking, and conflict resolution’ (p.122).

Interestingly, Cavaye’s (2001) assertion for a more nuanced model of governance reflects a similar theme found in the literature on school closures and within contemporary discourse on Canadian public policy. In particular, Irwin and Seasons (2012) make reference to Keevers, Sykes, and Treleaven (2008) who write on networked governance as a means to achieve greater

partnership and participation between policy makers and the community. This alternative model of governance has emerged 'out of neoliberal and managerialist discourse and are more specific to the community sector, re-shaping relationships and interactions between community organizations, government and communities' (p.465). While making an argument for networked governance specifically, Keevers, Treleaven and Sykes (2008) illustrate the advantages of such an approach:

'Network governance suggests a possible breakthrough in public administration and organisation [sic] theory by providing a means to tackle problems in a multi-dimensions and local flexible way. It forges a new path between bureaucratic centralization, and privatisation and such may be regarded as the emerging model of public organization for the twenty-first century' (citing: Considine, 2005, p.2).

In practice, such models are often adaptable rather than rigid and can include a range of discursive practices such as multiagency approaches, partnerships, place-based policy-making, and participatory planning processes. As the authors note, neoliberal policy tends to ignore the notion of society and community, and therefore does not encourage a focus on community well-being: 'local knowledge and distinctive perspectives of community sector organisations [sic] are rarely considered in broader theoretical and political debates' (Keevers, Treleaven, and Sykes, 2008; citing Andrew, 2006, p.323). Keevers, Treveane, and Sykes (2008) conclude by recognizing that greater community capacity, collaboration, and local engagement is likely to strengthen the well-being of communities through an informed activism.

From a Canadian perspective, the networked governance model reflects a growing recognition that greater citizen engagement and participatory practices are fundamental to building good

public policy and high quality places (Bradford, 2005, 2008). This includes upper-tier level governments that engage local networks to address 'wicked problems' (Bradford, 2008, p.2). These challenges are characterized as deeply rooted, interconnected, and altogether unfamiliar, and necessarily require holistic interventions to create good places for people to live, work, and participate in community (Bradford, 2008). Moreover, traditional approaches to governance and policy, typically centralized and top-down, tend to dismiss local knowledge and devalue the community perspective. Therefore, a 'local lens' (p.2) within the policy community is necessary: 'upper level governments need to use the local lens to align and tailor their generally available sectoral policies; and on the other hand, for the extraordinary challenges in distressed areas, targeted or community-specific action designed collaboratively can seed transformative local change' (Bradford, 2008, p.3). To this end, it is through capacity building and collaboration that communities become empowered and informed negotiators as a locus of knowledge in the generation and development of public policy interventions (Bradford, 2005, 2008).

The final term that is referenced often in the literature is 'resilience'. To define this concept within the context of rural school closures, we refer to the work of Oncescu (Oncescu, 2013, 2014a) who writes extensively on this topic. Here, Oncescu (2014a) refers to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) in reaching a broad definition of resilience as a 'dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (p.39). More specifically, community resilience refers to the depth of capacity to adapt and change within the complex processes between individuals and their broader environments where 'community resilience is perceived as a continual development process in confronting adversity and change,

rather than securing a stable outcome' (Oncescu, 2014a, p.40; citing Berkes & Ross, 2013). Therefore, strong community resilience includes strengths and attributes such as social networks, social support, social inclusion, sense of belonging, and leadership (Oncescu, 2014a). This is in addition to the natural and built environment, including a community's infrastructure and social services. Resilient communities, hence, learn to cope with, adapt to and shape change' (p.412). Alternatively, Magis (2010) notes that when facing constant change, a community's resilience will influence its capacity to navigate change, thus making resilience important to community sustainability, vitality, and long-term well-being. Taken together, a well-rounded and comprehensive interpretation of community resilience emerges, reflecting 'an ability of a system to sustain itself through adaptation and occasional transformation' (p.412).

2.7 CONCLUSION

The literature review has informed and further substantiated each of the four research questions that guide this study. As evidenced, there is a dearth of research on school closure processes and outcomes and within the rural context. Moreover, small schools that are experiencing sustained rates of declining enrolment are particularly susceptible to closure. This consideration is heightened under public policy that stresses fiscal austerity and efficiency. In other geographic contexts, this situation has been described as a 'hollowed out post-welfare state' (Witten et al., 2003). At the same time, the processes that inform these critical decisions are often clouded by the politics of community resistance and a largely unresponsive government. Here, there appears to be a significant policy disconnect between the ostensible intent of accommodation reviews and the particularities of rural Ontario. This has left many municipalities, policymakers,

and communities seeking a different, more effective and amicable process. Reviewing the literature on community planning and rural development seems to offer some promising directions. But first, it is necessary to strengthen the dearth of Canadian based literature on the role of schools and the appropriateness of a generic model of decision-making. The following chapter will detail the methodology developed and implemented to operationalize the research questions and objectives.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review has established that both the process and outcomes of rural school closures is an emerging topic of interest to both the academy and profession of community planners. At the same time, there appears to be strong association between school closures and rural development, with an emerging connection to community planning. It has also been recommended that a more nuanced policy model that integrates local knowledge and includes meaningful public participation be adopted. This not only reflects a greater democratic ideal, but also leads to increased collaboration, cooperation, and consensus building as a means to better support efforts of revitalization and resilience. The remainder of this study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by investigating an accommodation review that took place in rural Southwestern Ontario. The research methods outlined in this chapter are developed to address the following primary research question:

- *Does Ontario's generic accommodation review process need to be adapted for rural and small town communities?*

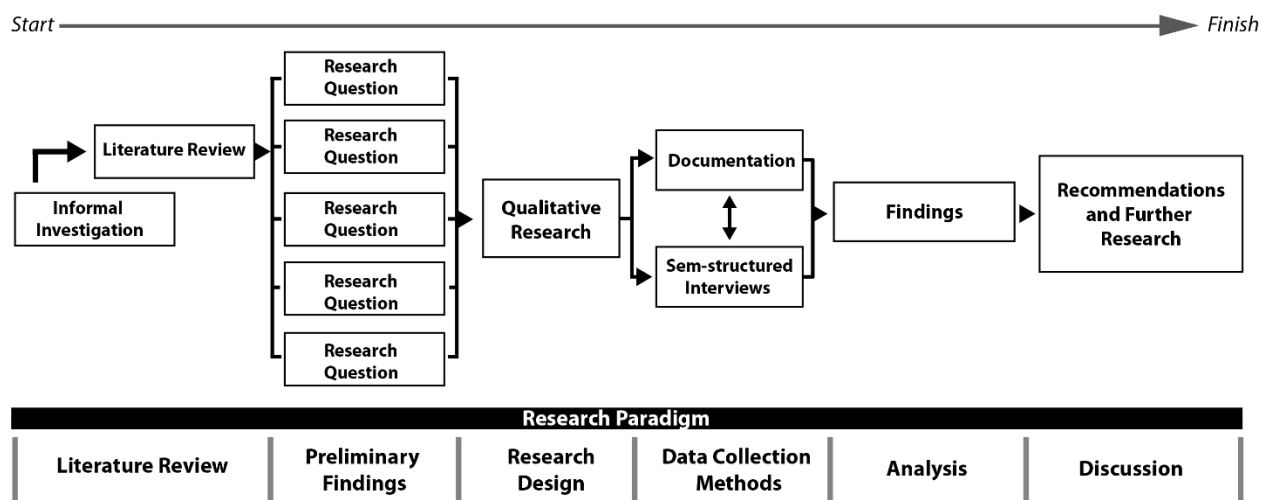
To further guide the research and evaluate the case study, the following secondary questions were developed:

- *Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?*
- *What is the role of elementary and secondary schools in rural and small town communities?*
- *What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?*

3.2 RESEARCH PROCESS

As illustrated in *Figure 3.1: Research Process*, this study began with an informal and preliminary investigation of school closure processes and outcomes. This was followed by a more thorough and detailed review of the literature, concluding with five research questions that would ultimately serve to focus the study. The research questions are operationalized through both the research program and methodology, together forming the empirical foundation of this study. This includes three distinctive steps: the research design, data collection methods, and analysis. The research paradigm serves to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of this study, and ultimately informs the following: how the data was collected, the types of data sought, and how the data was analyzed.

Figure 3.1: The Research Process



The remainder of this chapter discusses each aspect of the following methodology in more detail. This includes a discussion on the research design, data collection methods, analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.3.1 *THE QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY*

The methodology used in this investigation involves a single instrumental qualitative case study.

Though a number of definitions for case study research are found in the literature (See:

Cresswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009), but Simons (2009) offers a useful

interpretation for the purpose of this research:

'[the] Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program, or system in a 'real life' context. It is research based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), program, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice or civil or community action' (p.21).

Similarly, there are a plethora of definitions for qualitative research. It is sometimes defined with

respect to a particular methodology (See: Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). For example, the overall

research perspective and the importance of the participant's frames of reference; the flexible

nature of research design; or the volume and richness of qualitative data. Strauss and Corbin

(1998) instead define qualitative research methods by what it is not:

'By the term *qualitative research* [emphasis added] we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical or other means of quantification.' (p.11)

In this study, qualitative research is understood as an approach to derive meaning and

understanding of social phenomena in their natural context, as experienced by the individual and

then later interpreted by the researcher to identify themes or patterns (Cresswell, 2009; Norman

K Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The qualitative case study is therefore an effective tool when

addressing what happened, how, and why, rather than who or how many (Yin, 2009). Research of this nature serves as a particularly effective tool to gain new insights and empirical knowledge from under studied or poorly understood complex social phenomena (Cresswell, 2009). A further advantage offered through the case study is the ability to include a variety of data sources and collection methods within contextual conditions (Yin, 2009). Studies engaging in this form of inquiry support a way of conducting research that values the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Ultimately, qualitative methods lead to a richer understanding of complex phenomena, processes, or policy as derived from the narratives of the participants, groups or communities being investigated (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2000).

3.3.2 QUANTITATIVE AND MIXED-METHODS

There are three other ubiquitously recognized methods to conducting research, with the preceding discussion having established that the qualitative approach is utilized for the purpose of this study. The two other methods include quantitative and mixed, and are widely employed across multiple disciplines and contexts. In explaining the difference between research methods, Creswell (2009) notes that 'qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as polar opposites or dichotomies; instead, they represent different ends on a continuum' (p.3). This continuum is often defined by quantitative research to one extent, and qualitative research to the other. Quantitative research emphasizes the use of empirical data to substantiate findings, and is typically associated with the positivist paradigm. Endorsers of quantitative methods tend to maintain that all data and observations are objective; that is, bias free generalizations are desirable and possible, and as such the root causes of social scientific

outcomes can be determined reliably and validly (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A mixed-method approach rests in the middle of this continuum, and is increasingly being embraced by both qualitative and quantitative researchers alike (See: Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Creswell et al. (2003), offer the following definition for mixed methods research:

'A mixed methods study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, and are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research.' (p.165).

Nonetheless, this study remains grounded in qualitative methods for several critical reasons as asserted by Rist (2000). Here, the author argues that qualitative research is particularly well suited to evaluate both policy implementation and accountability. To the former, Rist (2000) asserts that qualitative research methods and designs, such as case studies, are particularly useful to evaluate policy implementation and subsequently inform policymakers and program managers. In other words, a 'ground level' evaluation and observation of implementation is best done through qualitative research. To the latter point, and with respect to accountability, the author contends that qualitative research allows for the study of both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes, as well as changes in understandings and perceptions as a result of efforts of the program or policy. In conclusion, policymakers and program managers have no equally grounded means of learning about program impacts and outcomes as they do with qualitative research studies, and the subsequent qualitative nature of their findings (Rist, 2000).

3.3.3 CASE STUDY DESIGN

This research is designed as a single instrumental case study, with three embedded units of analysis (Stake, 1998; Yin, 2009). Each analysis serves to build a narrative of the school closure experience and perspective. Stake (2000; 2003; 2008), describes the instrumental case study as a particularly effective research design when the intent is to produce insight into an issue, and is critical to advancing knowledge of a particular phenomenon within a broader context. In other words, the case itself is of secondary interest, where ‘the methods of instrumental case study draw the researcher toward illustrating how the concerns of researchers and theorists are manifest in the case’ (Stake, 2000, p.439). In this study, the implementation of an accommodation review policy is evaluated through the experience and perspective of a rural school community. Although this study occurs within this context, the findings are expected to be representative of school closure processes across rural Ontario.

3.3.4 CASE SELECTION

As an instrumental case study, the intended purpose of this research is to draw broader conclusions on the role of schools and the nature of accommodation reviews within the rural context. In this way, it is intended to provide more insight and produce a better understanding of the issue and the phenomenon of the school review process as a whole. Therefore, the importance of choosing a case is necessarily imperative because the findings are generalized as representative of the issue, or as Stake (2003) notes: ‘the phenomenon of interest observable in the case represents the phenomenon writ large’ (p.152). Moreover, it is important that the research design and methods are aligned with the current underpinnings or knowledge of the

issue and phenomenon being studied. Detailed analysis regarding the rationale of this case study selection is addressed in Chapter Four: The Case Study, section 4.1.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

3.4.1 STUDY PROTOCOL

A common practice to ensure consistent and focused data collection is to develop a study protocol (Table 3.2: The Study Protocol). The purpose of this instrument is to guide the research in a meaningful direction, so that the study objectives are consistently being addressed throughout the research program and data collection procedures. In each of the semi-structured interviews, the questions found under *Case Study Focus and Interview Questions* will be used to conduct the interviews.

Research Focus	Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Literature Sources
<p>The School Closure Decision Making Process:</p> <p><i>Does Ontario's generic accommodation review process need to be adapted for rural and small town communities?</i></p>	<p>Is the current accommodation review policy appropriate for school closures in rural and small town communities?</p> <p>Which stakeholders became involved in the consultation process; either from the board, the community, the municipality, or other?</p> <p>Were there any alternative solutions explored to keep the school open?</p> <p>What modification would you suggest to improve the accommodation review decision-making model?</p> <p>Are there any particular provincial or school board policies that you view as prohibitive to rural school remaining open?</p>	<p>Andres, 2013; Arnstein, 1969; Autti, 2014; Basu, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Doern and Prince, 1989; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin, 2012; Irwin & Seasons, 2013; Kearns et al., 2009; Luazon & McCallum, 2001; Lucas, 1982; Witten et al., 2001, 2003; Valencia, 1984, 1985.</p>
<p>Role of Rural Schools</p> <p><i>What is the role of</i></p>	<p>What is the role of Derby Public School in the community?</p>	<p>Downey, 2003; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Harmon &</p>

<p><i>elementary and secondary schools in rural and small town communities?</i></p>	<p>How were each of the four valuations of the accommodation review guidelines measured during the consultation process? Was there a variation in the emphasis placed on a particular value over another? What is the 'culture' of the school?</p>	<p>Schaft, 2009; Kearns et al., 2009; Lyson, 2002; Miller, 1993, 1995; Nachtigal, 1994; Witten et al., 2001, 2003; Valencia, 1984, 1985.</p>
<p>Impact of School Closures to the Rural Community: <i>Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?</i></p>	<p>What are the impacts to the local community if Derby PS is closed? What are some of the challenges or opportunities in rural Ontario as they relate to school closures? What are the potential outcomes from rural school closures to the local community or economy? Do school closures challenge the goals and objectives of rural municipalities?</p>	<p>Barakat, 2014; Bushrod, 1999; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Hargreaves, 2009; Irwin & Seasons, 2013; Magis, 2010; Oncescu, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Ramsey & Smit, 2002; Slee & Miller, 2015; Vincent, 2006, 2014.</p>
<p>Alternative Decision Making Model: <i>What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?</i></p>	<p>Should there be a more appropriate decision-making model for closures in rural and small town communities? Please describe the relationship between the Board and the community during the ARC process. What is the relationship between the municipality and the school board? Describe how the board viewed participation from the community during throughout the consultation. Was the board receptive of the community's efforts or participation during the ARC? Were there issues of data transparency or availability?</p>	<p>Arnstein, 1969; Bhattacharyya 2004; Bradford, 2005, 2008; Cavaye 2001; Healey, 1998, 1999; Innes & Booher, 1999, 2004, 2015; Irwin, 2012; Irwin and Seasons, 2013; Keevers, Sykes, and Treleaven (2008) Reimer (2006).</p>

The study protocol is a critical tool to the researcher. Though not a case study protocol in the strictest sense (See: Yin, 2009), the protocol developed for this study does ensure consistency and focused data collection; as well, a logical method to link the evidence and conclusions with

the initial research questions. Each of the four research themes identified in the protocol are based on evidence established through the literature review.

3.4.2 DOCUMENTATION

The first phase of data collection will include a preliminary analysis of the case through documentation, otherwise referred to as secondary data. As Yin (2003) states, documentation is subject to bias given its very nature and should therefore not be used alone; but, it is an important tool to 'corroborate and augment evidence from other sources' (p.83).

Documentation in this study largely consists of presentations, letters, meeting minutes, correspondence, school board documents, and mass media that were previously exchanged or produced during the accommodation review consultation. The use of secondary data is critical for a number of reasons. First, because the study is retrospective in nature and the researcher has no prior familiarity with the case, it provides for an in-depth perspective and a better understanding of the case. It also illustrates contextual information that assists in identifying the units of analysis, the key informants, and ultimately guides the interviews. Second, it built rigour and added validity to the case study (Yin, 2003). To achieve this, findings from the documentation analysis were cross-referenced with the interviews to ensure consistency, highlight new findings, and draw further conclusions. In the end, documentation was an important component that informed both the findings and ultimately the conclusions.

3.4.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The second phase of data collection included semi-structured, or focused, interviews with key informants. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted under those terms as espoused by Gubrium and Treating (2000), who suggest that they are a 'social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed' (p.141) but also with 'the possibility that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge' (p. 141). As a method of inquiry, focused interviews are preferred over both structured and open-ended methods for several reasons. First, the use of focused interviews ensured that the conversation was directed meaningfully towards the themes and research that emerged as central to the study. It also provides a degree of flexibility in the interview-questioning pattern so that conversations were emergent in design, and further probing questions could subsequently be asked (Barriball & While, 1994). Second, semi-structured interviews contribute to the overall validity of case study research by enabling the participant to address and elaborate on a particular aspect in more depth and detail than might have otherwise been possible (Gubrium and Treating, 2000). This ensures that the conversations are focused on reaching a deeper understanding of the case being studied. The third and final consideration in the use of semi-structured interviews is that they are underpinned by the interpretive research paradigm; that is, it places an emphasis on flexibility and adaptation so that the focus is on the participant's own perspective, experience, understanding, and interaction with the case itself (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

3.4.6 SAMPLING METHOD AND SAMPLE POPULATION

In qualitative research, sampling methods have a profound effect on the quality of the findings, and are ultimately and intentionally selected according to the needs and parameters of both the study and researcher (Coyne, 1997). The sampling method selected for this study was at first purposive, given the nature and focus of the research program (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015) the logic and strategy for employing purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases for in depth study, which in turn provides insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. Purposive sampling implies a strategic choice in recruiting participants that are also directly associated with the research objectives (Palys, 2008). Although it is widely embraced in qualitative research, it is also vulnerable to bias when a small number of cases are studied, or the participants are only representative of a small portion of the total population.

For the purpose of this research, we were particularly drawn to the implementation of a policy as experienced by the community, but we also solicited participation from the municipality. In this way, it can be argued that stakeholder sampling was employed, which is useful in the context of evaluation research and policy analysis (Palys, 2008). Further to this, it supports our methods of using purposive sampling given the targeted audience that this study is concerned with. However, an important concession is that due to the sensitive nature of this research, there are understandable limitations imposed by the Ethics Committee. Therefore, initial contact is made with those sources that are accessible, most knowledgeable, and relevant (Coyne, 1997, p. 625). Moreover, this study relies on chain sampling (Cresswell, 2009) and there are practical considerations for this method. Not the least of which, it is expected that those potential

participants who are initially contacted will be well positioned to solicit the participation from others in the community or the municipality.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

3.5.1 DATA MANAGEMENT

Both Yin (2009) and Stake (2008) recognize the importance of data management strategies in case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It not only enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, but also enables the researcher to better manage the vast amount of data normally collected during case study research. All data sources in this study are electronic in format, with the recorded semi-structured interviews being transcribed verbatim. This presents several advantages to data management, not the least of which is security and the flexibility offered in cataloguing and organization. However, given the large amount of data collected and its format, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) is used extensively. The CAQDAS software employed was NVivo 10, self-described as a platform that enables the researcher to 'collect, organize, and analyze various forms of qualitative data'. In practice, NVivo 10 is a particularly effective tool that enabled the interactive organization of qualitative data around the central research themes and questions; this enabled the findings to become dynamic, connected, and accessible (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006). Though NVivo 10 complements a variety of analysis and coding methods, it was instead utilized more for efficiency in cataloguing, organizing, and interpreting the data, rather than coding or analysis specifically.

3.5.1 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is largely dependent on the researchers interpretation of the data, and the subsequent sorting, categorizing, comparing, and further conceptualizing of the findings in search of themes and patterns (Patton, 2015; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). In this way, research involves both the analysis and synthesis of data and is a highly iterative process (Patton, 2015; Stake, 2008). In the specific context of case study research, there is an emphasis on recombining the evidence to address the initial research questions of the study. With these considerations, Patton's (2015) method of analysis is adhered to closely. That is: identify patterns that are representative of the descriptive findings, and subsequently interpret the meaning of those patterns through more categorical and topical analysis. Rather than identifying the presence or use of specific words or phrases, as is typical in coding theory, the nature of this research was largely focused on exploring each of the research questions within the case itself. That is, it was more concerned with both the implicit and explicit ideas within the data.

3.5.2 RIGOUR AND EVALUATION

Yin (2009) describes case studies as situations where the number of variables of interest far outstrip the number of data points, and this makes evaluation a challenging but important consideration in this type of research. As such, significant efforts were made to build evaluative rigour. A framework for these measures are outlined in *Table 3.3: Case Study Evaluation*. It was applied throughout the research program to increase the quality of findings and address common criticisms of case study research, including misinterpretation and repeatability (Stake,

2000; Yin, 2009). Four main approaches were employed to ensure study rigour. These include: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

Table 3.3 Case Study Evaluation		
Test	Evaluation Tactic	Research Phase
Construct Validity	Multiple Sources of Evidence	Data Collection
	Establish Chain of Evidence	Research Design and Data Collection
Internal Validity	Pattern Matching	Data Analysis
	Explanation Building	Data Analysis
External Validity	Address rival theories, explanations, or perspectives	Research Design and Data Collection
Reliability	Case Study Protocol	Data Collection and Management
	Develop Case Study Database	Data Collection and Management

Adapted from: (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008; Yin, 2009)

Construct Validity: One method to construct validity is to include multiple sources of data, data collection methods, and units of analysis as a strategy to interpret and corroborate the case study findings; this is known as triangulation. In this study, multiple sources of data, data collection methods, and units of analysis are applied to establish this. A second strategy for constructing validity is developing a chain of evidence that reconstructs the research methodology, including: data collection procedures, process, analysis, and limitations. The entire methodological procedure, as outlined in this chapter, establishes the chain of evidence.

Internal Validity: A second strategy to build rigour is through internal validity. Two methods are used; first, the research questions are evaluated through empirical evidence; this is referred to as pattern matching. Second, triangulation between data types, data sources, and other research on the topic are also employed to enhance validity and credibility.

External Validity: The next approach to building case study validity is through external evaluation. This refers to the generalizability of case study findings; that is, determining if the findings and conclusions derived from one case are representative of other cases within a similar context. Though external validity is best achieved through multiple or cross case analysis, the findings of this research are instead compared to other studies that have investigated accommodation reviews and school closures. This ensures that rival explanations, alternative theories, and different perspectives are accounted for.

Reliability: The fourth and final consideration in evaluating case study research is reliability through transparency and replication. In general, this refers to clearly establishing the methods and procedures of data collection and analysis. This study employed the extensive use of a study protocol and case study database to enhance careful documentation and research procedures so that the findings are both traceable and replicable.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND STUDY LIMITATIONS

3.6.1 ETHICS APPROVAL, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND ANONYMITY

Full ethics approval was received from the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee in October of 2014. Confidentiality and anonymity are of paramount consideration throughout the research program. With each participant, initial contact is made by email with an attached formal letter of invitation and verbal consent form (Appendix B). The formal invitation outlines the purpose, focus, and ethic procedures associated with the research, and also describes when

the final study will be complete, and subsequently available for review. Due to the sometimes sensitive nature of the interviews, and the narratives provided therein, strict measures are taken to ensure that participants feel comfortable with the conversations being recorded, and later transcribed for future analysis and use in the final report. This includes a verbal consent form that is completed prior to the interview; also, being clear that the participant may withdraw or have the recording destroyed at any time. In both the documentation and interview phases of data collection, individual references are not made in the report, and participants are given unique identifiers to ensure anonymity in the findings. Despite these best efforts, there were a select number of instances where individuals were inclined to participate but did not wish to be recorded; subsequently, briefing notes were taken but not used directly in the findings.

3.6.3 STUDY LIMITATIONS AND BIAS

The most significant research limitation in this study is associated with the number of cases investigated, the limited response rate, and sample population. This occurred for two primary reasons. First, the findings of this study are restricted to a single case. The original research design was a cross case analysis, including two study sites, with the other being Parliament Oak Public School in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Niagara, Ontario. This opportunity was pursued whole heartedly, so far as preliminary conversations were held and potential participants were identified. However, there was apprehension from potential participants due to legal measures that were being pursued on behalf of the community by Niagara Citizens for Accountable and Responsible Education. In the end, potential participants were granted clearance to participate in the study, but at the discretion of the researchers, it was decided that not enough time

remained to conduct a thorough case study investigation. The second significant limitation to this study is the low participant rate. This is further discussed section 6.3: Study Limitations and Reflections, but may be attributed to study design, researcher error, or the sensitive nature of the case in question.

Nonetheless, in all qualitative research of this nature and scope, it is neither practical nor possible to research and include every aspect of a case. To accommodate for this, purposive and chain sampling were employed for their value as an effective and focused means to recruit participants and to increase the credibility of the findings. However, the use of these techniques introduces a bias to the data sample, largely because it requires a degree of subjective judgment from the researcher about who participates, what questions are asked, and ultimately the sample size. A further consideration is how the data may be open to bias due to the small and focused sample population who participated. For example, this study gathers evidence directly from both the municipality and community, but not from the school board. Both groups may possess a different set of values and beliefs regarding the case. Cumulatively, this imposes a limitation to the validity of the findings presented; however, the use of various methods to ensure study rigour, as implemented and described previously, is intended to address these concerns sufficiently. Areas for further research that would accommodate for the various limitations identified above are explored in section 6.4: Considerations for Further Research.

3.7 SUMMARY

Thus far, an extensive review of applicable research and evidence has been presented; this was concluded by establishing a set of research questions and objectives that ultimately guides the study. The research methodology presented in this chapter has addressed how the research program will be operationalized and includes a detailed review of the research design and methods, data collection procedures, analysis techniques, and limitations of the study itself. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Chapter Four, a case study description is provided to establish context. Subsequently, the findings of this research are presented in Chapter Five, while the discussion and recommendations are presented in Chapter Six. The paper concludes by considering several areas for further research.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE CASE STUDY SETTING

4.1 CASE STUDY LOCATION

Kilsyth is a small rural community located within the Township of Georgian Bluffs, Southwestern Ontario. The exact location of Kilsyth can be found in *Appendix C: Location Map of Kilsyth, Ontario*. Kilsyth was first settled in 1845, and was most recently amalgamated with the surrounding municipalities of Keppel, Sarawak, and the Village of Shadow Lake to form the Township of Georgian Bluffs in 2001. Jurisdictionally, it is located in the upper-tier municipality of Grey County. Today, the nearest settlements to Kilsyth include the Village of Keady and the Village of Rockford located to the North and East, respectively. The much more populous and regional economic centre of Owen Sound is located approximately ten kilometers to the Northwest. Grey County Road 5 forms the central village corridor, along which a majority of homes and the very few existing businesses are oriented. Community focal points include the local arena, Kilsyth United Church, Kilsyth Hall, and Derby Public School.

The school itself is located in the Village of Kilsyth, and is home to the Derby Dolphins. The school was first constructed in 1958 with two further additions built in 1964 and 1971. Derby has a total of ten classrooms, one kindergarten room, one science lab, a library, and a general-purpose room, with a total designated capacity of 273 pupils. Derby has a current enrolment of about 200 students ranging from kindergarten to grade eight, with a twelve member teaching staff. Almost 95 percent of Derby students utilize bus transportation. It is self-described as an 'inclusive learning environment for all children, possessing a strong belief in building

partnerships with parents and businesses within the community, and fully embraces the concept of being a small, rural school with a caring and personal approach to learning' (Derby PS, 2015). For all intents and purposes, Derby Public School has an excellent reputation in education quality, student achievement, and leadership (Derby PS, 2015). Derby enjoys a strong parent council and community support; it is also well-respected institution with a firm network of parents and supporters that extends across the region.

4.2 CASE STUDY RATIONALE

The rationale used to select Derby PS and the community of Kilsyth as a case study is three-fold. First, there are far more elementary public schools across the province than secondary schools. For instance, in the 2013-2014 school year, the Ministry of Education operated 3,980 elementary schools and 917 secondary schools; this represents nearly four times as many elementary facilities. Moreover, it also represents an increased number of communities who may be effected by a school closure. Irwin's (2012) ethnographic study also focused on elementary school's with the following rationale:

'My focus is on elementary schools. They are more prevalent than secondary schools, they are smaller in student size, and, in terms of closing, more tend to close, and their closings tends to elicit a greater emotional response from the associate communities' (p.47).

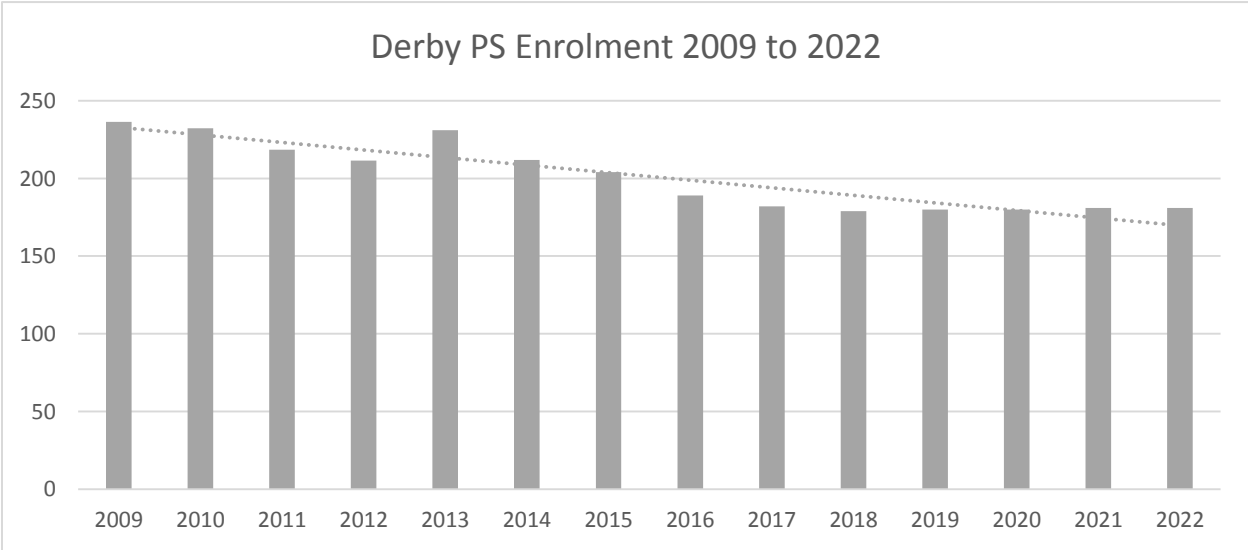
Indeed, a report published by People for Education (2012) corroborates Irwin's (2012) assertion. Since 1998, the average enrolment in Ontario elementary schools has declined from 365 to 318 students; as a consequence, the report indicates that 125 schools are slated for closure from

2012 – 2015, with 142 further reviews possible. Furthermore, there is regional variation in the rates of declining enrolment. The only Ontario region expected to see positive growth is within the Greater Toronto Area outside of the City of Toronto proper; otherwise all other regions across the province are expected to see rates of decline from as high as 15 percent in the North, to as little as 5 percent in Central areas. More specific to this study, Southwestern Ontario is expected to see a 7-percent decline. Further data on how many schools are closing and where this is occurring are not made readily available by the Ministry of Education; there is a recommendation made at the conclusion of this study to rectify this.

Second, this particular case was highly accessible to the researcher, with the community expressing an initial interest to participate in this. As with any case study, gaining research ‘access’ was a concern, so this was ultimately a promising development. For instance, several other communities were initially identified as possible case studies, but were dismissed after it proved difficult, if not impossible, to establish local rapport. Moreover, data for this particular case was highly accessible; this was a critical concern given the retrospective nature of the study. For example, Bluewater DSB has maintained a dedicated website for the Derby PS accommodation review. This includes meeting agendas, minutes, timelines, written and oral submissions, and reports. On the other hand, the community based organization *Derby School Matters* webpage has also been maintained, and contains much of the same information as the Bluewater DSB website. However, it provides more anecdotal and rhetorical evidence that demonstrate the contentious and difficult nature of this particular school review. This is

described and documented in greater detail below. To this end, the case demonstrated promising potential to gain an in-depth knowledge of the accommodation review process. A third and final rationale for selecting this case study were the various arguments made in favour of closing Derby PS. When selecting an instrumental case study, the objective is to choose an observable case that is representative of the phenomenon ‘writ large’ (Stake, 2003). Referring back to the literature, small rural schools are often slated for closure for either a demonstrating a continuous trend of declining enrolment, prohibitive or too costly to repair or maintain, or a combination of both. In the case of Derby PS, it was due to both factors. First, the school board projected a long-term rate of decline in enrolment for Derby PS (Figure. 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Derby Ps Enrolment 2009 to 2022

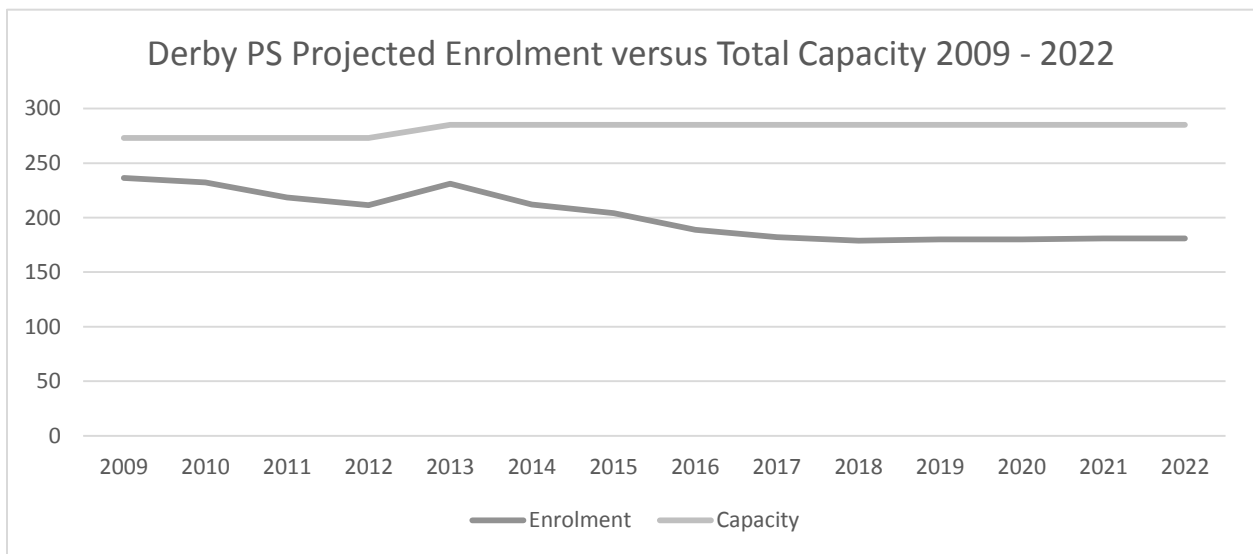


This also represents a significant shortfall in utilization when compared to the Ministry assigned enrolment capacity for the school (Figure 4.2). Thus, the school board argues the following:

- Operation shortfalls must be subsidized from a reduction in maintenance services at all schools;

- The high renewal backlog and need to bring the school to compliance regulations creates a high demand on limited capital resources;
- The board needs to reconcile excess system capacity and the school does not provide solutions to the Board(s) need;
- The lack of municipal water and sanitary facilities requires the Board to retain qualified water operators for day to day operations.

Figure 4.2 Derby PS Projected Enrolment versus Capacity 2009 – 2022



Ultimately, it becomes clear that the school was put under review for fiscal reasons which is consistent with the literature. Furthermore, the school board made an argument that closing Derby PS would increase utilization rates at nearby schools, thus increasing total board revenue and funds received from the Ministry of Education. At the community and municipal level, the school is widely perceived as a significant asset; in particular because it is only one of two within the Township of Georgian Bluffs as a whole. In conclusion, this case study was selected for three reasons. First, Derby PS is an elementary public school; second, the case study itself is highly accessible to the researcher; and third, the rationale for closing Derby PS is consistent with the

literature. Collectively, this research represents the school closure phenomenon 'writ large' and ensures that the case study will be representative of others.

4.3 CASE STUDY TIMELINE AND PROCESS

Derby Public School was first identified for review at a Bluewater DSB meeting on June 5th, 2012. At this time, a staff report titled '*Student Accommodation Reviews for Consideration 2012-2013*' (BWDSB, 2012) was tabled. It provided the board's rationale to review Derby for closure:

'Derby Public School has a high renewal need and the Facility Condition Index exceeds 65%, the ratio of renewal costs as a percentage of replacement cost. The school is not AODA [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act] compliant. The original building has wood framing, crawl spaces and a general-purpose room in the basement. The presence of radon gas and the high water table are a health concern for the operation of the school. Any capital improvements at the school will require engineered controls to eliminate the potential for radon gas collecting in the building. These costs are not included in the Facility Condition Index calculation. The low ceilings in the general-purpose room affect senior student sport opportunities. Any work in the general purpose room or the crawl space would affect six of the school's 12 classrooms.

The school's potable water is from a well that is controlled by Ministry of Environment Compliance legislation and the school has a septic system. The school has a combination bus loop, front entry and parking area. The parking spaces encroach on the fire route and the plant department pays for parking spaces at the municipal hall through a sharing agreement with the Municipality' (p.2).

The report background provides greater insight to the fiscal considerations that were imperative for identifying Derby for review. First, it was suggested that as many as 27 schools across the school board were generating a significant net-deficit in operating costs:

‘In an analysis of the plant operating cost versus revenue for all Bluewater schools, a total of twenty-seven (27) locations did not generate adequate revenue to cover the operation costs. The plant financial operating position of a school is based on enrolment, school capacity and the cost to operate the facility. Schools that are designated *Rural* are paid as if at capacity or enrolment is 100%. Non-rural schools must have student enrolment of at least 85% to allow the 15% capacity based top-up to bring the revenue to 100%’ (p.1).

Next, staff identified certain baseline expenses associated with operating a school facility that by in large remain independent of school enrolment or capacity:

‘The operating cost of a school is based on the area of the building and the fixed costs of operation independent of school capacity or size. The fixed costs include the cost of compliance permits and inspections, security and fire testing, and site maintenance such as snow removal, grass cutting, waste and recycling, tree maintenance, and site repairs. This costs are not variable based on enrolment or building size (p.1)’

This suggests that consolidation or closure offered one of the only viable means to realize true savings. The report then identified three other schools within an eighteen-kilometer radius with enough capacity to absorb students from Derby if it were to close. These schools included: Arran-Tara Elementary, Bayview Public, and Hillcrest Elementary. By closing Derby PS, net utilization across the four schools would increase to 87 percent, as would net revenue to a total of \$141 286. Summaries of these findings are found in *Table 4.3: Utilization and Finances*.

Table 4.3: Bluewater DSB Utilization and Finances		
	Before Closure	After Closure (<i>Projected</i>)
Total Enrolment	1287	1287

Total Capacity	1746	1473
Total Utilization	74%	87%
Total Financial	\$38 580	\$141 286
Adapted From: BWDSB (2012)		

It should also be noted that in actuality there were five schools identified for consolidation or closure in the report, including Amabel-Sauble CS, Georgian Bay Secondary, St. Vincent-Euphrasia, Meaford Community, and Derby. Of these five schools, only accommodation reviews for Amabel-Sauble CS and Derby PS were carried forward. At this point in the process, it remains unclear why Derby was alone identified for an accommodation review. This is particularly intriguing given that the provincial guidelines state that school boards are encouraged to focus on groups of schools within a similar planning area or in close proximity to one another, rather than examining a single school. Nonetheless, two weeks later on June 19th, the board approved a motion to commence an accommodation review of Derby Public School.

In accordance with the provincial accommodation review guidelines, and Bluewater District School Board policy, a minimum thirty-day advance notice prior to the first public meeting was given. This carried through the summer holiday months, with the accommodation review committee orientation meeting taking place on October 22nd. The review committee included eight members: one member from the school community council, an official from the Township of Georgian Bluffs, a staff representative from Derby PS, a school board trustee (who acted as an observer), the Superintendent of Business, the Superintendent of Education, and an executive assistant (who acted as a committee resource). The board had originally intended to conduct the minimum of four public meetings over the course of the consultation, but a thirty-day extension

was granted to accommodate further consultation. In all, there were six public meetings, and two committee-working meetings over a period of 120 days. A timeline is attached and can be found in Appendix D.

The first committee meeting was held on October 22, 2012. It was an orientation meeting for members of the accommodation review committee, where the process and policies were outlined. At this meeting, the chair of the committee was elected, and various procedures and norms were adopted for conducting the review, including Robert’s Rules of Order. It was also during this meeting that the committee was first provided with the necessary background information, such as the Bluewater DSB ARC policy, the Derby PS accommodation report, and associated timelines. This meeting was closed to the general public. There were then eight subsequent meetings that shaped the review process. This included six public input meetings, and two committee working meetings. Dates and descriptions of these meetings are provided in

Table 4.4: Derby PS ARC Meetings.

Table 4.4: Derby PS ARC Meetings		
Date	Meeting Title	Description
November 19, 2012	Public Input Meeting #1	The objective of the first meeting was to advise the public of the process and provide them with the Accommodation Review Report, the meeting norms, and criteria for presentations and submissions. A presentation on the reports was given that included value statements, revenue / expenditure information and repair costs for each school. The public was given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the reports.
December 2, 2012	Working Meeting #1	The committee discussed the communication process to receive submissions from the public and to communicate with each other. The committee discussed adding more members to the committee to help with the work load. The committee revised the dates of the upcoming public input meetings.
January 28, 2013	Public Input Meeting #2	The committee approved adding two additional voting members to the committee. Members were advised of the revised

		timelines, and discussed the option of requesting an extension. There were ten presentations with prior notice from members of the public. Members received information on types of funding available for operations and renewal.
February 11, 2013	Public Input Meeting #3	The committee agrees to request a 60 day extension to the public consultation period, extending it to May 18, 2013. Information was provided on questions asked at the previous meeting. A question and answer session took place between committee voting and resource members.
February 25, 2013	Public Input Meeting #4	The committee was advised that the extension request was approved. Committee members received a verbal response to the questions raised at the previous meeting. There were six presentations with prior notice from members of the public.
March 25, 2013	Public Input Meeting #5	Committee members received information on questions posed at the previous meeting. A map showing current boundaries was provided. An opportunity was given for members of the public to ask questions of the committee members.
April 15, 2013	Working Meeting #2	Committee members received information on questions posed at the previous meeting. The committee reviewed a few of the options for which staff had prepared data. The committee rejected those suggestions and presented options the parent group had been working on. Discussion took place around these options.
May 6, 2013	Public Input Meeting #6	This was the final meeting of the ARC. The committee presented to the public the final recommendation for the ARC being to keep Derby Public School open for the next five years. Upon expiry, Derby PS will undergo an accommodation review with a nearby school that is also prohibitive to repair, and to perform a future review with a vision of building a new, consolidated rural school that is in a central location beneficial to both communities. An opportunity for public input followed. Trustees will vote on the final recommendation on October 15, 2013.

Adapted From: Accommodation Review Committee (2013)

Throughout the review process, media attention and news reports were a significant source of information for the broader community, and several anecdotes from these sources shed light on the overall nature of this case study. For example, the community perspective is clearly evidenced through a news article published on October 2, 2013 titled ‘Fight for Derby Continues’ (Divinski, 2013). Commenting on the review process and value of the school, one community member states: ‘the school is the heart of the community but the board only puts value on what

programs are running because of Ministry of Education policies'. The Mayor of Georgian Bluffs also states: '...at the end of the day, they need to keep rural schools open and the ARC process has got to change at the provincial level' (Divinski, 2013). Other news headlines read: 'Parents plead for Derby' (Henry, 2012) , and 'Fighting for Derby Continues' (Bernard, 2013). The language used in these headlines is in itself indicative of how the review process transpired.

The nature of the process emerges as visibly strenuous, as one parent recounts in a news article: '...the process has put a massive strain on all the families involved'; and moreover: 'it is very disturbing that the BWDSB does not seem to care about the quality of education in their schools with their plan to close Derby' (Villeneuve, 2013). According to this article, according to school board officials, concerns with keeping Derby PS open are more associated with repair costs 'in the millions', and an undesirable utilization rate of 77 percent. Nonetheless, it appears that at least some trustees were not satisfied with the decision-making framework itself:

'Hanover-area trustee [redacted] called the ARC process 'divisive in a rural community. The entire culture is different in rural Ontario and it needs to be respected and understood. The ministry (of education) has imposed this upon us, but it is a process that is flawed from the onset . . . it is simply a no-win situation.' - (Golem, 2013).

The final vote occurred on October 15, 2013 with the Accommodation Review Committee recommending to keep the school open for a period of five years, with a further review which would include a nearby school occurring at that time. Conversely, school board senior administrators recommended closing the school in June of 2014 (BWDSB, 2013). In this scenario, out of boundary students would return to their original catchment schools, while students within

the Derby PS catchment boundary would become enrolled at one of two other nearby schools.

Commenting on this recommendation from the school board, one news article reads:

'...the administrative council 'thoroughly reviewed all of the options' and said with a 30% vacancy rate in schools across the board and funding uncertainties, 'tough choices have to be made.' - (Golem, 2013)

This proposal would satisfy the needs of the school board by closing Derby PS and in doing so, increase the utilization rates at nearby schools. However, in a final decision Bluewater DSB trustees voted in favour of the recommendation made by the Accommodation Review Committee to keep the school open. This decision was met with praise from the community and some trustees, but there was discernable ire directed at the nature of the ARC process itself:

'Some school trustees have also called for provincial review changes, called the current process flawed and for a moratorium on school reviews until the province changes the guidelines... they [parents] have said the review process puts too much onus on busy parents to gather together a defence of the school. They said it didn't consider the community impact of closing a rural school and they've criticized the 'flawed' process which considered Derby in isolation.' - (Dunn, 2013)

Nonetheless, the board maintained a strong concern for funding, stating: '...conditions of facilities and availability of resources all dependent on enrolment, Ministry funding, and efficient use of space' (Dunn, 2013).

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The rationale underpinning this study emerges from a paucity of research investigating the accommodation review process and the role of rural schools from a community planning and rural development perspective. Existing evidence and literature describes public schools as imperative to the vitality and overall well-being of rural communities. At the same time, the accommodation review decision-making framework has been widely criticized for devaluing the community and municipal perspective, and debasing the role of schools as integral to the long-term vitality and resilience of rural places. In contributing to this emerging body of knowledge and discussion, this study seeks to address the following primary research question:

Are the generic accommodation review guidelines appropriate for the context of rural Ontario?

Three subsequent questions were developed that enhanced the scope of this study by adding greater structure and focus:

- 1. What is the role of public schools in rural and small town communities?*
- 2. Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?*
- 3. What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?*

Together, these questions formed the basis of a semi-structured interview protocol that included a set of 17 questions (Appendix B). Given the emergent nature of semi-structured interviews, the pattern of questioning was not strictly applied during each interview, but was more dynamic and responsive to each individual response. In total eight participants were interviewed: three from

the municipality, and five from the community. Results from the analysis of documentation were also used to further substantiate the findings of this study. Three themes ultimately emerge from the research: the role of rural schools, the accommodation review process experience, and outcomes and implications from rural school closures. Each of these are subsequently discussed in greater detail below.

5.2 THE ROLE OF A RURAL SCHOOL

5.2.1 INTRODUCTION

The first theme that emerges from the findings is in regards to the role of Derby PS within the broader community. These findings are established through interviews with both community and municipal informants, but also through documentation that was submitted during the accommodation review process itself. Examples of initial questions directed towards community members and municipal officials include the following:

- What is the role of Derby Public School in the community?
- How were each of the four valuations of the accommodation review guidelines measured during the consultation process?
- Was there a variation in the emphasis placed on a particular value over another?
- What is the 'culture' of the school?

Again, given the dynamic nature of semi-structured interviews, these questions were used as a building block to elicit further individual perspectives from each question. In turn, the line of questioning was responsive to each individual participant. In the end, three patterns emerged in this theme: the school as a community builder, a place maker, and a source of local pedagogy.

5.2.1 COMMUNITY BUILDER

The findings indicate that the school was an important source for social cohesion and integration, and widely regarded as a community builder. During the accommodation review process, the school was described as the local hub of the community ‘where people move to and become involved on a regular basis’ (Documentation 1, 2013). Another resident observed how the school embodied the social fabric of the community by stating that: ‘a school is a building, but really a school is made up of families, parents, and children and dedicated teaching professionals’ (Documentation 2, 2013). In these ways, the role of the school in sustaining community cohesiveness and vitality is heightened: ‘since rural communities are small and cover a larger area, these facilities are even more vital to making the community thrive, both socially and economically’ (Correspondence 1). As another community member noted, ‘the area that has a school grows as a community, which in turn strengthens the smaller rural communities’ (Documentation 11, 2013). Similarly, one municipal official commented:

‘All municipal planners will agree that churches, stores and especially schools are a focal point for growing communities. Kilsyth is no exception in the fact that many families have migrated to that community because of the community centre for recreation, the church for religion, and the excellent history of education at Derby Public School. The school in Kilsyth has a tremendous effect of the value of the school to the community.’ – (Documentation 3, 2013)

Another finding that demonstrates the school acted as a community builder was its indirect role in supporting the broader community in times of need and distress. As an example, Community

Member 4 (2014) describes one particular instance where the school became an important asset to the community when a local family was in distress:

‘When there’s a problem, when there was a fire or something, like recently, it was completely smoking out somebody's house and ruining it, just north of me and south of the school, and those people again, you know in one of the assemblies at the school there, the Christmas pageant or whatever, you know they took up a collection and handed it over to the family. So, that’s how the community still comes together, because most those people aren’t going to church anymore, they don’t have any tie to any of the other parents, or any of the other people in the community, besides that school. So, is it important? Yeah, of course it is.’

As Community Member 5 (2014) also describes, a particular example of how the community comes together through the school is through fundraising events, such as one that was held and generated over \$100,000, describing: ‘so that’s the kind of community we live in.’ Again, another community resident stated how important a local school is, when it was stated that: ‘Derby community encapsulates the heart and soul of rural living: neighbours help out each other in times of need’ (Documentation 4, 2013). Interestingly, the accommodation review process itself seemed to bring the community closer, as one resident describes in an editorial to the local newspaper:

‘At Derby, we are a strong community. We support one another when times are tough, and we cheer each other on during times of celebration. Over the past few months, we have been supporting one another as we attempt to learn what a review means for our community.’ – (Documentation 5, 2013)

A more specific example of how the school brings the community together was shared by Community Member 1 (2014), who shares this perspective:

‘... It was our Christmas concert. And you know what, both sets of parents, my parents, [redacted] parents, like for one kid on stage, we bring in six people in the community because they want to see and be engaged with what the kids are doing. At that concert, it was full. I stood at the back. We were definitely at capacity. When you get a room like that and you see how many people support each one of these kids, and you see your neighbour and you look across, for us it’s like, it’s emotional. It’s very emotional to be [with] all the people that you know, it’s very different.’

Similarly, Derby PS also has a significant number of volunteers on the parents’ council, despite its relatively small size when compared to other nearby schools:

‘We actually have a reputation for having the largest parent council, we’re got one of the smaller schools, but we have 28 permanent members on our parent council. So of them, like Tara, the school that I like, it’s bigger than ours, but they’ve got two people... So gives you an idea of how just really involved our community is.’ – Community Member 4.

This finding clearly demonstrates the capacity of the school to bring the community together through different means. Indeed, many community members shared a deep personal connection and commitment with the school, either through history or participation in school affairs:

‘They’re all local people so they went to Derby and their parents went to Derby, and their parents’ parents went to Derby. It’s incredible. Some of them were third and fourth generation. So they have an emotional attachment to that school that’s unwavering.’ – Community Member 4

In this way, the school remains a significant part of many local resident’s lives, as Community Member 1 describes: ‘Again, a lot of the families, this is a multi-generation school. My Husband went to this school, and so did his mother. So, you know, we’re still all in this immediate area, we still look at it as part of our life.’

Other participants noted the role of the school in overall community well-being. For example, at least one municipal official highlights how Derby is an irreplaceable asset to the broader community as both a hub and source of community pride:

‘Similar to my stance as related to the potential closing of the Chesley District High School, I remain a believer that a school in a small rural community is much more than a building to house students, teachers and workers. It is a hub that fosters community spirit and plays an integral role in the overall health of our greater community.’ – (Documentation 6, 2013)

Other community members described Derby PS as integral to the overall community fabric, stating that: ‘Derby deserves the chance to continue as a vibrant, positive, all embracing village hub, apart [sic] of the community in the true sense of the word’ (Documentation 7, 2013).

Interestingly, Community Member 3 (2014) drew a comparison between the role of public schools and other important institutions that are critical for rural communities. As the informant notes, schools are not physical ‘plants’ as the board often refers to them as, but have a much more intrinsic and diverse role:

‘Personally, what I said all along from the very beginning, is they have to rethink their purpose. When they started calling schools plants, they forgot that they are honoured institutions, honoured community [emphasis] institutions. They’re like churches, and hospitals, and even libraries, and banks. You don’t put those in the middle of nowhere and expect people to move to them. You’re a public service. You’re there to serve the community where they live. So I think the mentality has to change...’

Moreover, the role of Derby PS as a community builder was strongly associated with tradition, relationships, and a connection to the past through the school:

‘The value of the school to the community is its relationship with past and present students, and how the school itself is the heart of the community. Tradition runs strong

and deep, and the school is the centrepiece for families to seek support both educationally and emotionally. The personal relationships that exist between staff and students are one that is hard to find in larger, more populated schools. Derby is an important cornerstone for this very caring and concerned neighbourhood.' - (Documentation 8, 2012)

As another community member observes, the amount of widespread support that Derby PS received during the accommodation review demonstrates 'how very important it is to the far-reaching community that it touches' (Documentation 9, 2013). It is also observed how the school brought the broader community together, even when its future was threatened. As Community Member 3 describes:

'...so while they're coming together, they're watching themselves being pulled apart. They really come together, like we can throw a fundraiser and we can have donation bags at the door for a cause, and in one night get a thousand dollars. They pull together [emphasis]. They need that, that's what country folk do. And they need that.'

Once again, the role of the school as a community builder is highlighted by how it strengthens the social fabric and cohesion of the community. In another similar way, one community member notes how the school embodied the very nature of rural communities and what it means to live there:

'I did not grow up rural, but I admire it so much. It is close, supportive, and unique. In times of trouble, rural communities pull together, they don't fall apart. They hold themselves responsible for others and yet still hold others responsible for themselves. That is what makes a community: looking out for each other yet holding everyone accountable for their own actions. They don't make excuses and they don't look to others to solve their problems. They pitch right in and fix what's wrong. That's the other top reason I love Derby so much.' – (Documentation 10, 2012)

Interestingly, one municipal official observes that the role and importance of the school is heightened because of a decline in other local institutions that would have otherwise fostered a similar sense of community:

‘You know what it’s about, the last thing a community has. Because, as you can appreciate, people don’t go to church very often anymore, there’s a church in Derby, single church, they don’t go to church as often, you know generationally it just seems to be declining, so there’s a declining enrolment in the church if you will. And then there’s the public school, where everybody connects. It is kind of the communication board, it’s the safety blanket of the community.’ – (Municipal Official 2, 2014)

In this way, the school was considered by many to be a ‘cornerstone’ of the community, where: ‘parents attending the same school their children now attend, grandparents of course sending the parents of the current children. Derby school is the common denominator, cutting across all other community institutions’ (Documentation 19, 2012). As one municipal official comments:

‘Yeah, I still have friends we went to school together there. It is a close... it’s a classic rural school. In terms of being tied to the community, and being almost close knit family of people who attend there, whether its students or parents are all connected with the school. It’s very neat.’ – (Municipal Official 1, 2014)

As one community member summarizes nicely: ‘[the school] defines the Kilsyth and area community... the value of a caring community that unifies the student body and makes them proud of their school and their worth to the community’ (Documentation 17, 2013).

In summary, the school emerged as central to everyday life, providing a connection to the past and future, and was widely regarded as the ‘cornerstone’ and ‘safety blanket’ of the community.

These varied roles are particularly heightened because other traditional institutions within

Kilsyth have closed or lost some significance, whereas the school continues to remain a common thread for the community. Municipal officials noted how important the school was in this regard, and in this way had a ‘tremendous effect on the value of the school to the community’ (Correspondence 3). Similarly, community members often shared a deep personal connection with the school, and valued it as a place for social integration and cohesiveness. In this way, it fostered and sustained a broad social network. The school also strongly contributed to a sense of place, and was regarded as an important asset according to municipal officials.

5.2.3 A PLACE MAKER

The findings indicate that the school embodied a place maker in the sense that it was both a local anchor and intrinsic to the community fabric. In many rural communities, the local school is often regarded as critical to everyday community life. As one official described when discussing rural schools, ‘in most cases these rural schools are the life of the community, they act as a community hub, their importance to a community is vital’ (Municipal Official 2). The importance of Derby in this regard was heightened, as many other local institutions no longer existed or were no longer functional:

‘Well, its already a very small town, very small. The arena doesn’t function, there is no business in the town except for an auto repair shop that is the only business. A coffee shop that had been making a go of it, shut down. There isn’t anything in that town whatsoever, aside from really great people. When they drew up the ridiculous math, because of course we're not talking about only the people in town going to the school, there's probably only about twelve kids that walk, the rest are bussed... that meant that Derby wouldn’t have a hub anymore.’ – Community Member 3

Again, the school was seemingly one of the last remaining institutions in the community of any real significance:

‘Well, it is quite tiny. Within the actual village of Kilsyth, it’s so little, so they have a community centre, an automotive garage, they have a church... What else in Derby or Kilsyth... there was a general store which has since closed...’ – (Community Member 5)

For municipal officials, the school was an important asset to both the community and municipality, as it is widely regarded as necessary when considering any potential for future growth. As one report touched upon, the social, recreational, and community role of the school is important as well:

‘From a Social Planning or community building perspective, the school provides various groups in a community with indoor and outdoor space to meet, learn and recreate. In many instances the use of the school helps to provide identity for the community. The closure of the school would result in significant upheaval for the various groups that use the school and may even cause some organizations to fold completely.’ – (Documentation 13, 2013)

This was also noted by one community representative during the accommodation review:

‘When a community has these things and runs them very successfully, as is obvious with Georgian Bluffs, the villages of Kilsyth and Keady, their community centres and local sports associations, and most of all, Derby Public School, this not only keeps local people involved, but also draws others into the community.’ – (Correspondence 1)

Another community member expressed a similar concern regarding the role of schools in attracting new residents. As they describe, in small rural towns the importance of having a local school is heightened; when it is lost, there is significant potential for detrimental outcomes:

‘There is an impact on the community if there is not a local school system. A community is often weakened when there are no local attractions such as a local public school.

Families that are moving into prospective areas are often looking for smaller communities to raise their children. When these families are moving into the area they are looking for key amenities. One of the key amenities, and may I say priority for any family is a local school. If there are homes for sale in two different areas of similar size, one area has a school, and the other does not, the area that has the school will be the one of preference. The saleability of the home in the area that offers a school will sell at a better value because there will be more demand. Furthermore the area that has a school grows as a community, which in turn strengthens the smaller rural communities.’ – (Correspondence 11)

Interestingly, at least one community member observed an influx of younger families who are drawn to the rural lifestyle, and farming as an occupation. They expressed concern regarding the impact of how closing rural schools might negatively affect this decision of ‘newcomers’ while the vitality of rural communities and the local economy is threatened by school closures:

‘First, I am seeing in Grey County (where I reside) an influx of young, formerly urban, small scale farmers, often university educated or with professional jobs. They are young people who have been drawn to farming as a vocation, and to rural community as a lifestyle choice. This is happening at the same time that the area served by the Bluewater School Board is witnessing the demise of the traditional family farm, which is under pressure due to a number of factors. With the depopulation of the countryside, it is critical that newcomers to farming be valued and supported. They help to keep rural communities alive, vibrant and economically viable. They bring new energy to the farming sector, and in time will be raising their own families and will want good local schools.’ – (Documentation 12, 2013)

Again, for many the strong reputation of Derby PS and the presence of a school in Kilsyth was seen as essential for long-term vitality. As a local business owner states:

‘We know for a fact that many people move to this area specifically due to the great reputation that Derby Public School holds. Families choose to re-locate to the area or enroll their children as out of bounds students and drive them to the school daily. Whether people live in the community, or commute to and from, they bring with them opportunity for local businesses. This creates more jobs and improvements to the economy. It is very important to our company, to not only have the community support our business, but to keep their shopping local.’ – (Documentation 12, 2013)

The municipal perspective on the role of Derby PS as a place maker mirrored that of the community, albeit at a higher level. In a report to the Accommodation Review Committee, one municipal official clearly states how the school is imperative as a community anchor and hub:

‘There is no question that Derby School is an important part of the community. From a Community Planning Perspective, a school provides an anchor or hub to keep existing development, both commercial and residential, prosperous and healthy. A school such as Derby also is an attractor for future development. As mentioned...the Provincial Policy Statement, Grey County Official Plan and the Township of Georgian Bluffs Official Plan designate Kilsyth as a settlement area and directs growth and development to the community. With a school present it is also more likely that the community of Kilsyth will see more residential development. This in turn would boost the population of the school...The closure of the school would curtail this growth and may even stall it indefinitely.’ – (Correspondence 13)

The school was also only one of two within the Township, and for this reason its value as an important asset to the municipality may have been heightened:

‘Lastly, Derby is one of only two schools in Georgian Bluffs and it is very important to both our local economy and the things that will attract new residents to our community. More people are realizing the value of the more rural lifestyle and those people are consciously making decisions to live in the “Bluffs” so that their children can attend a

quality school such as Derby even if it means more inconvenience to them in terms of distance from urban amenities.’ – (Documentation 14, 2013)

The school also played an important role as a place maker by contributing to a certain rural way of life. Many community members and some municipal officials expressed that a rural school sustained this particular way of life. As one Community Member describes when discussing the value of a local rural school to their children:

‘I also know that they've learned a lot of rural values by having the opportunity to be on a farm, to do and be a part of a farming community, to have a snowmobile, and a dirt bike, and a four wheeler, and a horse, and cattle, and you know livestock in our barn. Those things add to who they are, and I think as they try to create mega schools, they're taking away the opportunity to have like mindedness with other kids that are the same. And that's where it is unique.’ – (Community Member 1)

Similarly, one municipal official commented on how a rural school supports the rural way of life, and that this is important for families and individuals who choose to settle outside of urban areas:

‘The relationship between rural and urban has always been controversial within any community, as some prefer outdoor living and others prefer urban settings. As a society we all need to experience both, but there is a time and place for each. Families who chose to live in the rural areas should not be forced to subject their children to urban settings if they chose not to. We must be careful that we don't urbanize all components of our society, and we must maintain our rural heritage, which includes keeping open our rural schools... We must be careful that we don't urbanize all components of our society, and we must maintain our rural heritage, which includes keeping open our rural schools.’ – (Correspondence 3)

Beyond contributing to the rural sense of place, in at least one instance a local business valued the role of Derby to the economic well-being of the community as well:

‘Having Derby School and their families close to us benefits us in many ways. We have had many Derby students and graduates work at our sales barn, especially during the busy summer months. Here, they gain valuable insight into the ins and outs of a farming business. However, there are mutual benefits as we are able to hire good, competent students to work for us. Our business has a vendors market, small animal and livestock auction. We supply a service to our local community and many people in this community have children that attend Derby. Having Derby Public School within our community has an impact on how well our business does year round. In closing, I write this letter to let you know how valuable Derby Public School is to our business here in Keady. Please take into consideration how important this rural school is to our local market and don’t close the school.’ – (Documentation 15, 2012)

In another way, one municipal official noted that the school itself as an employer was imperative to the local economy:

‘The spin off benefits of the spending in the community will be felt by the businesses in the Township that provide goods and services to the teachers, and staff and families of the children attending the school.’ – (Correspondence 17)

From the economic perspective, it was also noted that the school was integral for attracting new families to the area:

‘In choosing an area to live parents are concerned about their children’s safety, mutual respect and happiness and we all know that effective guidance, teacher collaboration, parent and community involvement – all of these make up the basis for this community and popularity and demand affect property value. LOCATION! LOCATION! LOCATION!’ – (Documentation 16, 2013)

In conclusion, the school was integral as a place maker, by contributing to the local economy, as a drawing card for new and younger families, and sustaining or representing a rural way of life. As will be discussed in the following section, the school was also highly regarded for its quality education, and in doing so, fostering a sense of local pride and identity.

5.2.3 LOCAL PEDAGOGY

The last role of the school that emerged from the findings was associated with pedagogy. Many community members expressed that having their children attend a rural school was very important to them. When the school was threatened by closure, they were particularly upset because it would result in their children being sent to other schools, some which were in Owen Sound. As Community Member 5 indicates, many parents choose to locate in rural areas for a reason:

‘We as parents were going 'yeah, but we chose to live in the country for a reason, a lot of people chose to live where they live because they wanted their kids to go to Derby, I was one of them. We built a home in the catchment area because I wanted my kids to go to Derby because it had such a great reputation. And so, that was one of the problems.’

Other community members made a more explicit connection between the provincial funding formula and its impact on the viability of rural schools. For many, the rural schools provides a particularly positive learning environment:

‘...I understand the situation and that they need to make changes, what I find frustrating is the funding, it comes down to the funding formula that the Provincial government puts in place. And that funding formula ultimately says whether they can build new schools or fix old schools. By making new ones [schools], and changing boundaries, it may not make

a difference when you are in a community block in the city where you don't know your neighbours and so on. But when you live in rural Ontario like we do, it does make a difference. It makes an enormous difference to the time that the kids are travelling to the school, or who they're seeing, and changing so many things that are a big part of their learning process. And I think that they are not putting enough emphasis on the value to the student, and the value to the student from one area of Ontario to another is very different.' – (Community Member 1)

Another reason the community felt threatened was the prospect of their children and the students of Derby going attending a larger school. This might have the potential to be detrimental to student success and well-being:

'Well first of all, a lot of people hit the panic button because the kids were going to get bussed into Owen Sound. Which means being bussed from an open relaxed country environment, to the city. And I mean Owen Sound's not a big city, when you come from Hamilton or Toronto, but for these kids, its a big deal. They were loosing [sic] their sense of security, that they were being bussed into a school where its a hub of the community. So, for me of course I live in another small town that has a school, so that, and its a quote unquote rural school.' – (Community Member 3)

Furthermore, Derby PS had an excellent academic reputation, and many parents felt that the school was not being evaluated appropriately by the school board:

'...I mean it just blows me away, you know, the value to the student is obvious when they're testing their teachers through EQAO, and we're proving that we're better than the board standard and the provincial standard, consistently. Why don't you look at a community that's not actually, or a group of teachers, and a school, or a community, that's not actually producing what the goal is. I don't know... So if it was up to me, that would be number one. The value to the student is are they learning successfully.' – Community Member 1

As one community member stated during the accommodation review, many students that graduate from Derby PS have an excellent reputation throughout the school board. This contributes to part of the local identity and as a source of pride for the local community:

‘Our children are our greatest assets and we must ensure that we provide the best education for them as they will be our leaders of the future. The atmosphere that we provide for this learning is crucial to the development of these children. The history of education at Derby Public School has clearly shown that the graduated students have become exceptional high school graduates as well many went on to be leaders in their respected communities. The list of graduated students clearly shows that there has been a great value of the school to all the students who have attended that facility.’ – (Correspondence 3)

An interesting perspective shared by Community Member 3 was the impact of the accommodation review process itself on the student. For this individual, the review process is delivering the wrong message around the meaning of education and the purpose of a school:

‘And the fact that they didn’t seem to care about their own motto, which was indicating ‘children of today for the future of tomorrow’, or something along those lines. And, I just kept saying, what kind of future? A future where you’ve already taught them about shut downs, about layoffs? Because that’s what you’re doing to these kids, their school is their career. Their marks are their paycheques. And you’re talking about laying them off. If you’re going to talk a business plan, if you’re going to claim to talk a business plan, if you’re gonna [sic] call a school a plant, and make it an economy, your already on the wrong track. But then you’re also looking at by making the kids little employees, and a disposable work force. And that’s not what they are, as soon as they stop calling schools schools, and start calling them institutions, they headed down the wrong track.’

However, not every participant shared a similar perspective on the role of rural education. As Municipal Official 2 states below, that assertion remains dubious, but the role of having a school in a small rural town or village is nonetheless vital:

‘There’s a belief, and I’ve heard it said before, that often the rural schools provide better education for some particular reason. More community centred, but there are cases in those rural communities schools definitely impact the decisions on people and whether or not they're going to move into your community. And that would be a real tragedy if closing rural schools had that negative impact on people deciding whether or not to moving into a community. We have an aging population, we need youth, we need young families, and they need schools. So I look over to Meaford where the high school is in jeopardy, that will have a definite impact on that community on whether or not people will go and live there.’

Nonetheless, attending Derby PS provided an important sense of place and community, increasing a ‘common thread’ across the area. In at least one individual’s opinion, closing Derby would have been detrimental to the history and heritage:

‘...attending Derby school is a shared experience by many individuals throughout Georgian Bluffs and that shared experience connects the individuals and creates connections or links to the community and to each other.’ – (Correspondence 13)

It becomes clear that the role of Derby was greater than a local source of pedagogy, but that it also contributed to instilling rural values and mores, and created a shared connection to place and community for many. Despite it’s excellent academic reputation, and value to both the students and the community, the accommodation review process was ultimately a trying experience, in response to which many community members expressed a deep discontent.

Ultimately, the school board may not have adequately considered the imperative value and role

of the school, in terms of the education provided and the functions of the school in the community as a whole.

5.3 THE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW PROCESS

5.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Hampton (2009) asserts that identifying asymmetrical narratives of unequal power relations are important 'so that the views of parties who may be subordinate in such relations, are not obscured by the completeness or complexity of the major view' (p.239). Taking this into consideration, politics and power emerged as a defining theme of the accommodation review process from the community perspective. Research participants were asked a number of basic questions to explore this aspect of the study. For example:

- Please describe your experience with the accommodation review process from the beginning to the final report and recommendation to the board.
- Please describe the relationship between the Board and the community during the ARC process.
- Was the board receptive of the community's efforts of participation during the ARC?
- How was the community involved with the consultation process during the review?
- Were there competing values or goals evident between the board and the community?

The findings indicated that although the accommodation review policy is framed as a participatory exercise, many community members expressed that unequal power relations and political tactics ultimately came to define the process. This was asserted on three grounds as evidenced through the discussions and interviews. First, many community informants observed issues with school board governance and management. Second, the school board appears to

have made a number of decisions that, from the community perspective, negatively impacted the ability for meaningful participation and turned the process in favour of the school board. A third and final pattern that emerged is the non-binding and political nature of the process as a whole; this reflects the accommodation review process being described as dismissive.

5.3.2 SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The first pattern that emerged from interviews with the community are perceived issues and challenges associated with school board governance and structure. As detailed in the literature review, school board administration and its policy relationship with the province fundamentally changed with the introduction and subsequent promulgation of The Education Quality Improvement Act and The Fewer School Boards Act. As a democratically elected body, school board trustees are intended to be accountable to their constituents, but at the same time are subordinate to the Ministry of Education and the province. In speaking with the Derby community, many participants observed that the school board's current governance model and policy relationship with the province is detrimental to the review process. As a result, it is widely believed that the relationship between trustees, senior administrators, and community members are negatively impacted. In particular, many noted how divisive the process became, largely because of the dual role that trustees have by being accountable to both the senior administration team and the general public:

'The weird part is the trustees are in the middle, but the really, I was going to say dodgy, that's not the right word, but with a really strange role to try and play both sides of the fence, they're in the middle of it. And it's the way we've structured things, obviously in

Ontario right, I think it doesn't suit the purpose anymore, if it ever did. In fact, probably, sort of the question for the alternative decision-making model for rural accommodations, I was thinking about that, here's the hard part, there probably isn't one given the way things are structured right now, but if things were structured differently, it might work better. It's complicated.' – (Community Member 4)

In this way, the two-way accountability of trustees is challenging but at the same time, puts them in a precarious position of balancing interests between provincial policy and their constituents. During the accommodation review, this became particularly apparent, as Community Member 5 reflects on how divisive and political the process became:

'But you know what, at the end of the day, and I'm sure you're going to hear this repeatedly, what it really came down to, was going to our trustees and going back and forth. Meeting with trustees. It really came down to, and not even so much community support, but what trustee you could get to vote in your favour. It was a gong show.'

The statements of Community Member 5 indicate that school board governance and structure strongly influenced the Derby review process. When asked if the accommodation review itself became secondary and ultimately took a back seat, the respondent stated:

'Yup, yup! And to be candid there was so much conflict right within our own trustees, it was a really divided group. It worked in our favour because it came down to 'well, this person didn't like this person, so because she's adamant to close the school, I'm gonna [sic] vote the other way. And that's what it really came down. It's pretty sad to say this, but that's what it came down to, and like I say, it worked for us. That's what saved our school. Which is pretty sad these people are dealing with millions of dollars, and it was like a game of survivor. That's what I kept saying, I felt like I'm on survivor. Win people over, win trustees over, and present your case. But really, we put hundred and hundred of hours into this, and was it all necessary? We didn't know this at the time, but in

hindsight, probably not. Probably just meeting with these trustees and getting their vote is what counted in the end.'

Even more telling about the nature of the process was how the community believed it was imperative to convince the school board trustees to vote in their favour, instead of formally participating in the consultation. As described by one informant, the decision was really about the relationship between the school board and residents of the Derby community:

'...there wasn't a whole lot of involvement with anyone at the board, it was just more coffee dates with trustees. You know, that was basically, I just can't stress enough, at the end of the day, for me anyways... when this is all said and done, it all came down to how much we could, to what extent, sway their vote our way. And that's what it really came down to.' – (Community Member 5)

However, it wasn't just building rapport and establishing relationships with trustees that influenced the outcome and final vote. For some community members, a 'one size fits all' provincial education policy, the centralized funding model, and the provincially established funding calculus are equally damaging to the efforts of keeping the school open. Moreover, when coupled with poor leadership and politics, the situation becomes more complicated:

'For example, as an individual when the topic of rural funding came up at a meeting... I questioned who gets rural funding and who doesn't. And Derby is not getting rural funding, but they're mostly farming families or of some capacity. Why is that? And when they said well the reason is because it's a postal code of Owen Sound... and the few trustees that have the capacity were looking out only their individual areas or [riding] because they didn't want to rock the board, per se. And I think, for a couple of trustees, this is a leverage point where they thought they might take it and then step into politics. There's two that came to mind, that, that's what it looked to me like they were there to

do. They're there to be yes men, and move from this to the next. And neither of them had accommodation reviews in their [riding], or their area.'

Again, in speaking with Community Member 5, the issue and challenge of a centralized funding formula and education policy emerges as a central consideration:

'It sounded like the funding structure for the school board worked against Derby in terms of it being a rural school?'

'It did, yup'

'Did that become an issue during the process?'

'Oh, for sure. I mean, that was a lot, it wasn't my kind of area, it was numbers, but that was their whole thing. They don't have the funding, blah, blah, blah. It was more of a Ministry thing about where the funding goes. It was just one of those things where Derby was kinda caught, it wasn't quite rural but it wasn't quite urban. So we were kind of caught in between.'

Community Member 5 further alludes to the potential for conflicting interests and accountability between the trustees, and how this may influence the process: 'because each trustee is there to represent their own area, they're there to support their school.' When exploring the relationship between the trustees and senior administration team further, it is increasingly evident that their governance roles may have changed through the restructuring that occurred in the mid-1990s.

Community Member 5 was questioned about this in an effort to gain a better understanding:

So the relationship between the trustees and senior administration team, in principle the trustees are supposed to use the SAT to help them, but it seems like the SAT was maybe using the trustees to implement policy?

'Yup! Bingo! And so, you had some of the trustees that were helping SAT out, and the others that weren't. And like say, it was very divisive, it was terrible. I remember one time I was making phone calls to trustees, trying to present because I'm allowed to do that as

a parent and call the trustees and just kind of 'hey, have you thought about this?' and 'this is why our school is important to us and what not'. And the one trustee got on the phone, and was like calling them all and warning that I was calling, like it was just so high school. It was brutal.'

Community Member 3 shares a similar perspective when asked about how the trustees and senior administration team managed the accommodation review process as a whole:

'Well it was very managed by the SAT team. The trustees were, aside from the chair, the trustees didn't have a lot of management per se. They weren't, I didn't find them directing them to say 'okay, we're going to go visit the school'. Now they did, the chair of the trustees, and some of the SAT, did go visit the school a couple times... it was a very sanitized visit. And not everybody went. The trustees were a very divided bunch.'

The restructuring of school board governance and the subsequent change policy relationship with the province emerges as a central pattern in the findings. In particular, not only were the trustees a 'divided bunch', but it appears that the dichotomous role of school board trustees and politicized nature of the process was a central concern for many community members:

'So that's the hard part. Trustees sit in between the board and the parents, and trustees will come from all over, so there are ones from Kincardine, or a couple of native trustees, so the good news is they don't have any binding. They come with some impartiality to the table. But then, parents, I don't know, parents can kinda [sic] appeal to trustees, and trustees again are supposed to be, are supposed to answer to the board, in the perspective that they're supposed to carry out the board's wishes and conform with their votes. At the same time again, they're answering to the public. The truth is, its my opinion, that its total reform unfortunately, its my opinion that you shouldn't have a trustee.' – (Community Member 4)

Again, for Community Member 4 it wasn't just that the role of trustees is inherently difficult, but it was the entire governance structure of the school board and its subordinate policy relationship

with the province that proves most challenging. As described, it is difficult for trustees to be accountable to the public, when the board as a whole is ultimately accountable to the Ministry of Education, and by extension the province. Community Member 4 shares a thoughtful perspective on this issue:

‘... I think there’s a problem from the MOE all the way down. The whole model of the MOE and then board, a board who answers to the MOE not the parents, and not even really to the trustees. Then the trustees are supposed to do double duty, they're elected, and so they kind of answer to the public, but then they're also, it's written in their mandate, that they need to provide solutions that are in accordance with the board's policies, and the schools. So how is that possible? (laughs). So parents don't want you to close anything, and yet the board does want you to, because that's part of their financial responsibilities, exactly where do you land on that? And really, is the board trustee the right person to be doing that? Really they're an elected official, granted, but I'm the [redacted] of the [redacted] does that make me qualified for that? Or was I in the right place at the right time and I know some people? It's hard to say. I don't mean to imply that about trustees, but you get the idea? They're not necessarily the most professional people, or, I think that it's challenging for them in that role.’

The findings described in the discussion so far have demonstrated the community perspective on the policy relationship between school boards and the province. Education restructuring is thought to have fundamentally changed the role of school board trustees, but also resulted in a limited capacity for the school board to operate outside of the provincial mandate and policy structure.

Leadership, management, and professionalism are a subsequent pattern that emerges as a topic of concern from the community perspective. The first criticism in this regard concerns the

qualifications and ultimate ambition of school board trustees. The opinion of Community Member 4 indicated that the meaning of a school board trustee had changed and this impacted the commitment of trustees to the review process:

‘It’s a resume builder, eh? For sure. And given the number of them that showed up, you would kinda gather that because they certainly don’t go to accommodation reviews that often, they’re outside of their regularly scheduled board meetings, and they take up more their life. But we’re talking about probably one the greatest decisions, most serious decisions that they have to make. It’s not whether or not we send the grade 11 class somewhere, this is do we kill a school? Do we close the school? Because there’s a hundred kids there who are now going to be dispersed to other places. So its a pretty serious matter, and yet there’s no attendance, you know, requirement.’

While questioning Community Member 5 on the same topic, the focus of the conversation turned to the final vote. When asked about the outcome of that meeting, it was expressed that it was largely because of internal politics and dispute, but also because some trustees had ulterior motives. In the end, a decision was made that might not have been in the best interest of the school board, largely attributed to a lack of professionalism:

‘But why, it was a split, what I’m saying is I think it came down to personal agendas. It was such a, there was so much conflict, I only know this through talking with some friends or trustees, and it was such a split group of individuals, and some were just like, some of them were not there for the right reasons... (but) accountability wise, the school should have closed. But I think it came down to problems right within the trustee group, and just kind of spite, I don’t know how to word that, some of them took a liking to the parents at Derby and decided to vote our way. I know that sounds pretty simple, but that’s what it came down to.’

‘It sounds unprofessional?’

‘Extremely unprofessional.’

Once again, the above assertion indicates poor school board management and leadership. In a similar fashion, some community members felt that the school board may have mismanaged funds. For example, when asked about what an alternative decision-making model might look like, Community Member 1 immediately alluded to perceived issues with school board governance, leadership, and overall management:

'I think that the biggest challenge and the biggest argument, and it's not really giving you a positive solution for this, but the problem is a misuse of funds, continually. The problem was there five years prior and they mandated it without fixing anything. And now here we are with just as much or a bigger problem.'

Also noting how funding may influence the process, Community Member 5 mentioned '...yeah, because the funding is all different. Because each trustee is there to represent their own area, they're there to support their school right.' Ultimately, many community members question the qualifications of those responsible for school closure decisions, particularly with respect to the trustees. For example, Community Member 4 makes the assertion that qualified managers, similar to hospital executives, should ultimately be determining and guiding school board management and operations, rather than the trustees:

'It means that the people who actually [time checks] are the ones who are actually elected. Not somebody who's in between trying to play to both sides of the fence, it doesn't make any sense to me at all...Our board is our board. Very often they're ex-teachers, which is great and everything, don't get me wrong, but again are they the right person for the job because they became a teacher and then a principal? Are they good administrators, I doubt it. You managed a school really well, but can you manage an entire twenty-one schools within an entire school board jurisdiction? I don't know. And then what are you gonna [sic] do with the advice of a bunch of people who are, you know

in our case, our representative, is that your conduit back to the school board? (laughs). How many of those are there? The whole model just seems really, kind of silly.'

However, some community members refer to the issue of school board management, and the challenge of holding trustees accountable because of their inherently political positions, even if the misuse of funds was evident:

'Absolutely, and they get swayed by their community and they get swayed by the view of the parents that are engaged. The trustees that we had engaged with our accommodation, some of them were sympathetic from the previous accommodation so that worked to our advantage politically. The ones who were not, are the ones whose schools, you know, just got brand new schools (laughs) brand new school? So you got a brand new building, a brand new school with a decreased enrolment in an urban centre and yet you don't have 'x' number of dollars to fix our roof, or this little leak. So instead of fixing it, it continues to accumulate into a larger problem so then eventually you're going to condemn our building? I've just been waiting for them to condemn us this year for one reason or another. You know, because ultimately that's the sneaky way to close the school, is to just say 'it's not fit, we haven't fixed it, it's not our fault but it's not fit.'

In a similar way, another informant recognized the school board's need to be more accountable to their constituents to address the more root causes of rural school closures:

'...but unfortunately, it has to be done at the board level because the ministry doesn't care because they fund both. And they would like to see confirmative boards become one board, so they don't care. It's like setting the fox to guard the hen house, you can't ask the ministry to solve this problem, the board has to get a little backbone, and tell the ministry to smarten up. They have to come together, because what's happening is the board is kind of almost stuck between the parents and the ministry.' – Community Member 3

On the other hand, when discussing school board management and structure with Community Member 1, it wasn't just the accommodation review process or the outcome that was of concern. As detailed below, there was more concern about the future of rural communities in general, and how a change needs to come from those that are 'a little bit higher':

'You know, I was an optimist at the beginning of the process, and I think I'm still happy to be able to say 'yeah, we beat city hall', or 'yeah we got through it and beat the system'. But we really didn't, we were having to [go] along with it. And I think the only way to really, not beat the system, but to make things more improved is to continue to do things like what you're doing and try and make those that are a little bit higher recognize who needs to be making these decisions and what decisions needs to be made in order to successfully continue to have university graduates coming from rural Ontario.' – Community Member 4

Inadequate school board management, governance, and leadership were perceived to exacerbate the difficult process of reviewing the school for closure. The following section discusses those findings that are associated with the influence of power and politicization.

5.3.3 POWER, AGENCY, AND POLITICIZATION

A significant pattern that emerges through the findings is the influence of power, agency, and politicization on the accommodation review process. The first evidence in this regard is the exertion of strong agency skills on behalf of school board administrators. More specifically, this is in regards to the Bluewater DSB accommodation policy, which is a twenty-page document outlining the process and procedures of the entire review process. The review process is structured similarly to the provincial guidelines, but consists of a much more thorough and

robust framework, identifying the various tasks, responsibilities, and actions required on behalf of school board administrators, school officials, and committee members; there are no less than seventeen steps from beginning to end (See: Appendix E). A fair process would ensure that community members participating in the accommodation review would have a good grasp of the procedure, expectations, and format of the review process as a whole. To the contrary, many community members expressed a profound unfamiliarity, and even discomfort, with the accommodation review process. For example, the first accommodation meeting was not only confusing, but would prove to be indicative of the entire process:

‘...the first public meeting that was held, they discovered we were supposed to have more public representatives on the ARC, this should have been a sign right there about the way things were about to go. It wasn’t even known until the first public meeting, it wasn’t even sort of brought up as to how many people we were supposed to have on the review... and then being parents, and I wouldn’t say stupid parents by any means, being all college or university educated, reasonably smart people and business owners, and backed up by an entire, and very active parent community who’s as smart or maybe smarter, we all tried to put things together and we couldn’t understand what the process was. Exactly how many meetings are there? When these meeting happen, there has to be a gap between the meetings. Then we collect information and present it, but then the board, we would ask them to collect information and they would present as well. Then we would get to cross-examine the board and they could sort of speak with our people. It’s just the weirdest thing ever, its like, I don’t, know, like a grade four dance. There’s nothing more awkward in the world than us, because none of us knew what to [do].’ – Community Member 4

Community Member 1 was more critical of the relationship between school board administrators and the community. When asked about the accommodation review process as a

whole, it very clear that a perceived power relation heavily favoured the senior administration team:

‘These are school board employees that are making two or three times what a lot of our parents are making in their jobs, and as far as I’m concerned, their job is to make sure it’s getting done properly. So you know, it was almost like they were skirting under us, knowing that we didn’t know the rules. It’s like you’re playing against somebody who knows all the rules, knows how to play the game, been playing it, has had accommodation reviews. They’re up against a whole bunch of people who are, it’s like you’re the rookie, and they’ve been playing this game for years, so you come in as a rookie, and they’re not telling you all the rules and your [sic] learning all the rules as you go along...’

Similarly, when Community Member 5 was asked about the beginning of the accommodation review process, it is highlighted how there was confusion about the timeline of public consultation meetings, and further indicating that the entire process is tightly controlled and structured:

‘There was some initial problems, [redacted] can probably tell you more about this. They announced so many days from the first public meeting and what now. There was some debate about what constituted what the first meeting was because they didn’t really inform many of us about it, it was just held in the library at your school. We went back and forth about that, and you read the report probably too. It’s in there somewhere. There was a problem with what date was the actual first meeting, because it all came down to timelines right. It’s very detailed about how many days, and so forth.’

During the course of the interview with Community Member 5, a comparison was made to David and Goliath in reference to the community and board, to which it was responded:

‘Yes! And we would have to spend hour upon hour, even getting familiar with the process before we can even fight the fight, right. We had put hours just figuring out what’s going on.’

Beyond an unfamiliarity with the process itself, the community also reflected how access to information and limited knowledge sharing was detrimental to full and meaningful participation; a further example of strong agency skills and the exertion of power. Indeed, this was reflected in the final Accommodation Review Committee report submitted to the Board:

‘Sharing knowledge with a school community about barriers: An example of sharing knowledge may include “our resources are low and we need to combine school communities to save money”. Providing us with the knowledge of what is expected would be extremely helpful in the beginning. By sharing the real barriers, it create a sense of trust and that the BWDSB is looking out for our best interests and we are a valued part of the future in some form.

Information is key to this process and was missing. Key things like current Ministry initiatives, current guidelines and directives, the BWDSB plan and an overview of what the Ministry has put in place would have been extremely helpful from the beginning. Overlooking the BP 3101 [accommodation review] policy is less important than the things mentioned above’ (p 48).

Withholding knowledge or minimizing communication can be a tactic in exerting or leveraging power. When community members were asked about this, many felt that this became a hallmark of the process and was detrimental to working collaboratively with the board. As Community Member 4 observes:

‘...if the board communicated their financial position better and more frequently, their position of deceit, and don’t pull it out of a hat when there’s an accommodation review

and people are already upset, and lets have an ongoing balance [update]. Let's be frank with each other. Where do we stand? Municipal government does that...'

It is widely perceived that the board's inability to address questions directly was frustrating, if not completely unfair. When asked how this contributed to the community becoming frustrated with the process and the administration team, many participants recount how questions were not often addressed to reasonable expectations. For Community Member 5, this is particularly discouraging:

'And, a lot of frustration, and this followed throughout the whole ARC process. You ask a question, and you'd either get told that they would have to get back to us with an answer or they wouldn't answer your question. They were always very, very vague with their answers. And again, I think it was strategic on their part. You never got the answers you wanted, they were just always very vague.'

When asked if the tone of the board changed through the process, and if this affects the relationship with the community, Community Member 5 responded:

'A little bit of an edge to it... condescending, like 'we've already answered that'. I know. A lot of the questions were repetitive on purpose, from our point of view, because we kept drilling it at them, [asking] why, why, why?... we wouldn't get the answers; they wouldn't give us the answers we were asking. So we would ask again and again. So it was a little bit strategic on our part too.'

From this perspective, the board made strategic and disingenuous decisions to guide the process in favour of closure. Once again, for many community members this represents how the school board leveraged strong agency skills, and use its power to guide the process in their favour. One of the most contentious observations in this regard was the school board's decision to remove the existing principal from Derby PS prior to the accommodation review beginning. Community

Member 1 recounts the fact that the new principal had a particular reputation for managing schools under accommodation review. Indeed, this individual's colloquial nickname was 'the closer':

'And another thing that happened, and again the board will have a different take on this, but this was our take. But, we had an excellent principle, and right at the same time they announced that, she was being transferred to a different school, and bringing in the other principle and in my mind, and in the minds of the staff and parents there, that was strictly done on the boards part too, because it's a totally different personality right. So with the old principle who may have felt this was our fight, this one may not have as much. So that was strategic in my mind.'

In reviewing community submissions made during the accommodation review, a second demonstration of agency and power, and a particular point of contention for the community, was the fact that Derby PS was identified for a single school review. When Bluewater DSB was questioned on this, administrators responded:

'Derby Public School triggered an Accommodation Review on school condition of the value of the renewal backlog and capital expenditures outstanding. Previous ARC's that involved multiple schools triggered on low enrolment or imbalanced enrolments between schools or funding imbalances that could be improved by boundary or school profile adjustments. Derby's proximity to available student spaces in nearby schools, would allow a solution to impact other schools, without having the other schools in the ARC process' – (Correspondence, 20).

This occurred despite explicit mention in the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines that single school reviews should be avoided where possible, stating:

'...wherever possible, accommodation reviews should focus on a group of schools within a school board's planning area rather than examine a single school. These schools would

be reviewed together because they are located close enough to the other schools within a planning area to facilitate the development of viable and practical solutions for student accommodation' (p.2).

Another community member shared a similar level of frustration that Derby was identified for a single school review despite the guidelines suggesting otherwise. However, here it is felt that this was done intentionally:

'First, it is very hard not to assume that the fix already seems in. After all, how many single school reviews in Ontario have resulted in a recommendation not to close the very solitary school that was under review? We hope that our trustees appreciate that a review can lead to other solutions than an automatic closure' – (Documentation 18, 2012)

In following up on the single school review issue with community members, many felt that it contributed to the political nature of the process. Upon reflection, Community Member 1 is not only frustrated by this, but feels that it was disingenuous, stating: 'the fact that we were in a single school accommodation was completely unjust.' Community Member 3 felt that the reason for a single school was more obvious:

'And so we just knew, that they had decided the outcome from the beginning. I mean, we knew that because they isolated us, we were the only school. Single school reviews are not supposed to happen, but they made it happen...we didn't trust them as far as we could throw them, basically.'

When asked what contributed to the political nature of the accommodation review, Community Member 1 again cites the single school review, but also issues of transparency and access to information:

'I would definitely say it was politics, stuff going on behind the scene, because both sides had presentations. The SAT team had a very thorough presentation, we didn't like it, we didn't agree with it. Obviously that's why we set up to fight, well the first reason we set up to fight was the fact that we were a single school review. But after that, when we saw their presentation and material, which even had a mistake in it which we pushed long and hard for them to fix, which they never fixed, but it definitely came down to politics. Who was wooing who.'

Ultimately, the single school review emerged as one of the central criticisms during the accommodation review process from the community perspective. In making a submission to the school board that questioned why the school was identified for a single review, one Community Member 3 asks:

'Why was it not possible to group Derby school with other schools for this accommodation review? Why is Derby school standing alone?'

The answer I received was that it was possible, which is something I already knew. I was referred to the Ministry guideline that says that "wherever possible, schools should be reviewed together". This statement does allow for a single school review. However, I did not ask "is it possible?" – I asked **why** it was not possible to group Derby with another school?

To date, this still remains unanswered' – (Documentation 20, 2012)

A further pattern indicating a perceived misuse of power was a lack of transparency and good communication on behalf of the school board administrators and trustees. Again, an informed public is a stated cornerstone of both the provincial guidelines and the BWDSB's own review policy. To the contrary, when speaking with community members it became clear that the lack of transparency was a significant challenge to meaningful consultation and engagement; it also

emerged as detrimental to the process. Community Member 4 provided an interesting rationale for why this may have occurred:

'Well that too, and right now there is no reason for them to be transparent. Because again they don't answer to you, its really not their problem. They kind of work for you, but they work for you by extension of somebody else, by the extension of the Ministry of Education. And the only way to talk to them is through the hands of the trustee. You can actually go directly and ask to make a presentation... until you're in an accommodation review, they don't need to answer any of these questions. Then, you don't even know what to ask, right.'

Community Member 1 shared a similar perspective. As they describe below, the review process became increasingly visceral, as questions and queries were not addressed adequately or to community expectations. Again, being critical of the administration, Community Member 1 questions the responsibility of the trustees and the communication protocol of the board:

'Absolutely. And it's difficult when you're going to the process to not point fingers at that particular trustee who doesn't listen, or to that school board employee who doesn't even seem to understand the question that you're asking and continues to abrade your question, and come up with these funding formula's as an answer, and not be hostile with the person who is giving you the information. So as a parent, it's hard to step back, and now that our process is kind of behind us a bit, it's easier to step back and say, 'okay, I'm looking at the whole thing, and why did they not let us know this, and why was it that our MP didn't show up to this and that. Why is it that the trustees, when it came down to it, the ones who voted, never even heard our delegations?'

A tenet of transparency clearly requires meeting reasonable expectations of communication but also sharing of information and knowledge, as the views and perspectives of various community members have demonstrated.

As the review process continued, many community members felt that not only was the communication strategy and practices of the school board unsatisfactory, but also that it contributed to a growing animosity, even irritation, between both the community at large and the school board as a whole. What begins to emerge through this analysis is a fundamental breakdown of communication, and a subsequent impasse for meaningful cooperation and collaboration to emerge, ultimately resulting in a lack of trust. Community Member 2 (2014) sums this up most concisely:

‘Even though the senior admin said they were being transparent, answering our questions and sympathizing, it was evident that this was not the case. They obviously held planning meetings before and during the AR process to map out their strategy, we were not invited to these meetings. Our questions were answered, however with no explanation as to how they arrived to some of their decisions. I.e. ‘why were we a single school on review?’ Their answer, ‘because we can.’

By now, several underlying narratives of the review process begin to emerge. First and foremost, the community felt threatened, vulnerable, and isolated through a single school review.

Ineffective two-way communication, a lack of transparency, and unfamiliarity with the accommodation review policy had perceivably guided the process in favour of the school board.

As Community Member 5 points out, the culmination of these ultimately shaped both the relationship between the community and school board, but also the consultation process itself:

‘Yup, yup. And admittedly we went in with our backs up. And so maybe that’s what set the tone, but they certainly didn’t help themselves because we would ask questions and we weren’t getting answers, they almost played dumb. You know what I mean? So it just got people more upset.’

In a final presentation that evening to the school board trustees, the review committee concluded that: 'after months of meetings, reports, phone calls, research and more meetings, their recommendation is that Derby Public School should stay open for five more years' (Golem, 2013). However, despite months of consultation and efforts from both the community and school board, the outcome of the entire process rested with the trustees. Community Member 5 recounts the emotional experience of the final vote:

'Well then it was all orchestrated, but then they decided 'oh!, we're gonna [sic] have a' - what's it's called where you have to write your vote down... a closed ballot. So then another trustee spoke up, and said well you realize by doing that you're leaving out [redacted] vote. 'Oh yeah, we know that', they knew that we were going to have his vote. It was very political and very strategic. It was totally strategic, it was totally planned. And at that point, we thought 'oh my gosh, we're done'. We thought for sure that was going to be the closing of our school right there.'

Despite that accommodation reviews are intended to be grounded in meaningful consultation that results in an informed and sound decision, the Derby outcome was described as something entirely different by one community member:

'You probably know what happened the night of the outcome. That was basically a miracle, nothing short of a miracle. All the work we put into it, came down to a miracle. Which, I'm very thankful for (laughs). But still that's what it took. It took pissing off one of the wrong people, and not being able to add the math. They were not doing anything but counting their votes. That's all they were doing, the whole time.' – Community Member 3

Nonetheless, other community members note that the role of trustees is inherently conflictual, as jurisdictional duty may be an important reason why trustees are partial to their constituents.

Ultimately, this may have influenced their voting decisions. Community Member 5 describes a similar way in which geography influences the trustees:

‘I think so... I think for one thing it depended where they came from. If they lived in the town, they were willing to sacrifice a rural school. If they lived in the country, they were fighting for it even if it wasn’t their school. Trustees were fighting for us, but their schools weren’t on the line. One trustee was admittedly trying to close the school down, to the point where, I’m going to come right out and say that I believe [redacted] lied a lot of the times.’

From the community perspective, the school board ‘forced this process to become political... the moment we found out they were trying to win over the Trustees we knew what the real game was and got into the game. it was very political and stressful’ (Community Member 2). There were several strategic and calculated decisions made by the school board that guided the process in favour of closure. These included removing the existing principal, conducting a single school review, and not adequately meeting community expectations of transparency and communication. As will be discussed in the following section, this seems to have contributed to the process becoming highly polarized and contentious.

5.3.4 POLARIZATION

As will be addressed in the following discussion, the formal review process emerged as polarized in nature. First, the evidence indicates that this occurred because of how the school was evaluated. As described previously, the accommodation review guidelines are structured around measuring the value of a school in four ways: value to the student, value to the school board, value to the community, and value to the local economy. Interestingly, the guidelines also make

specific mention of the vital role that schools have, essentially stating that the process itself exists ‘in recognition of the important role schools play in strengthening rural and urban communities and the importance of healthy communities for student success’ (p.1). This ambiguity in lexicon is identified as an important pattern that emerged through the findings when speaking with members of the community. In focusing on how Derby was evaluated as both a school and community asset, the most significant finding was the role that it had in a number of different capacities. The community found it difficult to articulate these as values, even though that is what the accommodation review is measuring. However, Community Member 1 specifically refers to the committee’s final report, stating that perhaps Derby PS was not valued by the school board at all, or at least not in the same way it is valued by the community:

‘Derby is not valued by the school board. In [the] report, we did state how valuable, however if we were truly valued by the board, they would never let the state of our building get to five million in repairs, would have been willing to work with us instead of sticking to the process and going with one answer – yes close, or no keep open for a few years then close it.’

Indeed, as Community Member 1 indicates, the final committee report describes the role of Derby within the community as well:

‘It is evident from the depth of this report that Derby students, families, staff and the community as a whole would be negatively impacted should the school be slated for closure. The benefits of Derby Public school are simply too numerous to fully encapsulate on paper. This is why our community has voiced a strong and unified appeal regarding Derby’s sustainability.’

Moreover, the school board and community fundamentally evaluated the worth of the school in two different ways:

‘The value to the student and to the community were our two biggest pieces of that report and for good reason, it is the piece that is hard to quantify because it involves people not dollars or numbers.’ – Community Member 1

As for the school board:

‘The school board’s only argument is dollars and sense. So when it came down to it, they used these absolutely absurd formulas to come up with numbers that were going to cost so much money to keep the school.’ – (Community Member 1).

These viewpoints are reflective of how the value of the school is measured differently between the school board, community, and municipality. As described below, the process was also polarized because of a difference in positions and interests between the stakeholders.

Another way the accommodation review process became polarized was by rather than seeking common ground, most effectively done through establishing a common set of interests, the review process began with stated positions. As Community Member 4 describes, a significant challenge to the process was the dichotomous positioning of the school board and community:

‘At the end of the day, that’s the biggest problem... the number one challenge would be the contentiousness. The fact that it’s sort of a ‘us against them’ or ‘parents against the board’... it was a lot of time spent, right. But what it boiled down to was two sides looking at each other as adversaries, not looking for a common solution, which is what the real intention of accommodation review is to do.’

When asked if a more collaborative approach would be beneficial, they continue:

'Yeah, to have that sort of understanding for sure. It would have been interesting...To come up with something where you can both co-present it. Listen, this is what we have collectively come up with we think you can live with it, can you vote for this solution? Rather than closing down the school.' - Community Member 4

Community Member 4's perspective on the process is aligned with what other community members experienced as well. As the accommodation review continued, there was a simultaneous and growing animosity between the school board and the community. As a result, it was increasingly difficult to work collaboratively or amicably in seeking an agreeable solution. Again, from the very beginning of the process there was little discussion that focused on finding 'common ground', but rather each side establishing where they stood on the issue:

'The problem was that the board came to the table with an irrefutable 'we must close this school' and that instantly got parents backs up where they just felt like it was their job now to fight the fire and just try and save the school. So there's no way you can come to common grounds when one person comes with a hard no, and one person comes with a hard yes. That's really exactly what happened.' - Community Member 4

Community Member 1 observes a noticeably similar discrepancy in interests and positions between the two stakeholders. From this perspective, Bluewater DSB is more concerned with following proper policy and procedures in order to close the school down, rather than truly recognizing what is in the best interest of the community and the students:

'Yes, there was a difference in interests and position... the interests of the BWDSB was to solely close up a building and follow the ARC process to make it look good on paper. Their focus is on the dollar bill and not on what is best for their students. Our school community's position changed somewhat over the process. Our first position was to invite the Board to embrace change and be the change, make themselves an example of

how rural communities should be treated and stand up to the Ministry. After we realized that the AR process wasn't what it was portrayed as, we moved to dividing and conquering the Trustees simply to get the vote that we deserved.' - Community Member

1

There is also evidence to suggest concern for the greater role of a rural school and what how keeping it open is ultimately in the best interest of the community. However, the school board was mostly concerned with the financial burden of operating Derby, and using this rationale as justification to consolidate it with nearby schools:

'Our main argument was don't take rural kids out of their environment, and send them to urban environments. And that was the crux of our argument. And their argument was, there are open spaces within thirty kilometers. That's all they cared about. Doesn't matter that one of the schools they were citing was in horrible condition, doesn't matter that they built a new school that they could have closed, or could have not rebuilt. Nope, they needed to close Derby down to fill Owen Sound seats.'

It was a question of numbers for the school board, numbers and finances?

'Oh for sure, that's all they cared about... it all came down to the almighty dollar. I get that, I do, I get that. In today's world, everybody's begging for money. But I think they really need to consider the student more than they have. And, take into consideration what the public, they went through the process of giving public input, but they didn't listen.'

Overall, the quality of engagement digressed as positions and interests began to shape the dialogue. A poignant example is how the outcome of the process is described by Community Member 4, who feels that the decision may not have been in the best interest of the community nor the school board:

'So its complicated, but that was it in the end. In essence that's what we sorta had to fight for, to prove that. And like I said, it wasn't a win in my opinion, it didn't solve the underlying issue. There's not enough money to keep schools like Derby open. In fact, I feel guilty about it. I don't mind saying it, and I said that to other parents. I feel a little bit nauseous about the fact that, you know, we were a part of trying to keep something open that's an unaffordable business practice. And it really is. I wouldn't say we're really taking away from another school or something, but at the same time, we sorta [sic] screwed with the process that was there, right.'

When speaking with Community Member 5 with regards to the value of the school and it's students, it is asserted that the board had little regard for this, despite the value criteria. In the end, their main interest was to rationalize their operations as efficiently as possible:

'Absolutely, it couldn't be any more clear. And yet, there was not one, and that was repeatedly argued by us, there was nothing the school board could ever give to explain what the value in closing our school and distributing, and this way I think, there were eleven different schools that they wanted to send them to. And you know, so we repeatedly said 'so tell us then, this your plan, so tell us what the value for the students, our child is in doing this? What's the value to the student in doing that'. They couldn't. I think that was the only thing [they] could come up with'.

It was finances, money?

'It all came down to the almighty dollar.'

Perhaps most interestingly, the accommodation review seemingly failed to solve any of the underlying challenges for the school board, and therefore some questioned if anybody really benefited from the process:

'...everybody else is just sorta us versus them we need to win this sucker, we'll go to the press, we'll make them look bad, we'll win. And that's honestly how we won, if you wanna call it a win. It was really making it so compelling not to vote against us that you

couldn't help but vote for postponing the accommodation review, which essentially what the win was. I wouldn't say anyone should be proud of that so-called win. Because it didn't solve any problems, it did postpone it...' – Community Member 4

In the end, the accommodation review became highly polarized as both the community and the school board became increasingly disenchanted with the process, and the dialogue digresses away from formal consultation and was shaped by positions rather than interests. There was also growing animosity and contention between the two parties as quality communication gave way to politics and power dynamics. The polarizing nature of the relationship and consultation process prevented an equitable and effective outcome from being realized, and also resulted in the process becoming dismissive in nature.

5.3.5 DISMISSIVE ENGAGEMENT

Dismissive engagement was an significant pattern that emerged from conversations with the community and through examining accommodation review documents. For many consultation participants, the school board was not conducting genuine and authentic engagement with the community. Instead, the school board debased acts of collaboration, cooperation, and coproduction. The net outcome of these actions was that the accommodation review process became tainted through politicization and the misuse of agency and power, which were further compounded by poor school board management and leadership. Altogether, this created an impasse to reaching an amicable outcome, as both the dialogue was largely shaped by opposing positions and interests. Moreover, there is evidence that the consultation process itself had a significant negative impact on the human factor. At the conclusion of Community Member 3's

interview, it was asked if there was anything else they wished to discuss, to which they responded:

'The only thing I can say is that, I cannot stress enough, the devastation it does to the human factor. I mean I went through two arcs in five years. I was not heavily involved in the high school ARC, it was my son's first year, I didn't know it was going on, I didn't know what it was, I had little kids at home so I was following it online, and watching things from home, but I didn't really know what was going on. But, people are exhausted. And I think it is wrong, to ask the common man, to build a case, to go against people that are paid to sit there, and build a case to go against you. There is something inherently divisive about the fact that those people get paid to shut us down, we're not getting paid to fight to keep us open. And we're exhausted, the toll is incredibly lengthy. And if they look a little more closely, every time they talk about declining enrolment in the public system, the Catholic system is experiencing an increase in enrolment.'

Others also shared Community Member 3's personal views on the impact of the accommodation review process. Some community members felt that it was a divisive and fundamentally flawed system:

'I was the person that said we feel 'bullied' and that this process is flawed. Bullying is when there is an imbalance of power, when one side feels weak and or intimidated. Speaking for myself, I did feel weak, intimidated and out of my realm. We have not been through a process like this before. Very few schools have been through single school reviews, and most have closed. We are not familiar with board policies, ministry formulas or statistics. The process is flawed, from a provincial standpoint. This is what we have been trying to convey over the past 7 months. At what point do taxpayers have to come up with the solutions, when we are not the one with the tools, knowledge and background. I work from home, most of the parents work in and outside of the home. We have families with commitments. The process is flawed because we have to take on this

extra activity, we have to volunteer our time to save our school community, and we don't expect to be criticized when we don't understand the process.' – Correspondence 22

For another community member, the accommodation review process impacted the health and quality of life of their family, as noted in this personal account:

'At this point I speak for myself. Watching my sons, their peers, their families, who are my friends and neighbours trembling, losing sleep, not eating properly and worrying about the future of our school community made me sick. We lost our summer months to the 'wondering' of what will happen in the next few months. We held various meetings over July, August and September to speculate about the process and try to learn what was expected of us. After those meetings, many of us lay awake at night because so much energy was created at those meetings and we couldn't turn our thought process off. I spoke to children, with tears in their eyes, wondering if we were going to save their school. Staff members have their well- being [sic] weighted in a balance to what the community will come up with. Never again do I want to face either of my son's eyes and explain to them that they may have to give up their school and lose friendships created over the past 9 years because of a process.' – Correspondence 5

When speaking with Community Member 1, it was asked if there were any major differences between the school board and community that were exposed by the process. One aspect was the willingness to seek an alternative outcome. As they describe, the community was attempting to be creative and collaborative by seeking a partnership with the municipality, but the school board largely dismissed this as a viable alternative:

'... but why can't we think about other ways of paying for our school. That kind of bothered me. It wasn't 'here, we don't have enough money', well 'here's a way we can make money'. 'Well, no you can't do that, because we don't like that... yeah, but we could...yeah, nah, we don't do that, we have a policy against doing that'. And you just feel like, what? You know, you just don't want more money, do ya [sic]?...it's about how

disappointing it was we couldn't think outside of certain parameters to look at the way that school might actually be able to float themselves. Like what if we were able to partner with a local company, or a local municipal organization, build a gym that was shared? That was one of your proposals. What about doing that, that kind of stuff and the school board has, I think in some cases policies, and in other cases it's just choices and they just don't do that type of thing.' – Community Member 1

According to Community Member 4's account, the school board was reluctant to think 'outside of the box', or try an alternative approach in supporting the school. They also mentioned collaborating with the local municipality, which was another possibility that the community explored as mentioned by Community Member 1:

'Everybody was fighting for their side. The municipality was fantastic, they even let us put in that alternate proposal in there, which when the final vote came down, our proposal is split into two pieces, there was a vote for Derby ARC to be held in another five years, and basically maintain status quo for now. And there was a different vote that was pursued in the municipality in coming up with solutions, and so the municipality really kinda [sic] put their neck out... so they supported us, whole-heartedly. The mayor wasn't too impressed with trustees, wasn't too impressed with the board, [it] gave him some exposure of the way that other governmental organizations work, he was very respectful, great guy, but again, I think he was as disenchanted as us.'

It was also mentioned that in a smaller community, there might be the potential for shared space within the school, to which one community member responded 'Exactly. But, the school board doesn't allow that'. Which leads to another criticism from the community regarding how meaningful the process really was:

'That's what the process is like, so to say that it's convoluted wouldn't be fair, but to say that it's not understood by all parties would be completely fair. Say that you start out on

the wrong foot, if we were to go to mediation or something, to mediate a marriage, or to go to counselling, they're gonna [sic] be told right away by the mediator, listen, your gonna [sic] need to throw away you pre-conceptions right now, and we're gonna [sic] need to start working towards something together and let's pretend like we can't leave this room until we reach some sort of agreement. Not just, 'hey, what's your opinion, no it's to do this, and what's your opinion?' 'Yes, it's to do this, alright well, good luck then'. That was the problem, that's really it. And that's what I think happens everywhere. It sounds like our experience is completely consistent with every other accommodation review ever held.' – Community Member 4

Again, it was difficult for the community to participate in meaningful conversation and dialogue with the school board because it didn't feel like they were being actively or truthfully engaged:

'Well, I think in one way, the school board doesn't do the arguing. We do all the delegating. So all you hear is why we need to open, why we need to stay open. The school board's only argument is dollars and cents. So when it came down to it, they used these absolutely absurd formulas to come up with numbers that were going to cost so much money to keep the school. So when we wanted to come up with creative solutions, like working with the municipality, all these different things...' – Community Member 1

And with respect to procedural fairness, it was also noted that the community didn't feel there was enough allocated time to present at the school board meetings and opportunities for delegations. As Community Member 1 continues: 'These delegations that we would have at the actual board meetings, they were awful too. You would try to get in and they wouldn't allow you, they would say their allotments are already full... [or] 'you've got ten minutes and I'm timing you'. I guess they have procedures to follow, but it was awful'. As Community Member 3 noted previously, 'we were coming up with great ideas, and they were basically just shooting it down, 'nope, that won't work, nope that's not what the funding formula does, nope this, nope that.

They weren't even listening'. Another community member shares a comparable view of the consultation: 'take into consideration what the public, they went through the process of giving public input, but they didn't listen.' As Community Member 1 observes, it doesn't seem to make sense to present to the administration team when it is the trustees who make the final decision:

'...by the fourth delegation, we had it pretty, we kinda [sic] had the process figured out. Now the new accommodation review they're suggesting that you know, there won't even be four. And I think that the delegations are interesting, it's great. So we got up in front of our community that already supports us, (laughs) and we all talk to each other. But there's nobody there who is actually voting, that was listening. So it didn't make any sense to me. You know we're talking to the board employees, but they don't even get a vote, it's the trustees that got a vote, and most of the trustees didn't make the trip from their little part of our large geographical area, to come out to us. And they were asked to come to us. So my thing is, why if they want it to be fair in doing the accommodation review, why is the delegation not given to the trustees at the school board.' – Community Member 1

The outcome of the process and some of the final thoughts shared from community members are indicative of how the accommodation review was dismissive in nature:

'Ugh [sighs]. It was so demoralizing, that we had people take their kids and go Catholic before the process was even finished. They said we can't live our lives like that, we can't do this... we saw the two faced thing, and it [sighs], it was the hardest part of the fight. Because we basically felt there was no way we could win, but there was no way we could give up.' – Community Member 3

In conversation with Community Member 1, it was felt that the community's formal efforts to participate in the accommodation review were a 'complete waste':

'...There was, I honestly, I still have two humongous rubber maid boxes full of stuff that I printed off, reports that I printed off, you know, and literature. The truth is, I mean I should burn it because as a parent, I feel like it was a waste. Um, it was a complete waste. I spent hours and hours and hours...' – Community Member 1

Similarly, Community Member 1 shares a particularly powerful anecdote about the lasting effect of the accommodation review process:

'But I really feel that the whole foundation of the accommodation review based on the community, and the structure of the relationships. One of the most interesting things that I experienced personally in this process, um, one of my daughters friends, her grandmother was involved in the last accommodation review, because her family had other family members at the school at that time. Again, a lot of the families, this is a multi-generational school... So I spoke to this grandmother, and I said 'you know, I'm surprised that you don't want to come out to these delegations, and she said what's the point, I've already been through this. They squeak through'. But they didn't feel that in that previous accommodation that they really were listened to. So she was discouraged from trying again...all of a sudden now I feel like that woman, that grandmother that I asked 'why are you not coming out', and I'm her. I realize now why, I realize first hand now why she wasn't coming. Because I really didn't understand what she told me. But, she had been there, done that, and realizes that it's very unlikely that you're going to make a difference in the grand scheme of things, it's a higher power that's going to make these changes. And until those changes happen, we're going to continue to see cuts, we're going to see school closures. We just got really, really, lucky.'

As Community Member 1 describes, some participants of the accommodation review felt they had little impact on the process outcome. And, was the effort of participating in the review worth it in the end?

'If you were to ask me if I were to fight for the school again, I think at this point, I probably wouldn't. I would probably be willing to do whatever I could, but the frustration and the hostility that went along with it, wasn't really worth some of the feelings. Now, I mean it's great, it's worth having the school, but all we know is that we are going to under accommodation review again, and conveniently, it may be sooner than later because of the changes.'

For many community members, the consultation process failed to meet expectations of meaningful engagement. Although the school board was required to consult the community and adhere to their own policy as well as the province's, many felt that the decision to close the school was pre-determined, and this resulted in the process being more dismissive than truly collaborative in nature. There was also significant impact to the human factor, which was ultimately a very disheartening experience. Though the school did not close, there is some evidence to draw upon regarding concerns about the potential outcomes and implications if this were to occur. These are addressed in the following section.

5.4 RURAL SCHOOL CLOSURES: PROCESS CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES

5.4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the objectives of this study was to explore whether school closures might exacerbate the unique challenges that rural Ontario is experiencing through demographic and economic restructuring. Interview questions associated with this aspect of the research were similar to the others addressed in this chapter, but also included:

- Are there any provincial or school board policies that you view as prohibitive to rural schools remaining open?

- What modifications would you suggest to improve the accommodation review decision-making model?
- What is the relationship between the municipality and the school board?
- Do school closures challenge the goals and objectives of rural municipalities?

The community and municipal-based narratives on this aspect of the research emerged at two scales. First, the community narrative was largely representative of the immediate impact to the surrounding area, whereas the municipal narrative was logically more concerned with the impact to the region as a whole. From both perspectives, there were significant concerns associated with the potential outcomes and implications from the school closing. However, the municipal narrative was shaped by a lack of formal collaboration with the school board, and the insufficiently basic decision-making framework found in the accommodation review process. Moreover, although school closure was a subject of concern, these processes are among a myriad of others that are currently challenging rural Ontario. Each of these patterns is discussed in greater detail through the following section.

5.4.2 FOR THE COMMUNITY

Community concerns regarding potential outcomes and implications from the closure of Derby PS were various. In describing the value of the school to the community, one of the most significant concerns was about the local economy and real estate market. As the Accommodation Review Committee Final Report succinctly states:

'...the school's presence within the community is vital in attracting, maintaining and retaining young families looking for educational qualities compatible with and reflective of the rural way of life. For this reason, it goes without saying that the lack of a school

within the community ultimately affects its economic growth and sustainability' (p.36).

As a further example, one local business reported to the committee on the school closing would negatively impact its operation:

'This school is so much more than a building. If we were to lose our local rural school, we would be losing a very important piece of our community! We would no doubt see huge changes in the economy with people moving away from our community to re-locate elsewhere. This in turn would make it difficult for rural businesses such as ours to continue working at the same level. Staffing cutbacks and downsizing would leave everyone with an uncertain future. We would likely see a large drop in community involvement and property values would decrease. There simply are no positives that would come from closing this school and there would be a strong chance of our community falling apart.' – Correspondence 1

Similarly, there was concern expressed over the potential for negative implications on property values and the real estate market. In describing Derby PS as an important community asset, one participant brought this concern forward:

'That's another thing we argued, what's going to happen to the value of our properties? They've closed so many schools in our area, what happens then?' – Community Member 5

In reviewing the documentation, this emerged as a common pattern of concern as voiced from various community members during the accommodation review. As one local real estate professional noted:

'As a professional Real Estate Salesperson for the past 10 years and as a life long resident of Derby Township I would like to express my opinion on the negative impact the closure of Derby Public school would have on this community. I have discussed this situation with other local Realtors who agree this school closure would mean a reduced property value

in this region. Families are specifically moving to the smaller, friendly, safe communities to raise their children. A number of families have purchased homes in or near Kilsyth specifically due to the proximity to Derby School. I have been approached by several people who are considering moving to other areas if this school closes.’ – (Documentation 16, 2013)

A second common concern expressed was the negative impact to the social and community fabric if the school were closed. As Community Member 4 stated, Kilsyth would essentially become hollowed out, and the impact of this in a rural area is particularly heightened:

‘But yeah, it would definitely leave a hole in the community. It would basically, this would become an area, or a cluster of houses with bedrooms, and so on, people who know each other through hockey or soccer, whatever the case is, and that’s about it. So it would be unfortunate. You may not know your neighbour down the street. That sounds far fetched, but its not really because I’ve lived [redacted] and in [redacted] and I didn’t know any of my neighbours. Why would you know them? If there wasn’t the school connection, you’d have no idea who lived there.’

Again, this view seems to corroborate similar perspectives that were shared during the review process. As another community member noted, the closure of the school is a community concern, and the impact would be widely felt:

‘As a final note, this is a COMMUNITY issue! We are sometimes amazed at the response from people in the community. Some are very generous and know the value of the school to our community, others not so much. These people may not think that they will be affected by the closure of our local school, but oh yes they will! This will affect our community in many ways. Derby School has always been a draw for people to move to our community to attend our school, also involving them in many other activities such as community events, sports organizations, local business and the bottom line, our

economy. Without our rural community school, we will definitely see a change.’ –
Correspondence 19

Community Member 3 shared a similar perspective, but was particularly concerned with the negative consequences for the students. Not only would they be sent to various schools and subsequently lose important relationships, but the community would be left without a ‘hub’:

‘But, they were talking about 11 schools here then. So, that meant that Derby wouldn’t have a hub anymore. These kids already play sports in two different locations, some of them to Tara, some of them to Owen Sound, some even go to Chatsworth. They don’t have any sports within Derby, they don’t have any gymnastics, they have nothing. So that if you close the school, these kids are going to grow up neighbours and barely know each other. Because your neighbour is 5 kilometers away, so unless you’re at school and say ‘hey mom can I go to so and so’s house after school’ or something, they’re not going to have that same relationship.’

Interestingly, there is some evidence to suggest that closing down the school would have reciprocal effects on other local institutions as well. In particular, it was expressed by some that the loss of the school might impact another important community institution:

‘Given Derby School has families attending all three churches, I believe shutting down Derby will have a detrimental impact on the future of young people in our pastoral charge. If children are forced to go to other schools, then the cohesiveness of the local Derby small school community will be lost, and there may not be as much incentive for families to attend our church, or even to stay located within the Kilsyth village. Closing Derby could very well hamper church attendance and the social and financial health of our three small congregations.’ - Correspondence 12

Indeed, the negative consequences of the school closing to other organizations and activities was widely cited as a significant concern among community members:

‘The closure of Derby school would leave a gaping void in this community. Declining participation in local organizations, personal activities and sports teams for not only the children but for all the residents in our area as well. Small schools provide a central meeting place and a source of activities for all ages in the community. Derby school is an essential part of this community that our community can NOT afford to lose.’ –
Correspondence 16

A final pattern that emerged from the findings was the impact of the school review process on the perception of the public school board. As has been described previously, many participants expressed a strong discontent with not only the process, but also with the public school board. As one community informant noted, some parents are reluctant to enrol their children in the public system, and instead are looking at separate school boards:

‘The catholic school board is supporting the students, they're giving them extra help after school. they've got teacher engagement that is above and beyond. And you know they've got these after school buses for the high school students to keep them engaged in extra-curricular. I realize that you can't do that for all of the public school stuff. But, they are figuring it out and that's why people are leaving. It's not just a decline in the number of students that are born in our area, but there is a larger number of students that are looking at the catholic system. I didn't go to the catholic system, I didn't go to the catholic system, my husband didn't go to the catholic system, we never even considered it. But our son certainly has, and he's made that decision on his own and he's happy with it.’ –
Community Member 1

In all, community concerns regarding implications from the school closing were the corollary of how and why the school was highly valued as an important local asset. This included the negative implications of losing an important part of the community fabric that would also be detrimental to the local economy and real estate market, and result in a withdrawal from other community

activities and organizations. The last point of concern was the impact from the review process itself, and how this influenced some community members to withdraw their children from the public education system. The following section will discuss the concerns that were brought forth from the municipal officials.

5.4.3 FOR THE MUNICIPALITY

The municipal perspective on outcomes and implications were varied, ranging from concerns at the local scale to the municipal level. For the most part, these concerns mirror those of the community, but also offer some perspective on the broader issues that challenge rural Ontario as a whole. This includes some critical discussion on the accommodation review guidelines, and the limited municipal role during the decision-making process. As one municipal official commented, there has rarely been an opportunity to provide direct comments during a review:

‘Yeah. To be frank, to date the municipal role has been limited. there hasn’t been opportunity to provide direct comments as part of any ARC review processes to date, at the same time, municipalities, we haven’t infused ourselves into the process, or tried to infuse ourselves into the process.’ – Municipal Official 1

As this participant alludes to, municipalities may need to be more proactive as well. When discussing this further, it was noted that a recent report from the Bluewater DSB illustrates why the municipality needs to work closer with the school board through an ongoing process:

‘We are now trying to highlight that, though, now that there is a report, I don’t know if you have a copy of that, released by the school board that identified there will be 18 school closures throughout the school board, and so that raised the urgency of say ‘well, we need to be involved in this process’... but we in terms of the municipal perspective

and planning perspective, we need to be involved, and to date we haven't been. It's come to our realization after the release of that report that we definitely need to be involved as part of this, because in most cases these rural schools are the life of the community, they act as a community hub, their importance to a community is vital. And so, the ARC process which you know, looks at the financial aspects, student projections, and building conditions, those are all vital things, but there are some elements that we think should be also factored in as part of that process.' – Municipal Official 1

According to this perspective, greater municipal participation in the accommodation review process may not only benefit the process and outcome, but it is also imperative so that local government can make informed and guided decisions:

'We need it from a municipal perspective in order for our council, so they can make informed decisions. At the same time they would benefit from this information as well as part of the process, and we shared with them the previous growth management study data with the caveat that it was pre-recession data, and once we have some more firm numbers we're going to share it with them as well. But, beyond sharing information we think we need to be more involved in the process, you know there's even suggestions of whether or not there needs to be municipal representation on the ARC committee, and you know that may be more of a difficult situation but we're even suggesting let's be part of the process even if it's outside of the formal ARC review, and let's just share information, communicate more frequently in terms of providing data information and expertise.' – Municipal Official 1

Moreover, the relationship between the municipality and the school board appears to be isolated, with little collaboration or formal communication occurring. When Municipal Official 2 was asked about the quality of relationship between the school board and municipality, they indicated that there is very little formal cooperation:

'It's pretty isolated. They work separately, they're not integrated in my view. You certainly don't see them coming and asking questions. They're working with a set of criteria, so you know it doesn't allow you to look for those innovative solutions.'

There may be other challenges and issues associated with closing schools that the process fails to acknowledge or explore, further complicating a lack of collaboration between these two governing bodies. As Municipal Official 2 noted: '... sometimes the school reviews, they get so focused on the numbers game from the school board point of view, and the heart-string sensitivities of the families that there are broader issues that municipalities and other community interests can bring into play which have a benefit'. There were a number of different potential outcomes and implications associated with closing schools as from this perspective. For instance, Municipal Official 1 highlighted transportation, stating 'If you close schools those schools, those bus trips are gonna [sic] be longer... are we talking an hour and a half bus ride, if those schools are closed? Things like that should be considered as part of this...'. Municipal Official 2 also shared a similar perspective: 'If we close a school down, how far are these young kids having to travel?'. To this end, the school was also identified as a local source of green space, providing an opportunity for recreation. If the school were to be closed, that important community asset would be lost: 'When you look at Kilsyth itself, there's not a lot of other recreational green space or park space in Kilsyth. And so, if that were to be closed and turned over to a private business, there's a huge loss of that open recreation space for that community' (Municipal Official 1). As well, closing the school would also have a potentially negative impact on the community:

'If it comes to a point they have to close that school, well what's that school going to be in the future? if it just sits derelict, not only is it an impact of that school to close in the community, but if it sits absolutely empty then it even has further economic impacts for that community as well. Its taking a look at it could be utilized as an after use perspective.' – Municipal Official 1

This was also a concern expressed by Municipal Official 2, who stated '... but what is the impact of losing that on the community? In terms of future economic development growth, maintaining the healthy community'. In these varied ways, there was a concern for the impact on community development if the school were to be closed. For instance:

'And, usually we're looking at settlement areas to say well what exists in that settlement area from a growth perspective, and with the school closing in that community, the growth perspectives for that community are slim at best. So that's the reality. Parents with student-aged children, will want to locate to a settlement area if there is a school close by. If there isn't a school close by, there's gonna [sic] be less opportunities, and parents will locate or re-locate closer to schools. So that's just something that needs to be considered.' – Municipal Official 1

Municipal Official 2 shared a similar concern for community development, but the issue was recast into some of the broader structural changes occurring across the municipality:

'That would be a real tragedy if closing rural schools had that negative impact on people deciding whether or not to moving into a community. We have an aging population, we need youth, we need young families, and they need schools. So I look over to Meaford where the high school is in jeopardy that will have a definite impact on that community on whether or not people will go and live there.' – Municipal Official 2

Given the varied nature of potentially detrimental outcomes from closing schools, it occurred that a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach may be more appropriate. When Municipal

Official 1 was asked if it would be helpful to bring different ministries to together, they responded:

‘Absolutely. I think for sure ministry of municipal affairs and housing, because they are the ministry that look after the planning elements, as well as the housing elements. I think that having some of those other ministries involved. I think the initial step is to reach out to the Minister of Education and to relay some of the concerns we have with respect to the current ARC process, and making sure the municipal voice is heard. But I think absolutely some of those other ministries would need to be involved in some of these initiatives, if there was some change in policy at the provincial level, as well as making sure some of that will still work.’ – Municipal Official 1

Much of the conversation in this regard focused on provincial policy, and how the province could better support both rural schools and municipalities. For example, Municipal Official 1 alluded to the Provincial Policy Statement (2014), but also the accommodation review guidelines as well:

‘Absolutely. And, I think we even saw the province making some change in the provincial policy statement to better recognize that a policy for the province, may not work for rural Ontario. And with that you see in the new PPS, more recognition and more policies that are geared towards rural Ontario. There are still opportunities for improvement, but it’s a step in the right direction. I think the same can be said for this arc review process, that there needs to be consideration for, if you’re talking about school closure in a larger urban area versus a rural area, and with that, maybe changing the policies or the criteria to what is considered as part of that review process.’ – Municipal Official 1

However, Municipal Official 2 was more critical of provincial policy, stating that ‘You have to see it on the ground... right now, the smaller municipalities are really struggling, funding is being cut, their costs that they cannot control are escalating. There is a bit of a thought out there that the

province is starving them so that they will amalgamate on their own'. Moreover, a significant challenge in this regard was the geographic focus and source of current provincial policy:

'We tend to say in rural Ontario and I'm sure in the north they have a different view again, is that most decisions are made south of the 401 or south of highway seven with no regard to what it's like in rural areas. The policy lens of the province seems to be very urban centred. What we call HGTA. Because that's where the biggest part of the population is, the rules there don't work elsewhere.'

A final pattern of conversation that emerged through the findings concerned the accommodation review process itself. Here, two important assertions were made from the municipal informants. The first is in regards to a reformed process that formally includes the municipality in the consultation process. Municipal Official 1 acknowledged that municipalities need to accept some responsibility for a lack of collaboration, but nonetheless it is necessary to foster a better relationship:

'I think what's been missing from the equation, and its I guess partly our fault for not infusing ourselves into the process more, is the municipal voice. I think there's some benefit and merit to make sure the municipal voice is heard, and considered as part of that process and whether or not having a municipal representative is part of that ARC review committee, or just sitting down discussing potential elements that need to be considered. I think there's opportunities there for sure.'

There was also evidence that more proactive measures could be taken to through a better decision-making framework. This included better communication, and a more comprehensive and holistic decision-making framework:

'Well, one where you're not kidding people, you're looking at 'well, are there opportunities, does it have an impact on the potential health and vitality of the

community? And that's social and economic, that's both sides to it, right. If it is really critical to that fabric, are there ways of making it work? Are there opportunities?' –
Municipal Official 2

Further to this, formal cooperation between the school board and municipality would also enable a coordinated approach to explore other alternatives to closure or a shared use of space in these facilities. As Municipal Official 2 commented:

'Maybe in some communities the library is also looking to move some place, and you could partner together as opposed to doing it separately. It's the old adage of you pave the road, and then you dig up a year later to put the water and sewer line in. So should we talk together more, and are there opportunities are there solutions that you wouldn't think of when you're looking at it from the narrow focus of 'we just don't have the children.'

And again, this further supports a need for greater collaboration with the school board, as Municipal Official 1 clearly states:

'Beyond that, I think there's definitely goals for school boards and municipalities to improve communications and share information between, involving municipalities throughout the review process or even outside the review process. And, as I mentioned, looking for some of those creative opportunities to share space, and looking at that from a planning perspective so we can update our policies and official plans as well as our zoning by-laws that would support innovative ways of maybe keeping schools open, while utilized under used space in schools. While still ensuring student safety as I mentioned before.'

In another way, closing a school would have implications for the municipality as well, but for which the school board has little regard. For instance, Municipal Official 1 described how

different settlements are classified, and how this structures where future growth and development are directed or encouraged:

‘To the point where, we went through a process in our provincial plan where we classified our settlement areas into primary, secondary, and tertiary settlement areas, and we utilized criteria to come up with whether it fit into one of those classes, and right now Kilsyth is identified as a secondary settlement area, however if the school were to close, you would have to reinvestigate that, it would likely be a tertiary settlement area at best.’

Nonetheless, the main point of concern regarding rural school closures concerned a lack of provincial support, and the topic was ultimately recast into other issues of similar nature. For example, Municipal Official 2 noted that although school closures are a significant impetus for rural municipalities, there are other pressing challenges as well:

‘But, truthfully, there are a lot of services that are going to be evaluated and re-evaluated over the next number of years, not just in the school board, but in the municipalities as well. You know, we have aging infrastructure too. There are bridges that are aging, you know, do we need that bridge? Should that road close, can people go around? Those are decisions nobody wants to hear, but it’s gotta [sic] happen. Sorry to say.’

As Municipal Official 2 continued, other issues were brought forward, including that the ‘lens is on provincial’ with little regard for the particularities of rural. And again, rural communities are facing unique challenges with the implementation of provincial policies, not unlike those associated with school closures:

‘Well, demographic change is pretty big. so you got distances, we've got transportation issues, we're doing or rural transportation study right now, where we're trying to find solutions, but you've got people, um, that don't necessarily have access to transit that

need to travel, how do we get them from point A to point B? We have provincial model for health care which is saying more people in their homes, age at home.’ – Municipal Official 2

When Municipal Official 1 was asked about the connection between these challenges and rural school closures, there was a connection made with rural decline, noting ‘Yeah, absolutely. I think its a two-way street there for sure’. But nonetheless, a more proactive approach may ensure that a better outcome is achieved that balances the fiscal realities of the school board and the imperative role of the school in the local community:

‘Ultimately, some of those schools will probably have to close, just based on budget considerations and other elements. But maybe adding in some of these other considerations, we can identify some of those schools that are more of a priority in terms of keeping, and seeing if there are other opportunities to share space, or whatever it might be.’ – Municipal Official 1

Overall, two patterns emerged from the municipal perspective concerning rural school closures. First, municipal concerns largely mirrored those of the community with respect to losing an important local asset in the form of a community builder and place maker. The second municipal concern regarding school closures was recast into the broader challenges that rural Ontario is currently experiencing in the form of demographic and economic restructuring. Moreover, a more proactive and formal relationship with local school boards would undoubtedly lead to a more comprehensive and holistic decision-making model. Nonetheless, strong support from the provincial government was deemed as a necessary counter measure, but as Municipal Official 2 noted, policy statements and directives are not enough as the issues in urban areas of the province are fundamentally different than those in the rural.

5.5 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

5.5.1 *THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS*

What is the role of public schools in rural and small town communities?

The role of Derby PS emerges through the findings as intrinsic to the community in three ways.

First, with respect to Downey's (2003) interpretation on the important role of rural schools:

'In single school communities, the school is frequently the only public institution. It serves as a centre of entertainment, local activity, and political involvement, and its educational accomplishments are a source of local pride' (p.7).

Here, there is evidence to substantiate all of Downey's (2003) findings. For example: Derby PS is frequently cited as a centre for local entertainment and activity; its educational achievements are frequently highlighted by both members of the community and municipality; and lastly, widespread community involvement through organizations such as parent council, demonstrates significant political involvement in school affairs. Moreover, the importance of Derby PS is given added weight by all participants because it is the only remaining truly public institution within the community. Through these measures, it becomes clear that the school generates greater social cohesion and integration within the broader community. It also emerges as critical to creating a communal sense of belonging and attachment to place. In other words, it fosters a sense of society (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). Second, it contributes to overall community identity, autonomy, and vitality. This emerges as a cornerstone within the findings and in particular from the community perspective. Third, there is conceptual evidence that the school may create greater capacity for community development through institutional, social, and political capital. The findings also indicate that the school is a prerequisite for resilience and long-

term well-being. As one study participant notably describes, the school acts as a 'safety blanket' for the community as a whole. Moreover, Miller (1993; 1995) elaborates by noting that evaluating community well-being must measure more than economic vitality by including: value of place, quality of environment, history and tradition, and sense of belonging and affiliation. These are all ways in which rural schools contribute to the quality of place and life in rural communities. As Autti et al. (2014) conclude, schools in rural areas are centres of social and political life; but 'the significance of a village school is often taken as given, and the school's importance does not become evident until the school is threatened' (p.12).

The above findings are common to both the community and municipal perspective. However, there is little evidence to suggest that these are meaningfully factored in to the accommodation review decision-making criteria. From the school board perspective, it is clear that the school only serves pedagogical purposes and thus informs the primary way in which the value of a school is measured. There is little evidence to suggest otherwise, the most obvious of which is that the intrinsic community role of the school is not evaluated accurately. This is despite what the accommodation review guidelines state; but more telling, is a likely explanation as to why the community and economic value of schools are being removed as evidenced in the most recent proposal to modify the existing guidelines. Instead, the findings of this study demonstrate that school closures are largely motivated by fiscal considerations. For example, Derby PS is placed under review for two reasons. First, it was deemed too costly and therefore prohibitive to repair. Second, it was under-capacity and did not meet the Ministry threshold to receive 'top-up' funding. These are both objectively fiscal measures that are clear demonstrations of how

rational evaluation and reasoning tend to subvert the more subjective evidence gathered through community consultation. As Lucas (1982) describes:

‘A central point to be made in this and the following discussion is that while school authorities are able to support school closure decisions with relatively objective data, community protest against closure relies largely upon “subjective data”, including feelings, attitudes, traditions, and the like.

This represents an ideological disconnect for what counts as ‘evidence’ in policymaking, but also illustrates that consideration for the broader role of schools needs to be included in any iteration of school review policy.

These findings highlight a fundamental tension between how school boards and communities perceive the role and purpose of schools. As has been noted before (Irwin, 2012), school boards tend to express real and legal ownership over school buildings and property, while communities value these as an essential element of their ‘DNA’ (p. 146). As a fiscal tool, the current decision-making-framework is unable to truly value the intrinsic community role of schools, perhaps because these decisions are largely supported and rationalized through relatively objective data, such as enrolment numbers and fiscal considerations. Again, as Irwin (2012) concludes: ‘local schools become a community icon, centering citizen identity... and affords parents a sense of influence over the lives of their children and inclusion in a community of their making’ (p.285). The mandate of school boards and the operation of schools as ‘plants’ precludes such considerations of community identity and sense of place because they are mainly interested in operating these facilities as cost efficiently and effectively as possible. The limited

scope of the accommodation review guidelines not only devalues the community perspective, but also appears to ignore how schools benefit their communities beyond pedagogical means. As Lucas (1982) suggests, a systems approach to evaluating the role of rural schools may be more appropriate where 'the community system represents an integration of the relatively objective factors of the economic infrastructure with the fulfillment of important social needs' (p.258). Indeed, the economic role of Kilsyth and Derby PS may be limited, but the broad role of the school to community vitality, resilience, and overall well-being is seemingly significant. This suggests that consideration given to schools as central to long-term community well-being should be heightened. In this way, schools are an asset against the detrimental outcomes of structural and process related changes that are gradually eroding the rural landscape (Ramsey and Smit, 2002).

5.5.2 THE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW PROCESS

What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?

Although ostensibly designed as a method of meaningful participation to make an informed decision, it can be well argued that accommodation reviews are not an appropriate decision-making model for the rural context. Deliberate or not, community members observed a number of actions taken by administrators and trustees that were interpreted as guiding the review process in favour of the board. Here, the school board made calculated decisions based on notions of property, finance, and administration (Kearns et al., 2009). Compounding the contentious nature of these outcomes are issues associated with school board management,

governance, and leadership. Collectively, these worsened an already difficult and contentious process. In this way, the community felt increasingly threatened as formal means of communication and collaboration gradually eroded into polarization and politicization. However, even more alarming is that the nature of this process precludes any consideration for the important role of the school in community well-being as measured through social cohesion, social capital, and community agency. It can be confidently asserted that this occurred because the process itself did not meet community expectations of accountability, transparency, and meaningful inclusiveness; nor was it conducted through the rural community lens (Basu, 2007; Doern & Prince, 1989; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). In this way, the process very much took on a 'life of its own', as sound decision-making was replaced by protest, a school board staff whose actions were not meeting community expectations, and a group of trustees who appeared to be divided by geography, ideology, and interpersonal conflict.

More fundamentally, these findings reveal a strong disconnect between the centrality of schools to rural communities and an accommodation review policy that is ostensibly driven by fiscal considerations. In the particular case of this study, the decision to review Derby PS was largely made on two grounds that reflect fiscal rationalization; one, the school was deemed too expensive to operate and prohibitive to repair or maintain; and two, closing it would increase utilization rates at nearby schools, thus increasing funds allocated to the board from the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, the role of the school was intrinsic and integral to the community fabric, as the subjective and qualitative evidence of this study, and others, clearly demonstrate. These findings suggest a fundamental tension between a 'one size fits all'

provincial policy that is designed to create a 'level playing field' (Kearns et al., 2009, p. 139) and the contextual imperatives of locality. In the latter case, the perspectives of the municipality and local residents are more concerned with the long-term well-being and vitality of the community as a whole. The corollary to these concerns are the negative implications if the school is closed; all of which the school board appears to be largely unconcerned with, or deems to be beyond the scope of an accommodation review. It becomes apparent that the school is considered a right rather than a public service, and notions of financial efficiency were at odds with notions of social justice and community well-being (Slee & Miller, 2015). This not only creates a great 'value distance' (Irwin, 2012) between stakeholders, but also demonstrates the consequences of developing and implementing public policy that is removed from place, people, and community.

The second conclusion is in regards to how a school is valued within the accommodation review framework. It becomes apparent through existing literature and the evidence presented in this study that an emphasis on rationalization took precedence over concerns for community development and sustainability (Kearns et al., 2009). This leads to a further policy disconnect in the sense that the value of a school is largely measured by the community in subjective or qualitative terms, whereas the accommodation review framework inherently places an emphasis on quantitatively objective measures and necessarily requires a school to be evaluated accordingly. This leads to an important question: how is a policy instrument that is designed as an objectively fiscal tool meant to truly capture subjective and qualitative values? This being the case, it should not be surprising that the viewpoints, opinions, and perspectives of the community are inherently devalued, considered less relevant, or worse, completely disregarded

(Kearns et al., 2009; Lucas, 1982). Moreover, and as Slee and Miller (2015) remark, 'it can be very difficult to restore trust when local authority–local community relations have broken down and when the dispute is as much about values as the evidence base' (p.13). Another consideration in this regard concerns the nature of accommodation reviews as an instrument of the neoliberal political and economic paradigm that emphasizes rational decision-making. Rural school closures are clearly not a simple cause and effect phenomenon, but instead include a more broad set of factors that both precipitate and shape these outcomes. Moreover, there is strong evidence to suggest that school closures may ultimately undermine the future viability and resilience of rural communities. This would suggest that a more complex, comprehensive and holistic evaluation framework is necessarily appropriate.

A further conclusion can be reached in regards to the consequences of neoliberal policy at the community level. Here, Basu's (2007) assertion that accommodation reviews are 'a successful local planning tool practiced by neoliberal regimes' and where the 'community ultimately becomes responsible for its own planning outcomes' becomes particularly evident; in the context of rural Ontario, 'planning outcomes' translates to community development and revitalization, which necessarily relies on social and institutional capacity and for which schools are a critical catalyst. The findings presented in this study also substantiate Basu's (2007) assertion that accommodation reviews are representative of the state 'shouldering off' (p.111) certain responsibilities and duties, with a 'new emphasis on personal responsibilities of individuals, families, and their communities to take active steps to secure their own future well-being' (as cited in Isin, 1998, p.173). If schools are indeed an imperative and publicly funded

asset to the long-term well-being of rural communities, as has been argued in this paper and suggested by others, then this seems to cement Basu's (2007) reasoning. Interestingly, this was also an aspect of the issue that was brought forward by municipal officials, where the topic of school closures was quickly recast into broader issues associated with a lack of provincial support through either monetary measures or stronger policy language in support of rural Ontario. Underpinning these discussions was a general sentiment that the provincial locus and focus for public policy is located 'south of highway seven'. One potential conclusion in this regard may be that the province is downloading responsibility for the future viability and resiliency to rural communities and municipalities themselves, with little to no meaningful top-down support. One of the primary objectives of this study is to explore what might constitute an appropriate accommodation review process for the particularities of rural Ontario. Informing this research question is a potential connection between the reciprocal causality of closing rural schools and in doing so, further challenging efforts towards rural development. Meanwhile, there has been a relative paucity of research associated with the school closure decision-making process itself, which is at the crux of this issue. The limited body of evidence that does exist suggests that these reviews do not meet community expectations of a fair and balanced consultation process. It also dismisses the important role of schools. At the same time, school boards tend to exert strong agency skills that further support absolute decision-making authority. Moreover, school boards are legislatively empowered to conduct accommodation reviews under the auspice of fiscal responsibility, and largely without meaningful collaboration or cooperation with other stakeholders, including but not limited to the local municipality.

A final consideration in this regard concerns Witten et al. (2003) association of school closure with the 'hollowing out of the post welfare state' (Barnett, 2000). This is a complex concept, but citing Mohan (1995), Barnett (2000) asserts that one aspect of the neoliberal paradigm and subsequent hollowing out is that it 'may be politically beneficial since potentially it provides a means by which central governments can distance themselves from unpopular decisions and to disclaim any responsibility for inadequacies in local services' (p.6). School closures are rarely considered a positive outcome, and are almost universally met with a strong visceral reaction from the community, and often the municipality too. Participants of this study noted that initial discontent with the review was directed towards the school board, but as the process evolved there was growing ire towards the Ministry of Education, and by extension the provincial government. It was then slowly realized that school boards are in fact handcuffed by provincial policy, stemming from significant public sector restructuring that occurred during the mid-1990s. In this way, many community members perceive that school board trustees are no longer accountable to the public, but instead to the senior administration team, and in turn to the Ministry. The net outcome being that through a number of measures, including policy and governance, the province has effectively centralized control while simultaneously downloading accountability. With respect to accommodation reviews, the province has insulated itself from direct criticism by tasking school boards to carry out these difficult exercises, effectively creating a sort of 'buffer'. In other words, school boards are being used to do the 'dirty work', while the Ministry controls funding, curriculum, and policy, which trustees and senior administrators are legislatively mandated to conform with and adhere to. In this way, school boards are given responsibility without power (Basu, 2004a, 2004b), and have little autonomy while also being

subordinate to the province. It follows that school boards are 'policy takers' rather than 'policy makers' (Irwin, 2012).

A last point of discussion is in regards to the process being described as passive, reactive, and pre-determined. There is little evidence from this study to support the assertion that accommodation reviews are truly participatory or consultative in nature as the guidelines are so framed. Many community members note that they had little influence on the decision-making process, with an inability to exert any authority to ensure that their views are 'heeded by the powerful' (Arnstein, 1969, p.217). In other words, community members 'participated in participation' (p.218) but were offered little assurance that their views, opinions, or ideas would ultimately shape the outcome (Arnstein, 1969). As Irwin and Seasons (2012) note by citing Hampton (2009):

'Consultation without influence on the final decision is distinguished from a participation program where there is a clear commitment to participatory democracy. Participation requires a different policy process to the situation where public preferences will merely be taken into consideration. (p.236).

As one informant poignantly noted when describing the relationship between the community and the school board when seeking solutions: 'nope, that won't work, nope that's not what the funding formula does, nope this, nope that. They weren't even listening.' (Community Member 3). Many community members also observe the top down nature of accommodation review processes. Once again, this is where school boards exert exceptional agency and authority by dictating the process, assigning committee members, and controlling sources of information and

data (Irwin and Seasons, 2012). In this study, actions of this nature also included the use of Robert's Rules of Order, which have been evaluated to impede collaborative participation by '[forcing] votes, divisions, and partisanship instead of the seeking of common ground and building social capital' (Innes and Booher, 2004, p. 431; citing Susskind, 1999). Moreover, there were competing sources and interpretation of data circulated between stakeholders, further prohibiting consensus and clouding sound decision-making. Most concerning is that Derby PS underwent a single review with the intention to consolidate it with other schools nearby. According the perspective of many community members, this corroborates Irwin's (2012) finding as cited in Irwin and Seasons (2012):

'Community participants described the outcome of the process as "predetermined;" "a done deal," or a "sham." In addition, the preference by the school board administration for the model of larger elementary schools, the scale of efficiency model illustrated by a preference for elementary schools in the 400 to 450 pupil range, also demonstrates managerialist tendencies. This preference is diametrically opposed to that of parents interviewee who specifically chose to live in communities where their children would attend a "smaller" school' (p. 276).

Lastly, Irwin and Seasons' (2012) observation that separate recommendations, one on behalf of the senior administration team and the other from the committee, altogether diminishes the purpose of the review and creates an 'adversarial environment by design' (p.56). As this study has detailed, this particular combination of policy implementation and governance structure inherently exposes the process to bias, politicization, and polarization. Moreover, the nature of school board governance and a subordinate policy relationship with the province affords little latitude for administrators to work collaboratively in coproducing a fairer, more equitable, and

balanced outcome. Instead, the review guidelines are seemingly designed with little recognition for the challenges associated with the realities of implementation. This not only results in the process being widely evaluated as unjust and divisive, but also ineffective and unnecessarily fracturing for school boards, communities, and municipalities alike. In these various ways, it seems that the process is altogether designed to fail; alarming given the significance of these decisions.

5.5.3 SCHOOL CLOSURES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?

The nature of this study precludes any quantitatively objective evidence associated with the impact of rural school closures, particularly with respect to demographics and economics; two of the principal challenges commonly associated with rural Ontario. Instead, many of the concerns brought forth by participants are associated with the hypothetical consequences that would follow closure. Notwithstanding, there are a number of findings that can be established by tracing this discussion back to the literature. First, this study utilized a conceptual framework developed by Ramsey and Smit (2002) to understand implications at the community level of rural restructuring in Ontario. This includes a model of rural community well-being, interpreted as ‘the interrelated structural and functional conditions (physical, psychological, social, and economic) of a community, including individuals and their interactions, within a non-urban environment’ (p.371). Using this interpretation introduces an opportunity to establish how school closures may have negative implications across different conditions of well-being. The findings of this case study provide clear evidence for community and municipal based concern

regarding the economic, social, physical, and psychological consequences of rural school closures. Moreover, the overlapping nature of these conditions means that potential negative outcomes are not independent of one another, and again this was tacitly implied throughout the findings; however, the distinction between well-being at the individual and community level is not as clearly independent as implied in Ramsey and Smit's (2002) model. As it relates to closing school facilities, this implies a need for further research on the implications of such processes at both levels, but also across different 'conditions' (Ramsey & Smit, 2002).

As the authors also note, rural communities are dynamic and change over time (Ramsey & Smit, 2002). This occurs through forces that are both external and internal to the community, and can be evaluated through macro- and micro-scale approaches. Again, the authors assert that such changes occur through three foci: forces, changes, and responses. This is particularly pertinent to this study, because the model clearly demonstrates how the implications of changes in macro-economic and political structures trickle down to the community level, and ultimately have implications for conditions of well-being. The authors offer a good explanation:

'This model illustrates the linkages among forces, processes (structure and function), and changes in well-being. As rural community functions (e.g. economic) change, the structures of the rural community also change (e.g. economic, political, institutional, social). If the economic function declines, the structures of the rural community could change (e.g. closure of rural extension offices, population decline. (p.372).

This study has traced the widespread implications of restructuring public policy by evaluating the outcomes of implementation as experienced at the community and municipal level. Evaluating the evidence of these findings against Ramsey and Smit's (2002) model creates a more robust

understanding of this relationship. For example, both political and economic forces – namely neoliberal ideology – are creating unintended policy consequences on the functioning and structures of communities in rural places. This is an alternative but complementing theory to the ‘hollowed out post-welfare state’ as proposed by Witten et al. (2003). In the particular case of this study, it also begs one to ask what the long-term consequences are to other community structures if school facilities continue to be permanently closed. Municipal officials interviewed in this study observe a clear connection between closing schools and overall rural community decline. However, they also place this particular issue within the same context as other equally pressing challenges such as demographics and the rural economy. To this end, it brings about another question that Lucas (1982) propositioned concerning the cause-effect ‘enigma’ (p.256): ‘the question arises whether the loss of the school is a contributing factor to community decline, or whether it is merely a result of that decline’ (p.256). Either way, the contentious nature of closing schools is certainly heightened as communities experience the gradual erosion of rural life under political and economic restructuring. Ramsey and Smit’s (2002) model of well-being and changes to the structure and function of rural communities offers a logical way to advance our understanding of unintended policy consequences associated with closing schools.

Next, there appears to be a disconnect between school closures and efforts associated with community and rural development. The literature review introduced four authors to establish a working definition of community development, including Bhattacharyya (2004), Cavaye (2001), Miller (1993; 1995), and Ramsey (2006). Central to all interpretations is the importance of social capital. Of these authors, Miller (1995) offers the clearest connection by placing the role of

schools, social capital, and community development together. Nonetheless, each of the other author's definitions can be applied. For example, Bhattacharyya (2004) defines community development as fostering strong agency and solidarity through social relations that necessarily require participation in society. Alternatively, Cavaye (2001) describes community development efforts as those that go beyond service delivery, information dissemination and discrete initiatives; rather, they involve access, partnership, coordination, and new approaches that achieve greater recognition of community values, new forms of participation, dealing with local perceptions, and fostering new approaches by government. It is also important to remember that many community assets or institutions that are closely associated with all of the above, such as schools, are often regarded as local, yet are in fact controlled, managed, and 'owned' outside of the community (Reimer, 2006). The point being that if community and rural development necessarily rely on the importance of 'networks, trust, and mutual obligations to take collective measures to address shared problems' (Putnam, 1995), then the breakdown of community solidarity, cohesiveness, and integrity that result from closing schools should be of paramount concern to practitioners and policymakers operating within the rural context and from a rural perspective. If indeed the action of closing schools is in reality downloading the responsibility for a community's well-being (Basu, 2007), then the importance of having strong social capital and an overall cohesive community is therefore heightened. Going back to the work of Bhattacharyya (2004), Cavaye (2001), Miller (1993; 1995), and Reimer (2006) we begin to understand the important and inherent role of schools in fostering greater social capital, and thus creating greater potential for community and rural development efforts.

Lastly, we readdress the concept of community resilience that was introduced at the conclusion of the literature review; again, there is an important connection to be made here with respect to the findings of this study. To recap, community resilience broadly refers to the ability of a community to 'positively adapt within the context of significant adversity' (Oncescu, 2014, p.40; citing Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, 2000). Again, social capital including networks, support, inclusion, belonging, and leadership are central to this concept. As Magis (2010) states: 'resilient communities, hence, learn to cope with, adapt to and shape change' (p.412). The findings of this study indicate that many of the community and municipal concerns regarding school closures can be tightly linked to the destruction of community and subsequent impacts to community resilience and cohesiveness. There were very specific anecdotes shared by community members that demonstrate how the school acted as a source of resilience and support in times of local adversity. These were relatively small-scale examples, but the message is clear: the sense of community and social cohesion that the school fosters is critical to resilience and a community's sense of shared belonging to 'society'. Moreover, the municipal perspective largely mirrors that of the community's, but at a macro-scale. In the particular case of Georgian Bluffs, only two schools are present across the entire township. If even one school were to be closed, respondents tacitly note that the long-term impacts to municipal resiliency with respect to demographic and economic adversity would be of particular concern. Moreover, this study observes that there is significant social capital generated by the accommodation review process itself; however, the process model did little to capitalize and sustain this enhanced capital for longer-term community initiatives.

Given that schools are central to rural community well-being, community development, and community resiliency, it seems to corroborate the concerns expressed through the perspective of municipal officials and community members alike. Moreover, the macro-factors – including changes in economic and political structures – have tangible implications at the local scale, in at least one way as represented through school closures. Indeed, this seems to demonstrate how local challenges are in fact manifestations of problems whose origins lie further upstream (Bhattacharyya, 2004); this also indicates the need for an alternative process that engages a diversity of stakeholders, recognizes and builds on opportunities, facilitates networking, and embraces conflict resolution as necessary (Cavaye, 2001). This includes alternative models of governance, in particular networked governance (See: Keevers, Treleaven, and Sykes, 2008), as well as a reframing of what counts for ‘good’ public policy and legitimate policy ‘evidence’; increasingly believed to be processes that reflect greater citizen engagement and participatory practices that are developed and implemented from the ‘bottom-up, rather than the traditional ‘top-down’ approach (Bradford 2005; 2008).

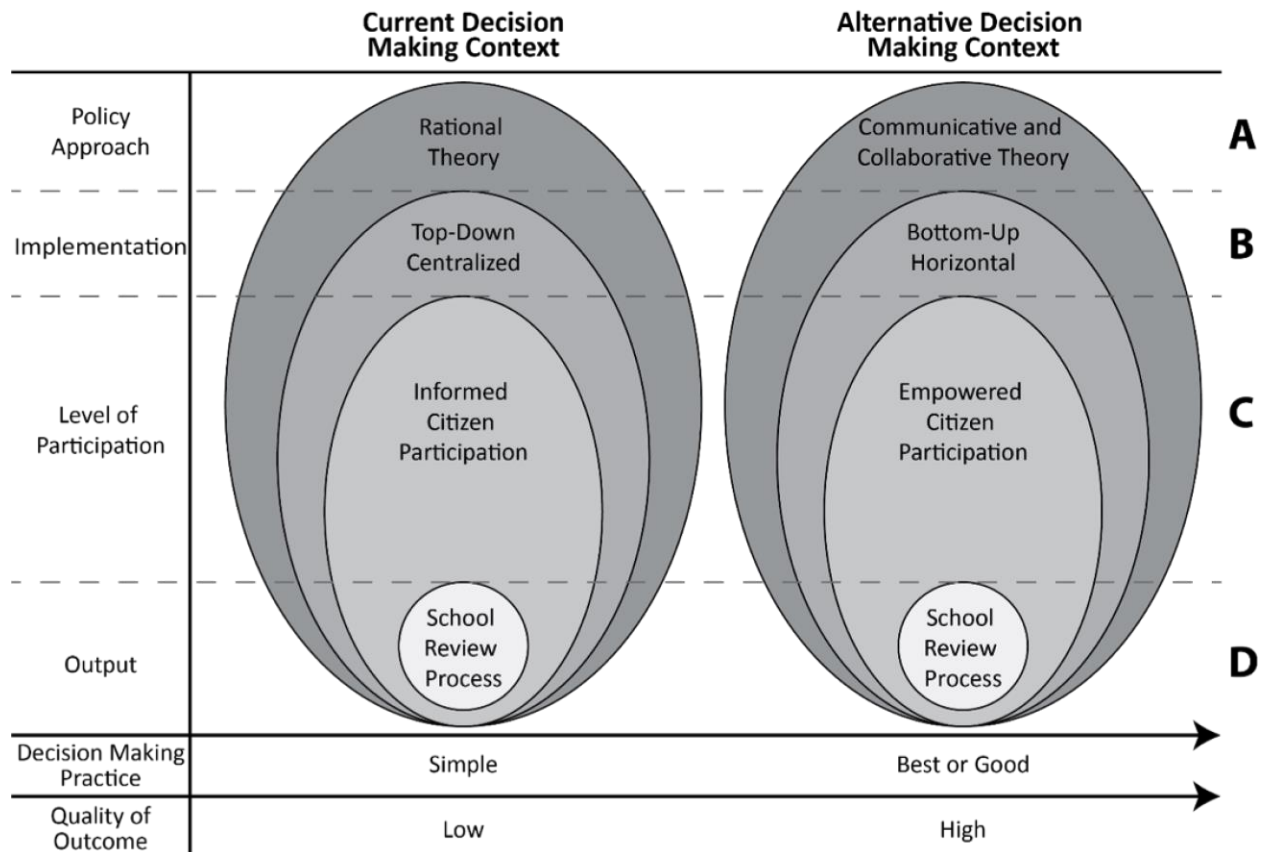
5.5.4 AN ALTERNATIVE DECISION MAKING MODEL FOR RURAL ONTARIO

Are the generic accommodation review guidelines appropriate for the context of rural Ontario?

Thus far, an evaluation of each supporting research question has been offered. These three secondary questions have served to ultimately evaluate the primary focus of this study: Are the generic accommodation review guidelines appropriate for the context of rural Ontario? Here, it is asserted that the generic accommodation review guidelines ***are not*** appropriate for the

context of rural Ontario. Existing literature, the findings of this study, and the analyses presented previously unequivocally demonstrate that closing rural schools in favour of fiscal efficiency dismisses more than three decades of evidence indicating how small local schools are imperative to rural communities in ways far beyond their primary pedagogical purpose. To summarize this discussion, a conceptual diagram is proposed, illustrating an alternative context of policy process and implementation (Figure 5.1 and Appendix G). A brief discussion is provided below to correspond with each 'level' within the proposed alternative.

Figure 5.1 Current and Alternative Decision-Making Context



A. Policy Approach: At this level, the rational policy approach to accommodation reviews is not only detrimental to the process itself, but results in having negative consequences at the

community level as well. This occurs in two ways. First, the rational approach is over simplifying a complex problem; school closures are driven by fiscal realities, but are political, ambiguous, and contentious in nature. This calls for a more nuanced model of decision-making that is flexible, adaptable, and authentic. Second, rational approaches that are grounded in positivist reasoning and fiscal efficiency inherently ignore the particularities of local and the community 'voice'. Moreover, it clouds sound decision-making and prohibits explicit recognition of the broader benefits that schools provide their communities. Instead, an alternative approach to policy that is grounded in contemporary planning theory and practice is necessary. This includes a focus on place-making through collaboration, consensus building, and most fundamentally, skillful communication. Here, there is an emphasis on building dialogue, cooperation, trust, and reciprocity, all in an effort to develop collective interests, values, and goals. Moreover, it brings communities closer to the process of policymaking and is more representative and responsive to the challenges and opportunities that exist at the local level. It would also permit various stakeholders, even those with competing interests and positions, to reach more equitable, effective, and amicable outcomes (Innes & Booher, 2015). The essence being that communication has power; which holds particularly true in the current context of accommodation reviews as both school boards and the province continue to exert strong agency and power through a rigid and tightly controlled process. Rather, policy approaches that are grounded in communicative and collaborative theory where there is demonstrated success in navigating 'wicked and messy' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) problems of public policy would represent a more

appropriate model of decision-making; whereas the current model does little to navigate a phenomenon that is mired in the realities of politics, ambiguity, and unequal power relations.

B. Implementation: There is also a need to reconsider how public policy is implemented within the rural context, from a rural perspective, and with specific respect to accommodation reviews. The current approach to implementing accommodation reviews remains top-down and centralized, in regards to both development and implementation. Such models ignore contemporary theory and practice regarding what counts as 'good public policy'. More contemporary models encourage upper-tier level governments to engage local networks. It is an effective approach that addresses public policy challenges that are characterized as deeply rooted, interconnected, and altogether unfamiliar (Braford, 2008). To complement this, an alternative model of governance is also required. Here, we have cited Keevers, Sykes, and Treveane's (2008) work on networked governance. This is only one example of an alternative mode of governance, but it does offer an avenue through which people and place-based policy can be developed and implemented in an adaptable and flexible way. Here, there are greater opportunities for multi-agency approaches and partnerships to be fostered. Coincidentally, this is also aligned with placed-focused and place-conscious governance (Healey, 1999). This includes interactive practices through which creative solutions are sought and institutional capacity is built. Moreover, it encourages horizontal networks and partnerships by connecting local strategies and opportunities to macro-policy (Healey, 1998). As this study has concluded, and as the experience of other researchers has demonstrated, the difficult nature of school closures is exacerbated because school boards

are 'policy takers not policy makers' (Irwin, 2012), suggesting a disconnect between macro-level policy and micro-level challenges. In this way, there is a fundamental and ideological disconnect between the intent of accommodation review policy and the outcomes for rural communities; and school boards have little ability to act differently or beyond their provincially established mandate. Instead, we argue that an alternative model of governance and policy implementation would permit greater collaboration, cooperation, and coordination among all stakeholders. More importantly, it would result in policy that is contextually appropriate and responsive to the local ethos.

C. Level of Participation: The consultation process conducted in this case study is described as dismissive; in other words, it was inauthentic and disingenuous, leaving many respondents disenchanted and feeling co-opted. On the surface, school board officials were seemingly engaged in public participation, but the community frequently noted that they were not being truly heard or listened to. Previously, it was established that when compared to Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of Participation', this form of engagement ranks 'low'. To ameliorate these contentious decisions, achieve better and more effective outcomes, and realize a more amicable process, the context of consultation needs to 'climb' Arnstein's (1969) ladder. This includes empowering both citizens and communities, fostering institutional capital, and facilitating community and individual agency. As Cavaye (2001) writes on the nature of community development, rural communities are growing weary of public meetings and mandated forms of participation that are used by default. This includes 'unempowering' means of participation, and complex systems of agency based decision-

making. Instead, this study echo's Cavaye's (2001) assertion for less traditional forms of participation to include coalitions, informal and temporary commitments, and networks of community groups. Incidentally, these are also responsive to the bottom-up approach of policy development and implementation as outlined above, as well communicative and collaborative planning theory and practice. Collectively, these forms of community participation foster greater solidarity, agency, and social capital, and with a greater emphasis on people and place.

D. Process Output: It is recognized that not all small schools located in rural Ontario can remain open for their primary pedagogical purpose. What *is* proposed is an alternative decision-making process that is grounded in contemporary best practices and theory of planning and public participation; one that actively and meaningfully engages stakeholders through dialogue and communication, moves rural communities and their perspectives closer to the centre of policy development and implementation, and genuinely seeks alternatives to permanent closure. Cumulatively, this reflects an effort to maintain many of the broader functions that schools serve that would otherwise cease to exist. This will not only lessen the polarizing and contentious nature of school review processes, but also reach more effective and desirable outcomes for all stakeholders and parties. At this point in time, it is critical to search for new alternatives and to explore different solutions. There is strong conceptual evidence that closing rural schools will be detrimental to the long-term vitality and overall well-being of rural communities, as argued in this study. This suggests that greater coordination and cooperation is required between and among policymakers at all levels of

government. Only when processes that are rooted in communicative and collaborative methods, implemented from the bottom-up, developed across horizontal networks, and achieved through meaningful and genuine participation, can high quality outcomes be realized. This necessarily reflects a decision making model that incorporates good or best practices that ultimately lead to higher quality outcomes.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the findings of this research as well as an analysis of the results. The nature of case study methodology enabled each of the four research questions to be addressed. In summary, the school emerges as central and intrinsic to the rural community of Kilsyth as both a community builder and place maker. It is aptly described by one community member as 'safety blanket'. The contentious nature of this review is made worse by a poor model of school board governance, and individual actions that demonstrate the use of power and agency to guide the process in favour of closure. Altogether, sound decision-making is replaced by politicization and conflict. Furthermore, both community and municipal participants feel strongly that closing the school will inevitably have detrimental outcomes at both the local and municipal scale. Here, there is a need to reconsider what counts for 'evidence' in policymaking and this study has argued strongly in favour of policy that is better informed by local knowledge. Lastly, each of the research questions are revisited, and discussed with reference to the literature. In the end, it is demonstrated how the generic accommodation review decision-making model is not appropriate for the rural context.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 MOVING THE AGENDA FORWARD

The consolidation and closure of rural public schools has emerged as a perennially contentious but imperative challenge to communities, municipalities, school board officials, and the policy community in general. This study has determined that despite formal review guidelines that are grounded in deliberative participation, the accommodation review process emerges as an arena for political contestation, conflict, and polarization. Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrate that the current decision-making framework debases the community and municipal perspective, and devalues the potential role for schools to support rural development and revitalization. Of equal concern, existing evidence and findings associated with this study suggest that school closures may precipitate or exacerbate those negative outcomes associated with demographic and economic challenges that are unique to rural Ontario. As a critical part of the social infrastructure, the loss of a school may jeopardize the long-term vitality of many rural communities across the province as small local schools continue to close.

Criticism of the current decision-making framework recognizes that the provincially crafted review guidelines have altogether failed to build cooperation, encourage collaboration, or reach consensus. In these varied ways, the process and outcome of school closures are often viewed to be anti-ethical and at odds with community expectations of procedural fairness and meaningful participation. These previous findings are further corroborated by the evidence presented in this study. To this end, it has been increasingly acknowledged that the viability of a more equitable,

comprehensive, and effective decision-making process ought to be explored, particularly as increasing pressures for greater fiscal austerity and efficiency in public education prompts further closures. Many formal and informal conversations and off the record discussions throughout this research process allude to this fact. As one school board official memorably commented, 'it's time to roll out the red carpet, not the red tape'. The penultimate deduction is that the current decision-making framework lacks scope, breadth, and depth. A more flexible, holistic, adaptable, and context appropriate approach that recognizes the particularities of each rural community would not only result in a more amicable process, but would also reflect the important role of schools to overall rural community well-being.

Here, it is important to note that while this study has emerged as largely critical of school boards and their role in the fractious process of accommodation reviews, it is only fair to acknowledge that they do not intentionally work against the best interests of communities and municipalities. As creatures of the province, school boards are effectively handcuffed by the province with respect to both funding and mandate and are therefore subject to provincial directives, including those that call for increased fiscal austerity. Needless to say, the issue of school closures remains staggeringly complex and includes factors such as demographics, economics, politics, and policy; all of which have been further compounded by a history of poor decision-making, as well as a lack of policy foresight, integration, and collaboration. Nearly thirty years of formal academic research and literature on the topic of school closures has reflected this assertion. Meanwhile, there has been little done to explore and ultimately identify what can be done better or completely different in an effort to create a more amicable, equitable, and effective process;

doing would lessen the potential for long-term negative outcomes associated with closing rural school facilities. This expanded thinking needs to include evidence of decision-making frameworks that demonstrate better collaboration, cooperation, and communication between and among all stakeholders.

The research perspective of this study borrows from contemporary discourse on citizen engagement, participation, and the use of narratives to both inform and critique public policy. Critical to this discussion is an emerging consensus for authentic citizen participation and for local knowledge to become more central within the policy community. In particular, from Hampton's (2009) assertion that narrative policy analysis' and planning is an effective tool to determine a way forward in complex policy problems, because otherwise 'rationalist and structured methods are mode dependent on an analyst or facilitator for processing and this may limit the extent to which participants' concerns are addressed and evolve through interaction' (p.241). With this in mind, the following section includes a review of the recommendations, followed by an explanation of how the research has contributed to the academy and profession of planning. In final conclusion, study limitations are readdressed followed by a discussion that highlights a number of areas where further research may be considered.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCOMMODATION REVIEW POLICY

Given that school boards are creatures of the province, and are ‘policy takers rather than policy makers’ (Irwin, 2012), much of the necessary change called for in these recommendations must originate with the province. First and foremost, supporting literature and the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the province should altogether **dismiss the current accommodation review guidelines and framework**. Despite more than thirty years of school closure doctrine, including recent iterations that are grounded in deliberative methods of public participation, the process of closing school facilities remains arduous, contentious, and polarizing. As the evidence presented in this study confirms, it can also reach ineffective, undesirable, and compromising outcomes that may favour one stakeholder over another; or in this particular case, none at all. This study also reflects a growing recognition for a more nuanced decision-making model to be applied. Here, there is a fundamental need to reconsider the context around how school closure and consolidation policies are developed and subsequently implemented as depicted in *Appendix F: Alternative Policy Context for Accommodation Reviews*. This occurs at four conceptual levels: (A) the policy approach; (B) implementation and governance; (C) level of participation; and (D) the output where a more nuanced decision making model reflects good or best practices and the quality of outcome is high. In each of these areas there are a number of recommendations to be made.

First, **the policy approach to school closure decision-making should be grounded in communicative and collaborative planning theory**. As the recommendation states, this includes communicative theory (Healey 1992; 1999), collaborative theory (Innes & Booher, 1999), and consensus building (Innes, 1996). These are processes that have demonstrated success when navigating the realities

of politics, ambiguity, and conflict that exist in complex adaptive systems and wicked and messy problems (Rittel & Weber, 1973). Often, these more nuanced models of decision-making are not only viewed to be fair, but are 'regarded as fair' (Innes & Booher, 1999), while also fostering greater institutional capacity including social and political capital (Innes & Booher, 1999; Healey, 1999). As Irwin and Seasons (2012) note, 'these newer urban planning models are inclusionary in nature, focus on stakeholder engagement and trust building, enhance respect for diverse values and views, identify and advance the public interest, and encourage shared responsibility for decision-making' (p.60). This is in stark contrast to the current accommodation review framework that is grounded in a rational model of evaluation, where quantitatively objective measures trump more subjective community based evidence. Moreover, a rational framework altogether ignores the particularities of place and subverts the community perspective by applying a 'one size fits all' approach grounded in positivist reason and efficiency. The current model does little to recognize, mediate, or negotiate the politically charged nature of these localized processes and this contributes to their fractious nature. Here, there is also a **fundamental need for the policy community to reconsider what counts as legitimate evidence.** At the outset of this research, an argument was made that policy evaluation needs to reconsider not only the outputs of public policy, but how implementation is experienced by those affected. In other words, does the end justify the means? From this perspective, it becomes clear that the accommodation review policy is poorly designed and implemented.

Second, the implementation of school closure policy must occur through a different model of implementation; more specifically, one that is more responsive and aligned with the local

context. Here, the **policy must be contextual, flexible, and people and place based**. Moreover, **implementation must occur through a governance model that reflects adaptability** and with a **focus on fostering community capacity and local engagement**. As a specific example, this study has highlighted the work of Keevers, Treveane, and Sykes (2008) who point to networked governance as a promising alternative to current public administration. This would not only address the strong policy disconnect that exists between citizens and the policy community, but would also be reflective of the more contemporary approaches to policymaking and implementation. These contemporary best practices include consensus building, collaboration, and communicative theory. In particular, a more nuanced governance model would work to build horizontal networks and partnerships (Healey, 1998) occurring across agencies, between different networks, and at different levels of government (Booher & Innes, 2002; Innes, 1996). Even more promising, such an approach would better address those local challenges whose origins lie further 'upstream' (Bhattacharyya, 2004) and where effective community development necessarily requires a policy framework that is more responsive to 'grass root movements' (Cavaye, 2001). Ergo, it would also respond to Bradford (2005; 2008) who argues that a more bottom up, people, and place based approach is necessary to address 'wicked problems', but also addresses a move from government to governance processes. These incorporate ways to 'leverage diverse ideas, coordinate collective resources, and use new tools and techniques to inspire and steer decision-making' (Bradford, 2008, p.2).

As others have observed, school boards are 'hand cuffed' by provincial policies and mandates that limit their ability to be creative, work collaboratively or better coordinate with their

municipal counterparts, as well as other community-based agencies. Therefore, a refined approach also requires greater **inter-ministerial and inter-agency coordination** of both policy development, implementation, and monitoring. School closures, community development, rural community well-being, as well as place making and planning related processes are all inherently connected but generally fall under the purview of different ministerial responsibilities and mandates. For example, while the Ministry of Education continues to close rural schools under the auspice of fiscal responsibility, other governing bodies such as the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, and Rural Affairs are working to establish stronger, more resilient and healthy communities by building on local resources and assets. Furthermore, different ministries are actively seeking more integrated models of service delivery, most notably through establishing community hubs within existing infrastructure, including schools. Such efforts will undoubtedly prove to be ineffective without better policy integration and cross-ministry coordination. Here, there is also an opportunity to implement cost-saving measures through such an approach by sharing resources, space, and knowledge across different agencies and among various institutions. If this does not occur, then the long-term implications must be re-evaluated from a full cost-benefit perspective.

A third component to an alternative policy context requires more **meaningful participation in policy development and implementation through improved consultation**. Respondents of this study noted an ideological disconnect from the accommodation review policy and many expressed that the school closure process was experienced as an imposition by the state. The genesis of accommodation review policy and its purpose were both foreign and alien to the

particularities of place and the community writ large. This leads to two conclusions. First, **rural communities need to be meaningfully consulted during the policy development stage**. Meaningful consultation whereby the community is actively engaged in the policy development process would not only build greater initial trust between local residents and policymakers, but the policy itself would fundamentally better reflect the values and ethos of people and place. Moreover, there appears to be a strong ideological gap due to a lack of provincial public policy that is developed through a 'rural lens'. For example, one municipal official commented that most provincial policy is both developed and serves purpose for 'south of highway 7'. Breaking down this geopolitical divide and conceptually bringing rural communities closer to epicentre of policymaking has two particular benefits: one, it creates greater initial buy-in; and two, it more closely reflects a proactive and contextually appropriate process. Second, **effective policy development and participation require a degree of citizen control of the process and outcome**. Referring to Arnstein's (1969) conceptual ladder, it has been demonstrated that at best, accommodation review processes are often experienced as nonparticipation where 'powerholders [sic] restrict the input of citizens ideas solely to this level, participation remains just a window-dressing ritual' (p.219). Alternatively, a more amicable, effective, and authentic participation process would include the redistribution of power and decision-making authority from policymakers to citizens and among other stakeholders. This necessarily has to occur through negotiation, shared responsibilities, and the widespread sharing of data and knowledge that results in increased stakeholder agency and empowerment (Arnstein, 1969). The net outcome of such a policy model reflects greater citizen control of both the process and outcome (Arnstein, 1969). As Cavaye (2001) also notes, government responsiveness to communities is

often mediated through 'unempowering' (p.120) consultation and a complex system of agency based decision-making. Here, the benefits of more meaningful citizen participation in accommodation review policy also responds to issues around community development, solidarity, empowerment and agency.

Evidence from this study corroborating the polarizing and contentious nature of accommodation review processes underlines previous recommendations made by Lauzon and McCallum (2001) as well as Irwin and Seasons (2012): **there is a need for a policy model that ensures greater transparency and accountability.** This necessarily requires action from both the Ministry of Education and among district school boards at the local level. There are very few findings presented in this study to support that accommodation review processes are transparent or accountable. At the school board level and with respect to transparency, community members frequently cite issues associated with data availability, data discrepancies, unfamiliarity with policy and process, and a lack of meaningful two-way dialogue and communication. From this perspective, neither trustees nor senior administrators were transparent in their actions and specific examples of this were frequently cited by study participants. This proved as detrimental to meaningful consultation, was interpreted as dismissive engagement, and contributed to the political nature of the accommodation review process as a whole. Greater transparency will increase trust between communities, trustees, and school board officials and this will undoubtedly contribute to a more amicable and effective process; however, there are important questions to be raised with respect to school board accountability and decision-making. For instance, who are school board trustees ultimately accountable to and what influences their

decisions? Historically, democratically elected trustees have been accountable to their constituents; now, accommodation review processes have exposed the reality that trustees are more accountable to the senior administration team and by extension the Ministry of Education. For example, as the process became increasingly contentious, participants observe that school board officials often deflected responsibility and instead pointed to the Ministry of Education. In this way, school boards are capable of sidestepping community and municipal criticism by refusing to take ownership of both the process and outcome by ‘passing the buck’ further upstream. For its part, the province has been unwilling to respond to both community and municipal concerns regarding school closure process and outcomes; again, this represents a lack of transparency and accountability on their behalf.

Lastly, **a more equitable, balanced, and fair process requires informed stakeholders who possess strong agency for negotiation and consultation.** The current decision-making framework effectively places the accommodation review committee as the principal liaison between the school board and the community writ large. This is an ad-hoc body consisting of representatives from different stakeholders and backgrounds; but generally speaking, they have no formal training in research, public participation, consultation, negotiation, or conflict management. As many community members address in this study, the accommodation review process can be demanding, time consuming and arduous given that many ARC members often have other obligations such as families and full-time jobs. Meanwhile, school board officials are paid experts who collectively bring the necessary experience required to muddle through the complex and difficult process of reviewing a school for closure. This represents an imbalance of power,

authority, and agency that ultimately preclude a meaningful and constructive process from occurring. This **requires a neutral third party** to guide the process, provide data, and have an appreciation for being fiscally responsible while ensuring overall community well-being.

Here, it is asserted that **municipalities should replace the role of ARCs by working directly with the school board** during an accommodation review process. The benefits of this are three fold. First, it relieves community members from the difficult and burdensome exercise of being directly exposed to the school closure process. In this way, it will level the 'playing field' between school boards and community members by enabling municipalities to exercise strong agency skills and ability. Second, a formal role for municipal governments in accommodation reviews would satisfy the large number of municipal leaders and officials who have been vocal in their support for a more central role in these decisions. Moreover, communities often immediately turn to municipal governments for assistance and support during accommodation reviews, although the municipal role remains 'outside' of the formal process. This seems to be an inefficient and ineffective model, when instead school board officials could work directly with their municipal counter parts and vice versa. Third, if the municipality assumes responsibility for negotiating on behalf of the community, a more robust and direct relationship established between the municipality and school boards is possible. Here, there is a formal role for municipal planners to bring their expertise in public participation, consensus building, communication, collaboration, negotiation, as well as skills and tools. In this way, municipal governments are conceptually more flexible and adaptable in seeking creative solutions to complex problems. Notwithstanding, such

a process model will also increase the potential for greater cooperation and may lead to creative opportunities being whole-heartedly explored and ultimately adopted.

6.2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

There are a number of ways through which immediate action can be taken to improve the current decision-making framework. First, **the province should mandate that there must be no less than two schools considered for review at the same time in rural areas.** As this case study illustrates, evaluating a community's one and only school is not only unfair, but it also results in strong potential for negative outcomes associated with school closures to be exacerbated. This consideration is heightened in more remote communities where there is only one remaining public institution. In these areas, schools should be better supported through increased funding from the province while school boards at the local level need to implement joint-use models to achieve greater fiscal stability. Furthermore, and in reflection of a more nuanced decision-making framework as described previously, a **pilot project should be established in Southwestern Ontario with direct involvement and collaboration from provincial planning bodies and municipal governments.** This project should be funded by the Ministry of Education and other pertinent ministries and **be reflective of evidence based research and best practices.** The Ministry of Education has released potential modifications to the current decision-making framework based on consultations with school boards and municipalities. There is little evidence presented in these proposed changes to suggest that the process will be improved. Instead, the Ministry should explore and test an entirely different process that is grounded in a more collaborative, communicative and flexible approach. As there is an increased focus and push for fiscal austerity,

it is a critical time to determine an alternative process that satisfies all stakeholders and produces a more equitable, fair, and balanced outcome.

Next, there is strong evidence to suggest that school boards need to communicate better and more effectively with both communities and municipalities. **The province should mandate consultation and collaboration with the local municipality and community no less than five years prior to beginning a review process.** Many participants in this study observe that the accommodation review caught both the community and municipality off-guard. School boards are required to develop capital plans on a regular basis and the wider dissemination of this data would permit stakeholders enough time to evaluate potential solutions and alternatives. Here, **the professional relationship between school board officials and their municipal counterparts should be formalized.** Furthermore, a five-year horizon would not only allow communities to ‘digest’ that their local school may be put under review, but also enable them to take proactive measures to increase financial support of the school, including but not limited to such options as greater community use of the facility. Finally, such a strategy should require that **initial consultation be mandated to include a broad range of local agencies and associations.** For example, this might include community and social services, public health, and local economic development, among others. School closures and consolidations often occur too late for other organizations to consider how the school could be utilized in an alternative way to deliver a variety of programs or services. Again, permitting more time for municipalities, communities, and businesses to work collaboratively with the school board is a crucial consideration in seeking a better solution.

Lastly, the most alarming fact in the school closure debate is a fundamental lack of data on the outcomes and implications associated with permanently closing schools. The bottom-line is that researchers and policymakers simply do not know if closing schools actually realizes true cost savings, while the short and long-term outcomes and implications of these decisions remain all together unknown. In other words, rural schools continue to be closed in the absence of hard and verifiable evidence. Therefore: **The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with municipal associations and professional planning bodies, should commission a long-term study on the affects and effects of closing schools in rural communities.** This includes exploring creative and integrative ways for school boards and other agencies or organizations in rural areas to work together; but also evaluate outcomes on the environmental, social, physical, and cultural well-being of the surrounding community. This calls for a **holistic model of rural community well-being to be evaluated when considering schools for closure.** Such a study needs to determine if there is a causal relationship between closing rural schools and exacerbating changes to the structural and functional processes occurring within the surrounding communities. Nonetheless, there is still a need to be fiscally responsible in an era of austerity and mounting provincial deficit. Once again, any solution needs to reflect this imperative; but equally important, retain the non-pedagogical role of schools as place-makers, community builders, and catalysts of institutional capital and capacity that are critical to community development and resilience. In the meantime, **the province absolve school boards from owning, operating, and maintaining schools, and instead transfer ownership to local municipalities.** This addresses a number of concerns, not the least of which is the desire of many school boards to focus on education delivery and not property management and ownership.

6.3 STUDY LIMITATIONS IN REFLECTION

6.3.1 STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study is designed as a single instrumental case study, where Stake (2003) notes ‘the phenomenon of interest observable in the case represents the phenomenon writ large’ (p.152).

Therefore, several measures were taken to ensure that the research was rigorously evaluated and tested, including: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

Nonetheless, challenges associated with case selection and participant recruitment resulted in the findings of this study having a number of limitations. First, the sample size was relatively restricted at only seven participants. Interviewing a greater number of community members and a broader range of stakeholders would have been more rigorous and robust, but ultimately this proved to be challenging due to ethical considerations and participant recruitment. Upon review, this may be attributed to researcher error; an alternative justification is that the difficult and trying experience of the accommodation review process itself may have impacted the willingness of potential participants to take part in this research. In other words, many community members expressed the ‘human factor’ or the personal impact that the process had on the individual and their family. A fair conclusion from this would be that others might have been reluctant to participate since the process and experience was now behind them.

A second limitation of this study is its scope and the subsequent restricted number of cases and perspectives that are evaluated. This study is limited to one case, whereas a multiple cross case

analysis would have proven to be more rigorous and comprehensive. Moreover, members of the administration team and trustees from Bluewater DSB were not interviewed directly. This is justified for two reasons. First, there are very restrictive ethical considerations when interviewing employees of a school board. Both the University of Waterloo and school boards impose certain restrictions and ethical procedures that constrain or render the research process as exhaustive, if not prohibitive. Second, existing literature has been consistent in finding that school boards are often reluctant to discuss accommodation reviews outside of the formal process. Given their policy relationship with the province, this is not unexpected. A third and final limitation to be considered is the use of a single research methodology. A viable and worthy alternative that was initially explored but ultimately dismissed was a mixed-methods approach. Prior to the case study being conducted, it was determined that existing foundational evidence on this issue, particularly within the context of rural Ontario, was insubstantial. Therefore, it would have been difficult to develop a quantitative research program to complement the qualitative findings; particularly in regards to the focus and objectives of this study. These various limitations were previously reviewed and detailed in Chapter Three. It is therefore asserted that the limitations of this study do not impede the quality or veracity of the findings; however, they do present a number of promising areas where further research is to be considered.

6.3.2 IN REFLECTION

Completing a study of this nature that includes choosing a methodology and implementing a self-designed research program provides an interesting opportunity to reflect on the learning process as a whole. First, a more desirable research design would have included a second

component to the overall study program in the form of quantitative research. Whether one case or multiple cases were ultimately investigated, it has become clear that these findings could have been utilized to construct a survey investigating the broader community and municipal perspective on rural school closures. Having established this, a more appropriate study design would be to disseminate such a survey across multiple jurisdictions and in the end, expand the scope of the study to an entire region such as rural Southwestern Ontario as a whole. This would not only have produced more rigorous and extensive findings, but would have also proved to be a more significant contribution to the study of accommodation reviews, school closures, and rural development. A second observation stemming from this experience is the shortcoming of using a single case study, and the subsequent difficult nature of recruiting study participants. This was an aspect of the study that was ultimately underestimated and significantly contributed to the limited nature of the findings presented. Again, an alternative research approach would have included measures to inherently accommodate for this unforeseen circumstance, such as those described above. In all, these lessons learned are transferable to work beyond academics. This includes the importance of time management, better and more comprehensive preparation, the ability to work laterally, establishing a strong research network, and referring to methods of research design from other disciplines and practices.

6.4 CONTRIBUTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

6.4.1 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY OF PLANNING

This study has highlighted several important contributions to the planning research community. First and foremost, it has addressed a significant gap in existing literature and research regarding the explicit relationship between schools, community planning, and rural development. Though there is a growing awareness and understanding that acknowledges schools as important community builders, place makers, and catalysts for rural vitality, this has largely been absent from formal planning discourse. This should be of particular interest for study in areas of rural planning since there is strong potential for schools to counterbalance the negative outcomes associated with the restructuring of rural communities. The school closure process itself has been described as a ‘wicked and messy’ problem in a most classic and fundamental sense (Rittel & Webber, 1969); but it is asserted that a more articulated approach to studying school closures from the academy of planning may better elucidate this emerging topic of interest and concern. This is asserted because contemporary societal and environmental challenges are increasingly complex, interconnected, and rapidly changing. Equally important, it is apparent that the more traditional models of decision-making, such as the RCM, are incapable of adequately addressing such issues. In this case study, it has been demonstrated that the accommodation review guidelines, as a rational based policy intervention, may be exacerbating the structural and process related changes that are found within rural communities across Ontario. Instead, it is proposed that a more complex decision-making framework will offer an alternative avenue to evaluate ‘wicked and messy’ challenges from a more theory-driven framework for thinking about, understanding, and influencing the dynamics of complex systems. This represents an opportunity to evaluate these decisions and outcomes through interdisciplinary research and knowledge. It is also an area where models that include heuristics,

communication, and collaboration have been demonstrated to be very effective and successful. This lends itself well to more contemporary theories of planning policy and process. For instance, this study has explored the shortcomings of simple cause and effect decision-making and in doing so, has offered a preliminary analysis of associated outcomes. At the same time, it has also demonstrated that a more nuanced and complete evaluation model is necessary.

A further contribution from this research concerns a need for more focus on the rural context. It has become obvious that urban regions are a locus for much of the Canadian population, economic stimulus, cultural activity, and political action. To a large extent, planning policy, processes, and research therefore necessarily focus on these places; but rural regions continue to be of immeasurable value to all Canadians in many important ways. Simply put, they contribute to a high quality of living for everyone, and should be valued as such. Alarming, this study has not only highlighted a dearth of research on rural school closures, but also a paucity of rural focused inquiry from the academy of planning as a whole. While many urban regions continue to grow by all measures, rural regions are seemingly in decline by comparison. This presents a new set of challenges to the academy, as we must continue to explore and learn our new role in no growth or declining environs. Compounding this challenge are the consequences of neoliberal politics and subsequent policies that are hollowing out rural communities. The net outcome of this ultimately tasks planners to do more with less in an effort to create high quality places for people to live, work, and play. To this extent, the topic of rural school closures presents an ideal opportunity to explore how a more nuanced decision-making model may work to counterbalance the general erosion of the rural landscape. More specifically, the academy might consider how collaborative planning (Booher & Innes, 2002; Healey, 1998) or consensus

building (Booher & Innes, 1999), might work to foster community development, social capacity, and ultimately ensure the long-term well-being of rural places.

6.4.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PROFESSION OF PLANNING

Further contribution from this research concerns the profession of planning and those 'on the ground', where the connection between theory and practice is not always tangible. The preceding study has documented how school closures are fractious, contentious, and become an arena for political action and bitter contestation. Therefore, a more nuanced model of public participation and consultation has been called for. At the same time, it has been suggested that these decisions have critical consequences to the local community; but are also rendered without meaningful collaboration and in isolation from other stakeholders. The challenge for the profession of planning is to be creative and *progressive* in becoming a part of this discussion. In the particular case of this study, what began as a consultation process regarding a potential school closure instead morphed into a negotiation about the future of a rural community. Lost in the debate was a sound decision-making process that planners are capable of guiding; instead, it was replaced by politics, unequal power relations, and dismissive participation.

The findings presented have also demonstrated that rural municipalities need to work more closely and collaboratively with their local school boards, and vice versa. This means formalizing a relationship between municipal departments and their counterparts at other administrative and institutional bodies, including school boards. In this way, proactive measures may produce more creative and robust solutions to ensure the long-term resilience and vitality of rural

communities and their schools. Interestingly, many of the processes that precipitate school closures are the very same that currently challenge rural municipalities. Here, there may be an opportunity for mutual reciprocity if the two governing bodies work together. At the very least, alternatives can be explored to better support those schools that are facing an uncertain future. Options may include but are not limited to an Integrated Service Delivery Model, a joint use facility, or the implementation of applicable planning policy, tools, and instruments. Moreover, planners have become well-versed at balancing community aspirations with the fiscal realities of municipal governments. In this way, the profession has learned to be accountable, but has also come to understand how to navigate the realities of politics and ambiguity that exist within complex decision-making. The very nature of the planning practice necessitates being well-versed in participatory policy-making and communicative skills. Here too, perhaps there is an opportunity to lend expertise in this regard. Nonetheless, it is most important that planners acquire a greater awareness and understanding of the school closure issue as a whole. Planners should continue to keep their finger on the pulse and stay in touch with their communities. Increasing fiscal austerity will potentially result in more school closures; rural communities will require both the hard and soft skills that the profession has come to be respected for in order to more effectively navigate these difficult processes. However, rural planning practitioners will undoubtedly find this challenging because of the narrow and unintegrated nature of 'siloes' provincial policy. Here, there is a mutual obligation for municipal and school board planners to establish an alternative path forward that is locally appropriate and effective, but one that is also most likely *informal*.

6.4.3 CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Both the literature review and research presented in this study highlight a number of areas where further investigation on the subject of rural school closures is required. Most concerning is that these decisions are, and will continue to be, rendered without due diligence or understanding of the full implications and outcomes when a school is permanently closed. As Lauzon and Leahy (2001) conclude 'While the evidence is not great, the uncertainty is and we simply do not know what happens to rural communities when we close their schools' (p. 14). More than a decade later, this remains true while there is a paucity of Canadian based evidence on this subject. Therefore, the first consideration may be intuitive, but nonetheless imperative:

There is an urgent need for robust and interdisciplinary research on both the implications and outcomes of rural school closures in Ontario, and to a larger extent, Canada.

More specifically, further study is required to establish a foundational knowledge base. A logical starting point would be to implement a rigorous and holistic research program. To begin, one might consider that missing from the Canadian discourse on school closure study is geographic and spatial data. An important but yet unanswered question then follows:

Where are rural school closures occurring in Ontario?

Using comparative analysis, the temporal geography of rural school closures would contribute to this field of study by enhancing our knowledge of what precipitates these decisions. Mapping and establishing patterns through geographic analysis would also depict the number and rate of closures across different regions and areas. If this outcome is related to demographic or economic processes, one might consider examining any related planning activity occurring in these same places. More practically, this may assist local planners and municipalities to be more proactive in supporting local schools. A further direction for research might consider how

planners can better support rural communities and schools, particularly in no growth or shrinking environs. For this to occur, there must first be a more robust argument made that closing schools fundamentally challenges rural planning processes and objectives.

As noted previously, a limitation of this study was its scope, data sample size, and number of cases examined. An interesting and worthy research question should therefore concern the school closure process as experienced by various communities across different contexts. Here, a mixed method approach with a quantitative focus proves to be a promising methodology. This would contribute to a more robust and comprehensive understanding of school closure processes and outcomes, while also contributing to the development of a more appropriate and contextual place based and people based policy model. A research question in this regard might read:

What are the experiences and outcomes of accommodation review processes in rural and small town Ontario communities?

This study has also highlighted a theoretical relationship between the restructuring of rural Ontario and an increase in the number and rate of rural school closures. Here, there are parallels between subsequent consequences to municipal governments and district school boards, such as increased size of jurisdictions, conducting government as a 'business', the dramatic rationalization of resources, and most of all, a top-down policy approach that is largely removed from the particularities of place. However, the findings from this study are largely inconclusive in reaching a substantive causality in this regard, but it is an area that would benefit from further investigation. As an extension to this potential research direction, it would also be worthy to

survey rural municipalities, with a specific focus on the departments of planning and economic development. A potential question in this regard might be:

In what ways are municipal planners and planning departments responding to rural school closures?

A significant impediment to this discussion is a lack of evidence-based research on the long-term outcomes and implications resulting from rural school closures. For example, there is little capacity for the current decision-making model to assess values outside of fiscal considerations, such as a rural school's role in building or sustaining social capacity, how it contributes to place making, its ability to both sustain community development, and revitalize communities in decline. Therefore, a longitudinal study would be necessary to evaluate these outcomes:

What are the long-term implications and outcomes of rural school closures to the surrounding community?

Most fundamentally, this study has suggested that a more nuanced and contextual decision-making process be adapted for accommodation reviews in rural and small town communities. A tenet of this proposition is that it would better support and strengthen rural schools, and at the same time, be a catalyst for community resilience and vitality against the detrimental impacts of changing demographic and economic structures. Communicative and collaborative-based approaches to policy have had success when planning in similar complex adaptive systems. Such a model has been conceptually established for the school closure decision-making process in this study, but constructive dialogue and meaningful conversation between various stakeholders and provincial ministries must first take place. Here, this area of study requires further research.

WORKS CITED

- Accommodation Review Committee. (2013). *Accommodation Review Committee Final Report*. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Andres, S. J. (2013). *Connecting School Closures and Community Planning Understanding the policy and process of Accommodation Review in Southwest Ontario*. University of Waterloo.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Autti, Outi & Hyry-Beihammer, E. K. (2014). School Closures in Rural Finnish Communities. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 29(1), 1–17. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/29-1.pdf>
- Barakat, B. F. (2014). A “Recipe for Depopulation”? School Closures and Local Population Decline in Saxony. *Population Space and Place*, 1–4.
- Barriball, K. L., & While, a. (1994). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: a discussion paper. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19(2), 328–335. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2648.ep8535505>
- Basu, R. (2004a). A Flyvbjergian perspective on public elementary school closures in Toronto: A question of “rationality” or “power”? *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 22(3), 423–451. <http://doi.org/10.1068/c11r>
- Basu, R. (2004b). The rationalization of neoliberalism in Ontario’s public education system, 1995–2000. *Geoforum*, 35(5), 621–634. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.03.003>
- Basu, R. (2007). Negotiating acts of citizenship in an era of neoliberal reform: The game of school closures. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 31(1), 109–127. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00709.x>
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559.

- Bernard, K. (2013, November 19). Fighting to Keep Derby Open. *Bayshore Broadcasting*. Owen Sound, Ontario.
- Bhattacharyya, J. (2004). Theorizing Community Development. *Journal of the Community Development and Society*, 34(2), 5–34. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15575330409490110>
- Bierbaum, B. A. H., Vincent, J. M., & Tate, E. (2008). Building Schools and Community. *Race, Poverty and the Environment*, 15(1), 79–82. Retrieved from http://www.urbanhabitat.org/files/15.Bierbaum.et_al_.pdf
- Bondi, L. (1987). School closures and local politics: the negotiation of primary school rationalization in Manchester. *Political Geography Quarterly*, 6(3), 203–224. [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0260-9827\(87\)80001-0](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0260-9827(87)80001-0)
- Booher, D. E., & Innes, J. E. (2002). Network Power in Collaborative Planning. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 21, 221–236.
- Bradford, N. (2005). *Place-based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban and Community Agenda for Canada*. Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Bradford, N. (2008). *Canadian Social Policy in the 2000s: Bringing Place In*. Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Bringer, J. D., Johnston, L. H., & Brackenridge, C. H. (2006). Maximising transparency in a doctoral thesis: The complexities of writing about the use of QSR*NVIVO within a grounded theory study, 18(3), 245–266. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X06287602>
- Bushrod, G. (1999). *School closure and its impact on community*. Gongaza University.
- BWDSB. (2012). *Student Accommodation Reviews for Consideration in 2012 - 2013*. Owen Sound, Ontario. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Director/Board_Package/Archives/
- BWDSB. (2013). *Accommodation Review Process Derby Public School Administrative Council Final Report*. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/B-1-c Admin Council DER Report Final June 4 2013.pdf
- Caldwell, W. (2005). Rural Planning in Canada. *Plan Canada*, 45(3), 25–27.

- Cavaye, J. (2001). Rural Community Development – New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas. *The Journal of Regional Analysis & Policy*, 31(2), 109–124.
- Community Member 1. (2014). Community Informant Interview.
- Community Member 2. (2014). Community Informant Interview.
- Community Member 3. (2014). Community Informant Interview.
- Community Member 4. (2014). Community Informant Interview.
- Community Member 5. (2014). Community Informant Interview.
- Community Schools Alliance. (2015). Community Schools Alliance.
- Corbett, M., & Mulcahy, D. (2006). *Education on a human scale: Small rural schools in a modern context*.
- Coyne, I. T. (1997). Sampling in qualitative research. Purposeful and theoretical sampling; merging or clear boundaries? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26(3), 623–630.
<http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-25-00999.x>
- Cresswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design : Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cresswell, J. W., Plano-Clark, V. L., Gutmann, M. L., & Hanson, W. E. (2003). An Expanded Typology for Calissifying Mixed Methods Research Into Designs. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* (1st Editio, pp. 209–240). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/19291_Chapter_7.pdf
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano-Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Derby PS. (2015). Derby Public School, Bluewater District School Board.

- DeYoung, A. J., & Howley, C. B. (1990). The political economy of rural school consolidation. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 67(4), 63–89. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01619569009538701>
- Divinski, J. (2013, October 2). Fight for Derby Continues. *Bayshore Broadcasting*. Owen Sound, Ontario. Retrieved from http://www.bayshorebroadcasting.ca/news_item.php?NewsID=60584
- Documentation 1. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 10. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 11. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 12. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 13. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 14. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 15. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 16. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 17. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 19. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page
- Documentation 2. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 20. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 3. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 4. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 5. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 6. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 7. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 8. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 9. (2013). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Documentation 18. (2012). Written Correspondence to the Accommodation Review Committee. Retrieved from https://www.bwdsb.on.ca/Business/schl_accom/Derby/Derby Home Page

Doern, G. B., & Prince, M. J. P. (1989). Political Administration Closures : Administrators , Trustees Community Groups. *Canadian Public Policy*, 15(4), 450–469.

Downey, J. (2003). *Strengthening Education in Rural and Northern Ontario: Report of Rural Education Strategy*.

Drummond, D. (2012). *Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services. Commission On The Reform of Ontario's Public Services*. Retrieved from <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&btnG=Search&q=intitle:Commission+on+the+Reform+of+Ontario's+Public+Services#7>

- Dunn, S. (2013, October 15). Derby Public School gets five-year reprieve. *Owen Sound Sun Times*. Owen Sound, Ontario.
- Education, O. M. of. (2015). 2015-16 Education Funding Consultation Guide. Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Egelund, N., & Laustsen, H. (2006). School Closure: What are the consequences for the local society? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(4), 429–439.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/00313830600823787>
- Epstein, D., Farina, C., & Heidt, J. (2014). The value of words: Narrative as evidence in policy making. *Evidence and Policy*, 10(2), 243–258.
<http://doi.org/10.1332/174426514X13990325021128>
- Falk, I., & Kilpatrick, S. (2000). What is Social Capital? A Study of Interaction in a Rural Community. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(1), 87–110. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00133>
- Fischer, F. (2003). *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fredua-Kwarteng, E. (2005). School Closures in Ontario: Who has the Final Say? *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, (46), 1–26.
- Fuller, W. (1982). *The Old Country School* (First Edit). University of Chicago Press.
- Gibbert, M., Ruigrok, W., & Wicki, B. (2008). What Passes as a Rigorous Case Study? *Strategic Management Journal*, 29, 1465–1474. <http://doi.org/10.1002/smj>
- Golem, M. (2013, June 5). Board staff reiterates suggestion Derby School be closed. *Owen Sound Sun Times*. Owen Sound, Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.owensoundsuntimes.com/2013/06/05/board-staff-reiterates-suggestion-derby-school-be-closed>
- Group, D. E. W. (2009). *Planning and Possibilities: The Report of The Declining Enrolment Working Group*. Retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca
- Hampton, G. (2009). Narrative policy analysis and integration of public involvement in decision making. *Policy Sciences*, 42(3), 227–242.

- Hanifan, L. J. (1916). American Academy of Political and Social Science The Rural School Community Center. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 67, 130–138.
- Hargreaves, L. M. (2009). Respect and responsibility: Review of research on small rural schools in England. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 117–128.
<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.02.004>
- Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. (2009). Rural School Leadership for Collaborative Community Development. *The Rural Educator*, 30(3), 4–9.
- Healey, P. (1998). Collaborative planning stakeholder in. *The Town Planning Review*, 69(1), 1–21.
- Healey, P. (1999). Institutional Analysis, Communicative Planning, and Shaping Places. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 19(2), 111–121.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X9901900201>
- Henry, B. (2012, June 20). Parents plead for Derby. *Owen Sound Sun Times*. Owen Sound, Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.owensoundsuntimes.com/2012/06/20/parents-plead-for-derby>
- Hodge, G., & Gordon, D. LA. (2008). *Planning Canadian Communities* (5th ed.). Toronto, ON: Thomson Nelson.
- Innes, J. E. (1996). Planning through consensus building. A new view of the comprehensive Planning Ideal. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 62(4), 460–472.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/01944369608975712>
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (1999). Concensus Building and Complex Adaptive Systems: A Framework for Evaluating Collaborative Planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 65(4), 412–423. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s00187-009-0076-5>
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2004). Reframing public participation: strategies for the 21st century. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 5(4), 419–436.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/1464935042000293170>
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2015). A turning point for planning theory? Overcoming dividing discourses. *Planning Theory*, 14(2), 195–213. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1473095213519356>

- Irwin, B. (2012). *School closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting values?* The University of Western Ontario.
- Irwin, B., & Seasons, M. (2012). School closure decision-making processes: Problems and prospects. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 21(2), 45–67.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed Methods Research : A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 12–46.
- Kearns, R. a., Lewis, N., McCreanor, T., & Witten, K. (2009). “The status quo is not an option”: Community impacts of school closure in South Taranaki, New Zealand. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(1), 131–140. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2008.08.002>
- Keevers, L., Treleaven, L., & Sykes, C. (2008). Partnership and participation: Contradictions and tensions in the social policy space. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 43(3), 459–477.
- Lauzon, A., & Leahy, D. (2000). *Rural Schools and Education Reform: Should We Keep Rural Schools Open? A Review of the Literature*. Guelph, ON. Retrieved from <http://www.ofa.on.ca/issues/additional-information/Lauzon-should-we-keep-rural-schools-open>
- Lauzon, A., & McCallum, M. (2001). *Negotiating Rural Futures: Communities During a Period of School Consolidation*. Guelph, ON.
- Lucas, B. G. (1982). School closure and community protest. *McGill Journal of Education*, XVII(3), 251–262.
- Lyson, T. A. (2002). What does a school mean to a community? Assessing the social and economic benefits of schools to rural villages in New York. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 17(3), 131–137.
- Mackenzie, H. (2007). *Missing the Mark: How Ontario’s education funding formula is shortchanging students*. Ottawa.
- Mackenzie, H. (2015). *Harris-era Hangovers*.
- Magis, K. (2010). Community Resilience: An Indicator of Social Sustainability. *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal*, 23(5), 401–416. <http://doi.org/10.1080/08941920903305674>

- Mathis, W. J. (2003). *Equity and Adequacy Challenges in Rural Schools and Communities*.
- McKibben, J. N. (1996). The impact of policy changes on forecasting for school districts. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 15(December 1996), 527–536.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (2nd Editio). United States of America: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, B. A. (1993). Rural distress and survival: the school and the importance of “community.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 9(2), 84–103.
- Miller, B. A. (1995). *The Role of Rural Schools in Community Development: Policy Issues and Implications*. Washington, DC.
- Ministry of Education. (2006). Ministry of Education Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines. Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education. (2009). Pupil Accomodation Review Guideline (Revised June 2009). Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education. (2014). *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) Consultations*. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Ministry-of-Education-consultation-document-on-Pupil-Accommodation-Review-Guidelines.pdf>
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. 2014 Provincial Policy Statement (2014). Ontario Government. Retrieved from <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=10463>
- Morgulis, L. (2015). *School Closures and a Changing Ontario*. Durham, Ontario.
- Municipal Official 1. (2014). Municipal Official Interview.
- Municipal Official 2. (2014). Municipal Official Interview.
- Nachtigal, P. M. (1994). Rural Schools, Rural Communities: An Alternative View of the Future. In *Paper presented at the International Rural Education Conference* (p. 8). Townsville, Australia.

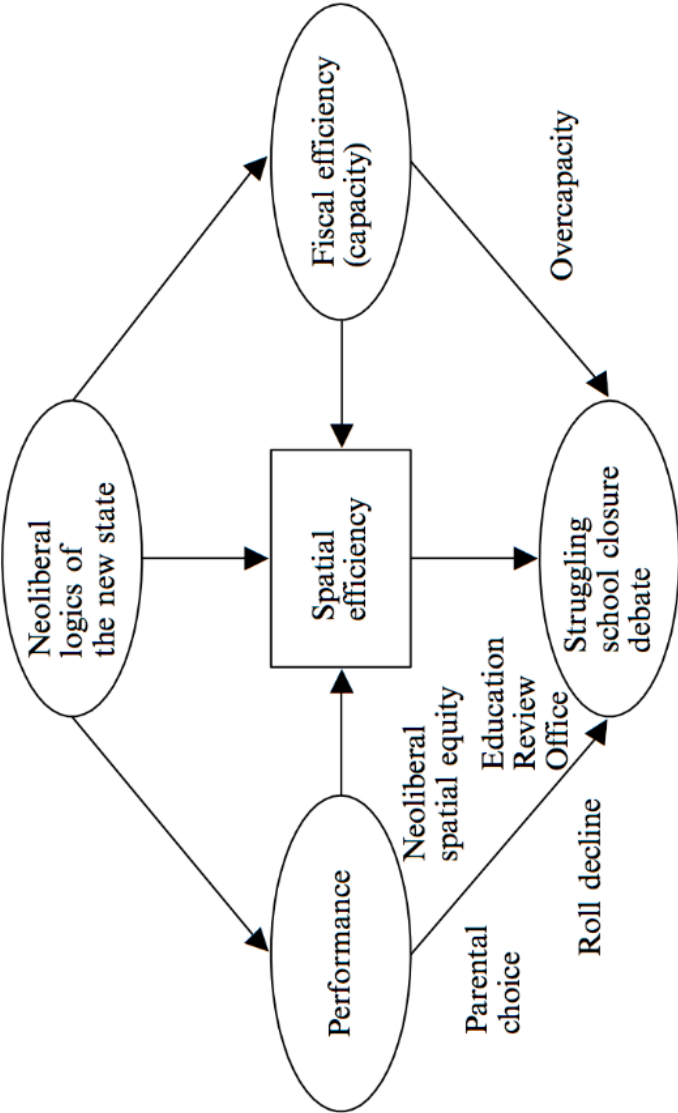
- Office of the Premier. (2015). Premier Wynne Appoints Community Hubs Advisory Group, p. 1. Retrieved from <http://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2015/04/premier-wynne-appoints-community-hubs-advisory-group.html>
- Oncescu, J. (2013). *The Impact of a School's Closure on Rural Community Resident's Lives*. University of Ottawa. Retrieved from http://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/24094/1/Oncescu_Jacquelyn_2013_Thesis.pdf
- Oncescu, J. (2014a). Creating Constraints to Community Resiliency : The Event of a Rural School's Closure. *The Oline Journal of Rural Research and Policy*, 9(2), 1–30.
- Oncescu, J. (2014b). The impact of a rural school's closure on community resiliency. *Leisure/Loisir*, 38(1), 35–52. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2014.932969>
- Oncescu, J., & Giles, A. (2014). Rebuilding a Sense of Community through Reconnection: The Impact of a Rural School's Closure on Individuals without School-Aged Children. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(3), 295–318.
- Ontario Professional Planners Institute. (2012). *A Discussion Paper on Rural Policy*.
- Ontario Regional Planning Commissioners of. (2014). Re: Closing of Schools and Provincial Funding Formula.
- Palys, T. (2008). Purposive Sampling. In *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2nd Editio, pp. 697–698). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* (4th Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- People for Education. (2009). *School Closings And Declining Enrolment in Ontario*. Toronto, ON.
- Phipps, A. G. (1993). An institutional analysis of school closures in Saskatoon and Windsor. *Environment and Planning*, 25, 1607–1626.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life. *The American Prospect*, 13, 35–42.

- Ramsey, D., & Smit, B. (2002). Rural Community Well-Being: models and applications to changes in the tobacco-belt in Ontario, Canada. *Geoforum*, 33(3), 367–384.
[http://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(02\)00008-8](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(02)00008-8)
- Reynolds, D. R. (1992). *Rural School Consolidation in Early Twentieth Century Iowa: Lessons for the Early Twenty-First Century*.
- Rist, R. C. (2000). Influencing the policy process with qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd Editio, pp. 1001–1017). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (1st Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155–169.
- Roe, E. (1994). *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice*. United States: Duke University Press.
- Rural Ontario Municipal Association. (2011). *A Voice for Rural and Northern Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://www.roma.on.ca/ROMA-Docs/Reports/2011AVoiceforRuralNorthernOntario2011Oct.aspx>
- Samson, W. W. (1997). *School Closure and Consolidation in Two Small Rural Communities in Newfoundland*. Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Sattler, P. (2012). Education Governance Reform in Ontario: Neoliberalism in Context. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 1(128), 1.
- Sauve, L. M. (2014). *An Investigation into a Role for Municipal Planners in Decisions Pertaining to the Future of Surplus Schools*. Ryerson University.
- Simons, H. (2009). *Case Study Research in Practice* (1st Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Slee, B., & Miller, D. (2015). School Closures as a Driver of Rural Decline in Scotland: A Problem in Pursuit of Some Evidence? *Scottish Geographical Journal*, (May 2015), 1–20.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2014.988288>

- Stake, R. E. (2000). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd Ed., pp. 435–454). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R. E. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd Editio, pp. 134–164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R. E. (2008). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (4th Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (2nd Editio). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, A. (2001). *The Politics of Educational Reform in Alberta*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Valencia, R. R. (1984). *School Closures and Policy Issues* (No. 84-C3). Stanford, CA.
- Valencia, R. R. (1985). Public School Closures and Policy Issues: Financial and Social Implications. *Public Budgeting & Finance*, (Spring), 43–53.
- Villeneuve, M. (2013, September 19). Parents Rally For Derby School. *Bayshore Broadcasting*. Owen Sound, Ontario.
- Vincent, J. M. (2006). Public Schools as Public Infrastructure: Roles for Planning Researchers. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 25, 433–437.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X06288092>
- Vincent, J. M. (2014). Joint Use of Public Schools : A Framework for Promoting Healthy Communities. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 34(2), 153–168.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X13513615>
- Vincent, J. M., & Filardo, M. W. (2008). *Linking School Construction Investments to Equity, Smart Growth, and Healthy Communities*. Berkeley, CA. Retrieved from http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/reports/Vincent_Filardo_2008_Linking_School_Construction_Jun2008.pdf
- Weiss, J. D. (2004). *Public Schools and Economic Development: What the Research Shows*.

- Whittemore, R., Chase, S. K., & Mandle, C. L. (2001). Validity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research, 11*(4), 522–537. <http://doi.org/10.1177/104973201129119299>
- Witten, K., Kearns, R., Lewis, N., Coster, H., & McCreanor, T. (2003). Educational restructuring from a community viewpoint: A case study of school closure from Invercargill, New Zealand. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 21*(2), 203–223. <http://doi.org/10.1068/c05r>
- Witten, K., McCreanor, T., Kearns, R., & Ramasubramanian, L. (2001). The impacts of a school closure on neighbourhood social cohesion : narratives from Invercargill , New Zealand, 7, 307–317.
- Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, and Policy. *World Bank Research Observer, 15*, No. 2(August), 225–249. <http://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225>
- Wright, K. A. (2007). Reenergizing Small Communities: A Vital Role for Rural Schools. *The Educational Forum, 71*(4), 345–360. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00131720709335024>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: design and methods* (4th Editio). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

APPENDIX A: HOLLOWED OUT 'POST-WELFARE' STATE



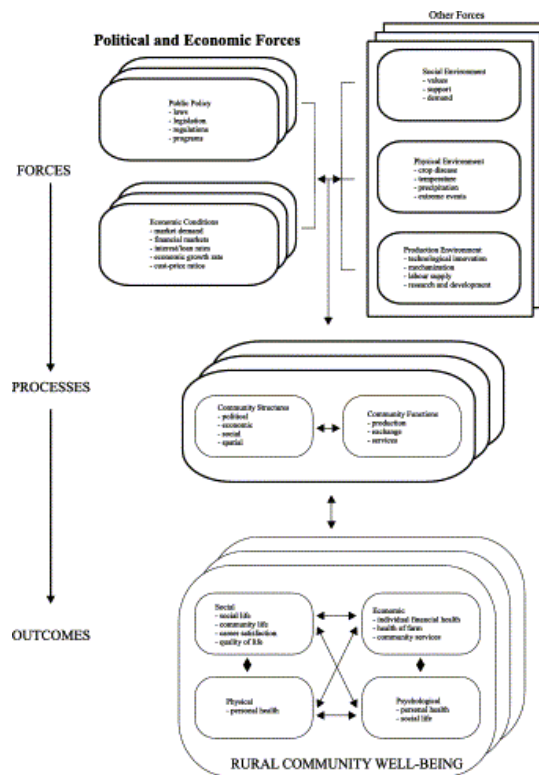
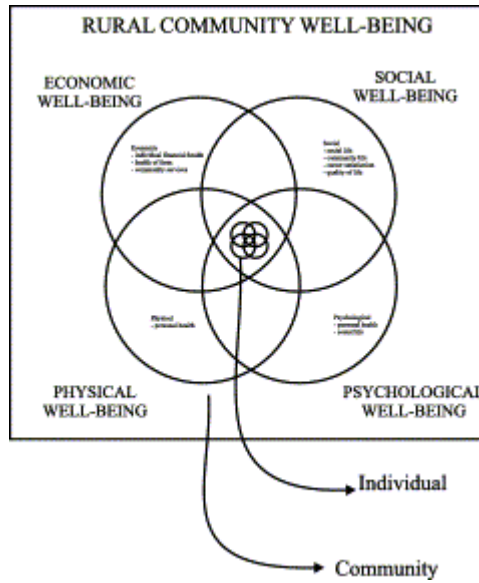
Witten et al., 2001

APPENDIX B: PUPIL ACCOMMODATION REVIEW GUIDELINE VALUES

ARC Value Consideration	Select Examples
Value to the Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning environment at the school; • Student outcomes at the school; • Course and program offerings; • Extracurricular activities and extent of student participation; • Accessibility of the school for students with disabilities; • Proximity of the school to students/length of bus ride to school.
Value to the School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student outcomes at the school; • Course and program offerings; • Availability of specialized teaching spaces; • Value of the school if it is the only school within the community; • Fiscal and operational factors.
Value to the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility for community use; • Program offerings at the school that serve both students and community members; • School grounds as green space and/or available for recreational use; • School as partner in other government initiatives in the community; • Value of the school if it is only within the community.
Value to the Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School as a local employer; • Availability of cooperative education; • Availability of training opportunities or partnerships with business; • Attracts or retains families in the community; • Value of the school if it is the only school within the community.

Adapted From: Ministry of Education, 2009

APPENDIX C: MODELS OF RURAL COMMUNITY



Ramsey and Smit, 2002

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH INVITATION AND STUDY QUESTIONS

The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in important research examining school closure processes and outcomes in rural and small towns of Southwestern Ontario. Together with Dr. Mark Seasons FCIP RPP, I am in the process of collecting data for a Masters thesis on this topical issue. My research is titled '*A Community Based Perspective on Accommodation Reviews: The Rural and Small Town Experience*'.

School closures and the associated Accommodation Review process have emerged as a contentious and critical issue for many rural Ontario communities. To better understand this process in a rural and small town context, this project is eliciting participation from three groups of stakeholders: community members, municipal officials, and school board officials. The overall objective is to determine if the current accommodation review guidelines and associated criteria are appropriate for rural and small town communities.

Voluntary participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes, during which a series of questions will be asked. The conversation will be recorded in order to conduct further analysis. This information will remain confidential for a period of two (2) years, at which time it will be destroyed. During this period, all recorded data and interview notes will be secured in a password-protected location, and only accessible to myself. *You will not be identified directly at any stage of this research or in the final report.*

The interview will be conducted over the telephone with a number that you have provided, and at a time and date that is mutually agreeable. Before we begin our session, I am required to receive explicit consent regarding your participation in this study. A consent form is attached to this email for your review.

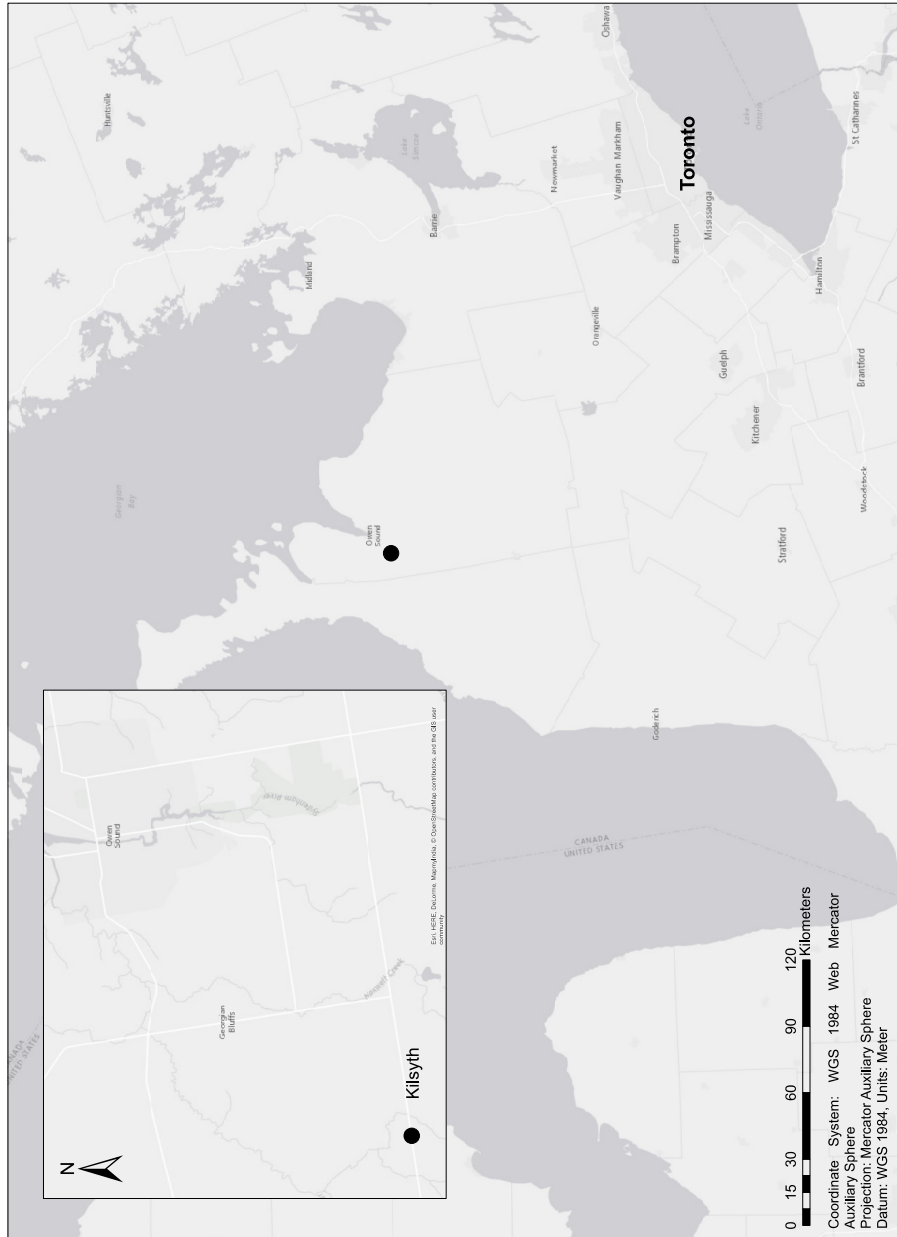
This research has been reviewed and has been granted ethics clearance through the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin in the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca.

This study will be completed in early 2015, at which time I will provide a copy of the final report via email to all participants of the study. I will also provide a follow up letter once our interview is complete. If you have any further questions, please phone me at (519) 497 2556, or through email at rjrappol@uwaterloo.ca. You may also reach Dr. Mark Seasons at mark.seasons@uwaterloo.ca, or at (519) 888 4567 ext. 35922. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Rob Rappolt
(Candidate) M.A. in Planning
rjrappol@uwaterloo.ca

The Study Protocol	
Research Focus	Semi-Structured Interview Questions
<p>The School Closure Decision Making Process:</p> <p><i>Does Ontario's generic accommodation review process need to be adapted for rural and small town communities?</i></p>	<p>Is the current accommodation review policy appropriate for school closures in rural and small town communities?</p> <p>Which stakeholders became involved in the consultation process; either from the board, the community, the municipality, or other?</p> <p>Were there any alternative solutions explored to keep the school open?</p> <p>What modification would you suggest to improve the accommodation review decision-making model?</p> <p>Are there any particular provincial or school board policies that you view as prohibitive to rural school remaining open?</p>
<p>Role of Rural Schools</p> <p><i>What is the role of elementary and secondary schools in rural and small town communities?</i></p>	<p>What is the role of Derby Public School in the community?</p> <p>How were each of the four valuations of the accommodation review guidelines measured during the consultation process?</p> <p>Was there a variation in the emphasis placed on a particular value over another?</p> <p>What is the 'culture' of the school?</p>
<p>Impact of School Closures to the Rural Community:</p> <p><i>Do school closures exacerbate the challenges that rural and small towns in Ontario face?</i></p>	<p>What are the impacts to the local community if Derby PS is closed?</p> <p>What are some of the challenges or opportunities in rural Ontario as they relate to school closures?</p> <p>What are the potential outcomes from rural school closures to the local community or economy?</p> <p>Do school closures challenge the goals and objectives of rural municipalities?</p>
<p>Alternative Decision Making Model:</p> <p><i>What constitutes an appropriate accommodation review process to address the unique circumstances around school closures in rural and small towns?</i></p>	<p>Should there be a more appropriate decision-making model for closures in rural and small town communities?</p> <p>Please describe the relationship between the Board and the community during the ARC process.</p> <p>What is the relationship between the municipality and the school board? Describe how the board viewed participation from the community during throughout the consultation.</p> <p>Was the board receptive of the community's efforts or participation during the ARC?</p> <p>Were there issues of data transparency or availability?</p>

APPENDIX E: LOCATION MAP OF KILSYTH, ONTARIO



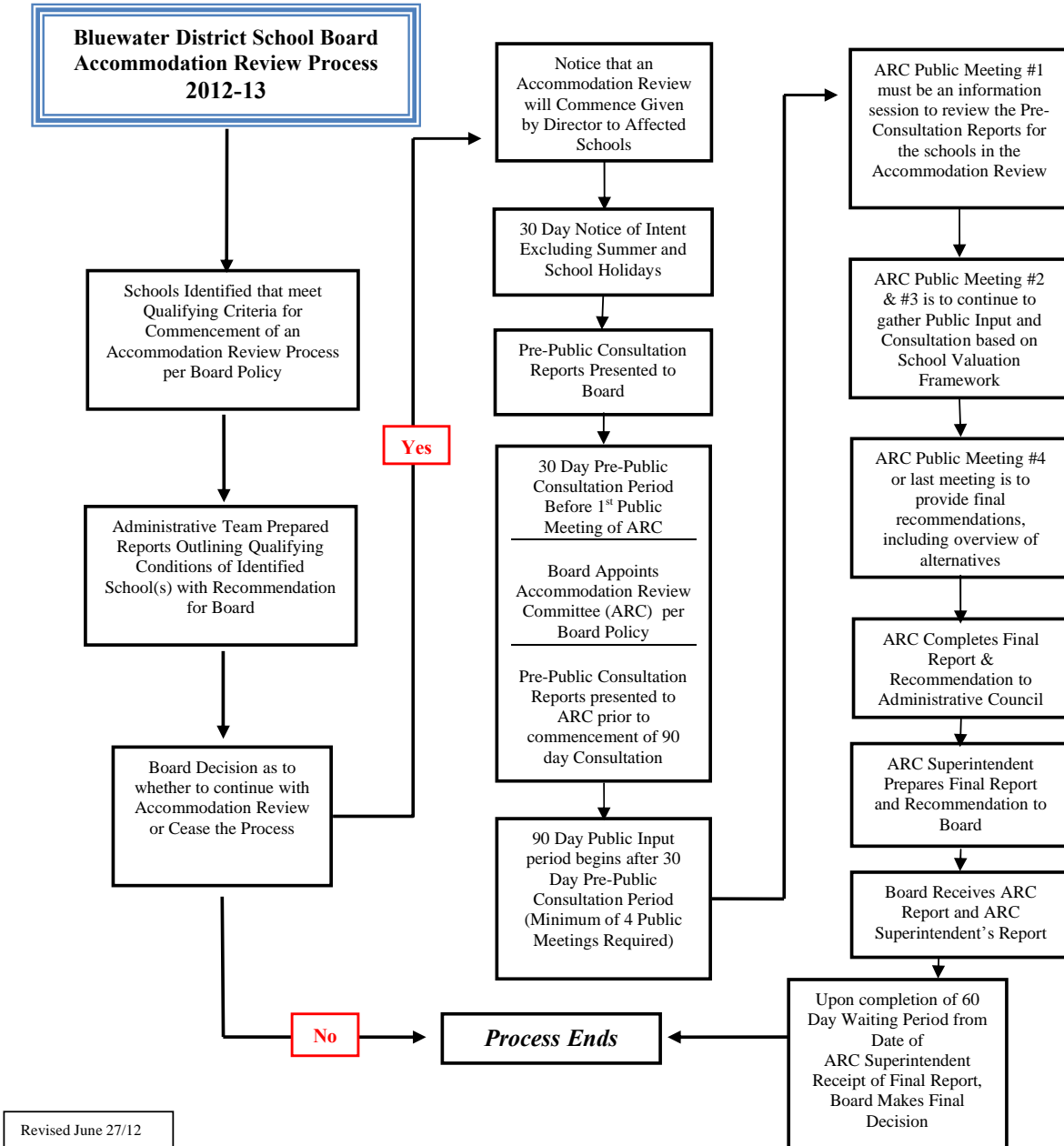
APPENDIX F: DERBY PS ACCOMMODATION REVIEW TIMELINE

2012-13	Accommodation Review Timelines Derby PS ARC - 60 Day Extension																																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31							
June																					M																	
																						30 Day Notice of Intent																
July																																						
August																																						
September				M														M																				
				X																		Excluding Summer and School Holidays						30-Day Pre-										
October	M							H							M																							
		Public Consultation Period Before First Public Meeting																																				
November					M																M																	
December				M														M										H	H	H	H			H	H			
January																																						
February					M														H	M																		
March					M																													H				
April	H	M																M																				
May						M																																
June					M																M																	
July																																						
August																																						
September																																						
October																																						
November																																						

M	Board Meetings
H	Board Holidays

X	Board receives Pre-Public Consultation Reports
X	Last Board meeting prior to end of 90 day consultation period
X	Final Report presented to Board
X	Recommendation from Final Report to Board
X	Final Decision Taken by Board

APPENDIX G: BWDSB ARC PROCESS FLOW CHART



APPENDIX H: ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION REVIEW POLICY CONTEXT

