Negotiating Acts of Citizenship in an Era of Neoliberal Reform: The Game of School Closures

RANU BASU

Abstract

In Ontario, the landscape of public education has changed quite rapidly during the past decade. Critics argue that neoliberal policies concerning privatization and marketization in the education system have produced different outcomes for different groups. One of the most sensitive issues during these years has been the closure of schools. Over three years (1999–2002) nearly 200 schools were closed in Ontario. These many changes, however, have not gone uncontested and communities have adapted to these circumstances in different ways. Acts of citizenship range from coping independently to challenging these changes collectively. This article examines the failures and successes of various acts of citizenship in challenging neoliberal governmental rationalities. More specifically, it traces the difficult process of school closure negotiations using examples from Toronto. Based primarily on participant observation carried out over a year, it examines the politics of the community consultation process among a heterogeneous 'family of schools' amid mixed incomes and varying capacities and needs. Through these case studies it explores whether these acts are inclusionary or exclusionary, homogenizing or diversifying, positive or negative. The evolution of the planning process is examined at three different periods (1998, 1999, 2000), demonstrating the slow and steady construction, advancement and legitimization of neoliberal policy, and correspondingly the spaces and citizens it makes and unmakes through this process. The article concludes with a framework of collective action highlighting relational aspects of citizenship that lead to positive or negative consequences for civil society.

Introduction

Neoliberal policy has slowly but surely filtered into the educational landscape of international democracies. Ontario is the largest, and politically and economically the most dominant, of Canadian provinces; in 1995 a Progressive Conservative government took power by persuading a disgruntled electorate, with neoliberal prescription, of the perceived ills of the province. In Ontario, the success of this ideological discourse, particularly during the past decade, was largely due to the ideal message that it conveyed to the general electorate, which was one based on efficiency, accountability and equity of resources across different school boards in the province (see Basu, 2004a). These messages were accompanied by a series of governing practices and a reliance on particular techniques and strategies that legitimized neoliberal agendas. Despite its

alleged utopianism, however, it has become one of the most politically divisive issues in the field of public policy today. This is because policies formulated at one spatial level (provincial) operate quite differently at another (local school) and the spatial disjunctures that arise from the actual implementation of policies are often invisible but intersect with questions related to social justice, citizenship and rights.

In local communities all over Ontario, the removal of library and music programs, after-school activities and supplies in the classroom, and the sharing of principals, among many other changes, have led to what some may argue as a 'crisis' in public education. One of the most sensitive issues during these years has been the closure of public schools (state funded in Canada) primarily based on arguments of declining enrolments and surplus capacity. Since 1999 over 200 schools have closed in Ontario. Though the closure of a school is often perceived by local residents as leading to a loss of place, community and sense of belonging, these many changes have not gone uncontested and citizens have adapted to circumstances and expressed their agency in different ways. Adaptations range from coping independently to challenging changes collectively, resulting in the constant creation and recreation of new spaces of citizenship. Within the changing context of neoliberalization, Peck and Tickell (2003: 33) note that though different kinds of 'local neoliberalisms' do arise, they are embedded within wider networks and structures of neoliberalism. They further argue that neoliberalization is contradictory and tends to provoke counter tendencies, and it exists in historically and geographically contingent forms. These contradictions, as I will demonstrate further on in this article, are often fed by efforts of mobilization — in both positive and negative ways — further sustaining, enhancing or opposing its core foundations. These mixed reactions and their implications for the policy process and sustainability of neoliberal regimes require long-term, close and even tedious scrutiny — often at the everyday, mundane and grassroots level — to ultimately unravel the spatial and institutionally entrenched neoliberal doctrines promising progress and change; and, more broadly, to reflect on the changing impacts on civil society.

This article examines the failures and success of various *acts of citizenship*[1] in challenging neoliberal governmental rationalities. More specifically, it traces the difficult process of school closure negotiations during an intense period of educational restructuring using case examples from different neighbourhoods in Toronto. In other words, acts of citizenship are examined as a *dynamic process* creating circumstances for possibilities as well as impossibilities; rather than as simply an end product or culmination of those events, such as an urban social movement or civil unrest. Examining the evolution of these acts alongside its reciprocal impacts on 'roll-back' (destructive) and 'roll-out' (creative) neoliberal policy (Peck and Tickell, 2003) alerts us to the importance of its unstable political nature. What the following case studies tease out are the constant tensions and contestations between neoliberal governmentalities on the one hand, and the conformance, disobedience and opposition of groups on the other. The importance of taking into account the complexity and geographic specificity of such governmentality is noted by Foucault:

> From the moment that one is to manipulate a society, one cannot consider it completely penetrable . . . One must take into account what it is. It becomes necessary to reflect upon it, upon its specific characteristics, its constants and its variables (Foucault, 1994: 352).

Based primarily on participant observation carried out over a year, I examine the politics of the community consultation process (Area Review Committee [ARC] — a planning tool purported to enhance citizen engagement) among a heterogeneous 'family of schools' amid mixed incomes and varying capacities and needs.[2] The emphasis is to

---

1 This term originates from a conference on Acts of Citizenship organized by Engin Isin at York University in 2004.
2 This involved attending 10 board meetings (3–6 hours each) for phase I and phase II (stage II), nine ARC meetings in six schools, one ward meeting, three education forums, and other activist meetings. These were complemented by census data analysis of the neighbourhoods in question, mapping exercises and content analysis of policy documents (for stage I and stage II).

unpack the ARC process — a successful local planning technique practiced by neoliberal regimes which relies on the community taking responsibility for its own planning outcomes. This can often imply shouldering off duties by the state (see Wolch, 1989), and new emphasis on personal responsibilities of individuals, families and their communities to take *active* steps to secure their own future well being (Isin, 1998: 173). I use what Forester describes as a 'critical pragmatic' approach and through various case study examples explore whether these acts of citizenship are inclusionary or exclusionary, homogenizing or diversifying, positive or negative. This approach is critical, according to Forester, because it is sensitive to issues of power and ethics; and pragmatic because it helps to assess issues of concrete, situated action in planning and related political processes (1993). The article traces the evolution of the planning process (design, implementation and particularly the negotiation of school closures) at three different time periods (1998, 1999, 2000), while demonstrating the slow and steady construction, advancement and legitimization of neoliberal policy; and correspondingly the spaces and citizens it makes and unmakes through this process.

   The article is organized as follows. The implementation of school closures examined in this article comprised two stages. Stage I involved a radical, widespread policy initiative that was to be implemented during a 1-year period (1998). This was consequently met with fierce resistance from the public. The second attempt at school closures was a more cautious and slower process involving two further phases (1999, 2000). Thus, the two phases of the second stage are discussed separately: phase I — with a description of the ARC process and the types of group dynamics that evolved; and phase II — with a further elaboration of other case studies. The intricacies of the empirical case studies are described in great detail and allow the strategies and tactics of the planning and negotiation process to reveal the complexities and political nuances that evolved over the years. The article concludes with a broader framework of collective action highlighting relational aspects of citizenship and scalar interplays that lead to positive and negative consequences for civil society — and is a cautionary tale for planners, academics and activist groups interested in grassroots organizing and scalar politics. As Delaney and Leitner (1997: 94) argue, the politics of scale is a fundamental ingredient of the ways in which we go about creating, revising and living within a complex set of power relations. The power among and between these scales is periodically transformed and where scale emerges they argue is in the fusion of ideologies and practices. The core of this article is thus the relationship between neoliberalization of education policy, the interplay of scalar politics, and the changing nature of various acts of citizenship — through the game of school closures.

Implementing school closures: change of reasoning

Stage I: March–November 1998

In March 1998, the Ministry of Education (MET) introduced a new student-focused approach to funding public schools in Ontario that was to be implemented by the end of the year. In response to this policy, planners from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) produced a report announcing the potential closure of 138 schools in the City of Toronto. According to new regulations, schools with excess capacity (calculated on the basis of 100 square feet per pupil) were not to be funded. The TDSB reported a surplus capacity of over 7 million square feet and a funding deficiency of over $38 million. According to the formula set out in *School Closures: A Response to the Provincial Government's Student-focused Funding Model* (1998), schools selected for closure were to be based on a set criteria. These were identified as (i) the size of the facility; (ii) the condition of the facility; (iii) the capacity of the facility; and (iv) the presence of a school in the community. The validity of the criteria was set in place with little public consultation or debate, and was used at this time to justify the implementation of school closures.

    The issue of such widespread, immediate and radical school closures, however, soon generated a large-scale urban social movement in Toronto whereby most citizens were outraged at the prospect of losing so many publicly funded schools and collectively organized protests and rallies across the city. In Ontario, other coalition movements such as the 'days of action' by labour groups, and Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and Metro Network for Social Justice were also making their voices heard (see Isin, 1998) and added to the climate of collective dissent in the city. By November 1998, the power of collective action on planning decisions translated into the renegotiation of the funding formula. The Premier announced a package of initiatives designed to 'make the province's education funding formula more flexible' (MET, November 1998) and injected a one-time only $200 million grant into the funding formula (*Toronto Star*, 1998). (See Basu, 2004b for an extensive discussion of this stage.) What is particularly interesting about these acts is that they were widespread, cohesive and powerful enough to challenge the established truths presented by neoliberal rationalities — at least at this stage of negotiation. Based on the proposal outlined in the report most schools were affected — either directly or indirectly. However, as argued earlier on, the process of neoliberalization is contradictory and fluid and provokes counter-tendencies (see Peck and Tickell, 2003) that best suit its purpose. This soon became evident during the second stage of school closures — which mutated into a slower and more cautious approach.

Stage II

After the change in the 1998 formula, a turn of events took place during the following years. Of the 479 public elementary schools in Toronto, the interim strategy was the proposed closure of 30 schools spread over a period of 3 years. The change from 138 schools at once to 30 schools over a period of 3 years is an exemplary case of how 'power defines reality' (Flyvbjerg, 1998); and correspondingly, the malleability of neoliberal policy designed by the province and implemented by the board. The capacities, resources and constraints at each scale of governance are particularly instructive to note — from provincial centralized regulations and fiscal control; to the board's recommendations and implementation of policy; and finally the local communities response. The large-scale urban movement from the preceding year and consensus generated by the public in stage I resulted in a more cautionary approach in stage II by both the MET and TDSB; and as the following sections will demonstrate, qualitatively a very different political response from the communities at stake.

    Though massive protests across the city had led to a revision in the funding formula, the changes that were made were only minor. Mitigation funds provided by the MET were to *temporarily* provide assistance during the amalgamation process that was to be completed by the year 2003. However, more importantly, it appeared that mitigation funds were able to *deflect some of the heat* and opposition felt from the 1998 citywide threat of school closures. Though initial savings of $100 million were identified by the TDSB, additional cuts were argued to still be necessary to conform to the ministry's funding level. In other words, there is a scalar power relationship that creates the situation with which planners must deal. Changes in the board's capital program meant that facility upkeep, renewal and new construction now depended on the province. According to the adjusted formula, 2 million square feet of school space remained unfunded. This shortfall in facility operations (i.e. capital funding and school operations) resulted in a deficit. As a response to this deficit, a proposal to close schools to cut back costs was made once again, and soon after, the TDSB approved a report entitled *Pupil accommodation review: 2000 and beyond*, which identified the need to close 2 million square feet of surplus operating space. Closures would be implemented on 30 schools over a 3-year period — phase I by the year 2000; phase II by the year 2001; and phase III by the year 2002. The sequence of events and case studies analyzed are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in more detail in the sections below. The following is a brief description of the events that followed in phase I and phase II that highlights various

negotiations that took place during the difficult process of school closure planning and implementation.

Board's proposal, phase I: April–September 1999

At the end of April 1999, trustees from the TDSB held their first board meeting to discuss the implementation of school closures based on the adjustment of the funding formula. The procedure had by this time changed from the authorization of one-time, large-scale closures to dealing with few schools phased over a period of time. Planners had prepared a new report entitled *Pupil accommodation review: 2000 and beyond* examining the closure of 30 schools over a 3-year period. The first phase was to deal with the implementation of 10 school closures (this included eight elementary and two secondary schools) by September 2000. The report stated that in any given year, the closure of ten schools was the maximum that the system could implement without draining available resources from the instructional program (TDSB, 1999: 5). The approach in phase I was restricted to those schools which were at the border of old municipalities (pre-amalgamation) and where utilization rates were below 55% (TDSB, 1999). Forester (2001: 265) has argued that in planning practice it is often difficult to distinguish between planning that serves the established power from planning that resists it; or planning that rationalizes elite decisions from planning that rationally criticizes such decisions. Based on this proposition, it initially appears that planning decisions were neither resisting nor supporting the provincial course but working around policies in order to involve the least amount of resistance and to *promote consensus*. At a meeting I attended one planner addressed the audience by expressing this dilemma, 'We are trained to build schools not to close them', suggesting that the rules and regulations were imposed by the MET, a higher-scale state institution, without the allocation of sufficient resources to meet the needs of all neighbourhoods.

To ensure a democratic planning process during this phase of closures, the TDSB designated ARCs among a 'family of schools' to allow the communities affected by the closures to respond to staff recommendations. Though ARCs were touted as planning tools used to encourage participatory planning, a critical interpretation cautions the beginnings of 'self-responsibilization' where unpleasant decision making is easily passed down to the community level. The ARCs were to include neighbouring schools (principals and parent representatives from each school) and community organizations affected by the closures. It is important to note here that this method of public consultation was used only after the decisions to close schools had already been made. The function of the ARCs, therefore, was restricted only to expressing opinions on the *selection* of schools for closure — and was ultimately set up as a *zero-sum game* for the neighbourhoods involved. As will be noted later, this approach from the very beginning proved to be divisive and detrimental for inter-community relations between schools and in fact was just nominally a consultative community process.

The audience in the boardroom consisted of only a few people on the day the proposal for phase I was submitted to the board, and there were few groups from some, though not all of the listed schools. Two delegations representing their wards called for a moratorium on school closings until a better formula was established. The delegates argued that hasty decisions were being made and that the ARC process should be given more time than the 6 weeks allotted. With school closures they were also concerned about the risks to other community programs such as child care and adult education. Closures they felt were 'at the expense of children, particularly poor children in stressed neighbourhoods'. The discussions and debates that took place during the meeting were laden with emotions while tempers flared on all sides. As in 1998, it appeared that a fundamental tension existed between the two ideological approaches to school closures: one based on bureaucratic decisions of accountability, and the other based on the symbolic meaning and value of schools to neighbourhoods. At the end of the evening, when a vote was taken to delay the process, only four trustees voted in favour of delaying

the ARC. Three of these trustees represented wards with schools closures. Unlike the solidarity outcome of 1998, the opinions of trustees regarding the decision to close schools were divided at this time. And, unlike the harmonious response of the previous activism (urban social movement in 1998), the fragmentation of collective ideals had led to the planning process becoming more individualistic and self-protective — conforming as closely to the neoliberal vision.

Community consultation: the ARC process

The process evolved as follows. First, the ARC began their deliberations over a 6-week period. Second, the recommendations of the ARCs were forwarded to the Facility Services of the TDSB. Third, the board received the report after which it was forwarded back to the staff for analysis. Fourth, the final recommendations by the staff to the board were submitted. Fifth, the ARCs presented their final reports to the Board of Trustees in a public meeting whereupon trustees voted to decide which schools would close.

During the ARC process, each committee member received a detailed report prepared by the planners of the TDSB outlining the rationale for the closure recommendation and details regarding the provincial funding formula. The committee was to compile the given information,[3] make the necessary recommendations and present the findings to the larger community (i.e. neighbourhood residents) by the fifth week of deliberations and then present these findings in a final report to the board. Finally, closure implementation teams (CITs) were to be formed to complete the closure process.

Compared with 1998, in phase I the selection of school closures was based on a different set of criteria (see Table 1) — the change in board strategy was in response to the large-scale movement of the previous year and a consequence of the 'new rules of the game' being imposed by the MET — a higher scale state actor. It is interesting to note that a few additional components and justifications were now being considered in the adjusted formula to present a more rational approach less likely to generate criticism: (i) minimum walking distances (1.6 km for junior kindergarten to grade 5, and 3.2 km for grades 6–8)[4]; (ii) a minimum of 70% capacity[5]; (iii) child care space; (iv) the consideration of non-educational uses. The change in criteria and flexibility in defining criteria for school closures illustrates, once again, the flexibility and malleability of neoliberal techniques in defining knowledge and 'rational' explanations. Power in this case was never a fixed and closed regime but rather to be viewed as an open strategic game (see Gordon, 1991: 5).

Major issues raised by ARCs

The 10 schools selected for closure in phase I include eight elementary schools. The neighbourhood profiles (by school district/attendance area) of these elementary schools are presented in the maps below (see Figures 1–3). Though enrolment levels were low in these neighbourhoods, data indicate that the schools (with the exception of one ARC) were located in areas where there was a high proportion of immigrants, a high proportion of renters, and where the average household income was low.

By the end of September 1999, the final recommendations of the ARCs (phase I) were presented to the Board of Trustees. Unlike the previous meeting, an overwhelming crowd (including parents, students, teachers, principals, union members, child care advocates, other interest groups and the media) had been marshalled to attend the meeting which lasted over a period of 6 hours. Police were stationed at the entrance of the building in the event of any impending disturbance. What this also indicated was a message of perceived rather than actual volatility of the situation.

---

3 The volume of information in these reports was noted to be enormous. This information was to be analyzed by the ARCs within 6 weeks.
4 It is interesting to note that the definition of 'walking distances' varies in Ontario depending on the boards of education. These range anywhere between 0.4 and 1.6 km.
5 The changes by the ministry included a 20% top up in funding for schools operating at less than full capacity, not to exceed 100% of capacity (TDSB, 1999).

Table 1 School closures: changing reasonings

Stage (year)	Number of Schools	Rationale Used	ARC Process	Acts of Citizenship
Stage I (1998)	138 targeted, none closed	• The size of the facility • Condition of the facility • Capacity of the facility • Maintaining the presence of a school in the community	Individual schools targeted, no ARC process	Urban social movement
Stage II, phase I (1999)	10 schools selected, eight elementary schools, six closed	• Minimum walking distances (1.6 km for junior kindergarten to grade 5; and 3.2 km for grades 6–8) • A minimum of 70% capacity • Child care space • The consideration of non-educational uses	Communities targeted, ARC process for all schools	Conflictual and consensual: phase I, case i, phase I, case ii, phase I, case iii
Stage II, phase II (2000)	10 schools selected for school closures, school consolidation, school relocation	• Maximize operating efficiencies • Achieve optimal utilization rates wherever possible • 80% for elementary and 90% for secondary schools • Reduce/eliminate portables • Ensure that students have reasonable access to a full range of program offerings • Maintain a viable public school presence in each community • Have regard for the presence of child care space • Consider the impact of elementary closures on enrolment levels at secondary schools • Recognize that community consultation is essential	Only two communities targeted, ARC process for two schools only	Conflictual and consensual: phase II, case i, phase II, case ii, phase II, case iii

During the course of the evening, ARC representatives presented reports to trustees and staff of the TDSB. A variety of arguments and rationales were forwarded to the board against school closures. The underlying theme present in all reports was the *loss of community* that would result from the closure of schools. Residents were not prepared to give up their local institution and the corresponding resources and ties closely associated with their schools and argued that their 'community identity' had been threatened. ARC members argued that enrolment declines — the primary rationale used to close schools — were only 'temporary setbacks' due to the nature of individual neighbourhood life cycles. They argued that many of the programs that used excess space in the schools were programs necessary for maintaining the *vitality of their neighbourhoods*. Other arguments were also made against school closures, many related to the specificities of neighbourhood geographies. For example, most of the ARC members worried about issues of safety for younger children, such as crossing major roads, the topography of the neighbourhoods or walking long distances over the winter. Other residents also worried about the effect of school closures on property values.

A variety of creative solutions emerged from the groups to avoid school closures. For example, many ARCs recommended that schools could offset revenue shortfalls by partially leasing their properties. Staff disagreed with this suggestion, arguing instead that leasing entire (rather than partial) buildings was a more profitable proposition as it generated more revenue. Among other recommendations, some ARCs suggested that students in overcrowded settings (i.e. portables) be relocated to schools identified for closures. In response to this suggestion, staff argued that the impact of such transfers would result in further disruption and would amount to additional busing costs that could not be funded. Most of the ARCs complained about the short time period (6 weeks) that they were given to make recommendations and argued that the process did not give the communities enough time to explore further options. In sum, the ARC process required that the communities select one school for closure — a zero-sum game for the board and province. Yet, none of the ARCs were prepared to do so and produced new evidence within the existing decision frameworks.

In studying *acts of citizenship* as a collective endeavour it is essential to note the internal group dynamics as a community indicator of the cohesiveness and success of the group's interest. The ARC process involved a group of neighbourhoods (referred to as a 'family of schools') in close proximity making decisions related to competing interests (i.e. saving their individual school). In understanding the evolution of collective action, Davis (1991) argues that it is important to note both consensus and conflict within a group itself. Through the various case studies discussed below it was noted that internal group dynamics differed with respect to the various ARCs across the city. The power relations that came out of these interactions affected the final outcome of school closure negotiations. Though the sentiments and interests that were shared across the groups were similar, the internal group dynamics within the ARCs were not necessarily consensual. The following is a description of various acts of citizenship during phase I which can be interpreted as privatized micro-power structures across the city controlled by the invisible strings of the neoliberal state policy to ensure that a particular form of governmentality is practiced.

Acts of citizenship: phase I, case i

First, those ARCs refusing to adhere to staff recommendations (i.e. to select a school for closure) were unsuccessful in their efforts and voted out by trustees. Though the internal group dynamics were *consensual* in nature (i.e. consensus among the schools that were part of the ARC) they were not successful (or powerful enough) in protecting their local schools from school closure since they appeared to be in *conflict* with the board. Micro-disciplinary powers had not been adhered to and the ARCs' internal consensus did not prove strategic enough to avoid closures.

Acts of citizenship: phase I, case ii

Second, those internal ARC group dynamics that were *conflictual* in nature constituted neighbourhoods that attempted to protect their own school at the expense of others. The result of this process was inter-group competition and NIMBYism. In addition to the primary report, these communities produced 'minority reports' to the board expressing 'dissenting and division in opinions'. These ARCs were also unsuccessful in their efforts and voted out. In these cases the process of neoliberalism results in antagonistic conflicts and an overall success in triggering individualistic goals. Internal group dynamics that were conflictual, however, also resulted in the loss of schools.

Acts of citizenship: phase I, case iii

In a third approach, two ARCs tried different bargaining strategies that produced a modification in the closure process. Both of these ARCs produced researched reports (one group hired a consultant) presenting different rationalities. The first group argued that their neighbourhood was uniquely different as it was an isolated community bordered by unique topography — i.e. streams, hills, industrial districts and major thoroughfares that made walking conditions difficult for young children. They argued that if their school should close, additional busing expenses would be required. In addition to this, they argued that proposed residential developments that were present in the old stockyards of the neighbourhood had not been taken into account in the staff's enrolment projections. Finally, they argued the staff had not considered an over-enrolled neighbouring school within their ARC. The member's recommendation of a *delay* in closures (another bargaining tool) was successfully accepted by staff and passed by trustees. The second ARC, similarly successful in efforts to save their school, however, used a different strategy which was also internally *consensual* in nature. Within this ARC each school was prepared to share some of the cuts. Their report stated:

> In the spirit of shared responsibility, all schools in the Review Area should contribute to the overall reduction of excess capacity in the area (ARC report, 1999: 54).

By hiring a demographics consultant they were also able to forecast rising enrolments due to new residential developments. The outcome of their proposal to staff resulted in some building closures and the shuffling and relocation of programs between schools.

Both of the ARCs had produced new sets of rationalities that were difficult to dispute and in the process had managed to maintain a working consensus with the board — negotiating a non-zero sum game which the other cases were unable to do. These group dynamics are similar to Bondi's (1987) findings of protest against school closures in Manchester, when groups that had prepared well researched reports were more successful at saving their schools compared with groups that had used other means of protest that were conflictual in nature. However, it appears that consensus in itself was not as powerful as consensus within and across actors with different motivations. As Brenner and Theodore indicate (2002) extraordinary variations (as in acts of citizenship) arise as neoliberal reform initiatives are imposed within contextually specific institutional landscapes and policy environments.

The board thus approved the closure of six of the eight elementary schools. However, unlike the solidarity efforts of the urban social movement in 1998, the decision to close fewer schools led to scattered resistance in various communities across the city, each fighting its own battle. With the implementation of a community consultation process (ARC), a successful neoliberal tool, the difficult negotiations had now passed down to individual communities. All the ARCs expressed their dissatisfaction that the community consultation process had been implemented as just a formality since many of their recommendations were ignored.

Board's proposal, phase II: February–September 2000

By February 2000, the second report, *School closures: September 2001*, was released at a public board meeting. The focus in phase II was on those schools with utilization rates of 60% or less, and in areas where enrolment levels could be optimized through boundary realignments. The rationalities for selecting schools for closure had changed once again based on a different set of criteria. Additional components brought forward included the problems of unfunded portable space and the issue of program rationalization. Rationalities defined guiding principles as follows: (i) maximize operating efficiencies; (ii) achieve optimal utilization rates wherever possible (80% for elementary and 90% for secondary schools) which maximizes the 'top-up' funding of 20%; (iii) reduce/eliminate portables; (iv) ensure that students have reasonable access to a full range of program offerings; (v) maintain a viable public school presence in each community; (vi) have regard for the presence of child care space; (vii) consider the impact of elementary closures on enrolment levels at secondary schools; (viii) recognize that community consultation is essential (TDSB, 2000: 2).

The audience in attendance at this meeting included activists and union leaders and commenced with delegations from parent activists. The first delegate questioned the philosophy behind the board's 'program rationalization' and argued that a ground-up process was necessary to investigate the needs of individual schools. The second delegate voiced a similar concern questioning value differentials of different programs: '*Low profile programs*, such as reading clinics, are silently disappearing and a few *high profile programs* are being maintained at the expense of the general good'.

In response to these concerns planners from the TDSB blamed the political powers as being responsible for school closures. As in phase I, planners/staff/officials neither resisted nor supported the provincial agenda but had modified policies in order to generate the least amount of resistance. For example, in phase II, *new language* was used to identify schools at risk. 'School consolidation' and 'program relocation' were new terminologies used instead of school closures. The new report defined the schools at risk as follows: (i) 'School closure — where an under-utilized school is closed and displaced students are relocated to one or more adjacent schools with available space; (ii) School consolidation — where a school operating in two under-utilized adjacent buildings is consolidated into one of the buildings; and (iii) Program relocation — where an inefficient school or program is relocated into a more efficient space or to another under-utilized location to improve its efficiency' (TDSB, 2000: 3).

In phase II, however, an interesting development takes place in accordance with the new language proposed. The ARC process was to only take place in communities designated with 'school closures'. By limiting the ARCs this time to only two groups in the city simplified the complexity of the process and unpredictable outcomes of the possibility of a non-zero game that could arise. As in phase I, the scope of the ARC was limited. Though community members were not excluded from the decision-making process, their inclusion entailed the difficult task of selecting which school within the ARC would be chosen for closure. The neighbourhood profiles for the ARC schools are displayed in Figures 1–3.

By May, deliberations from each of the ARCs were made to the board. According to a media report, over 300 supporters were present that evening, including parents, teachers, media, union members, bus loads of children, academics and politicians among many others. It appeared that experiences gained from phase I were kept in mind as all the reports prepared in phase II were well researched with professionally prepared presentations (including videos, slides and PowerPoint presentations). Not only did students, parents and principals make presentations, but other community members such as neighbourhood associations, politicians and academics also made formal presentations. The message was similar to the one before — schools were community centres where many other activities took place which community members valued deeply. The closure of a school, whatever the form (consolidation or relocation), it was
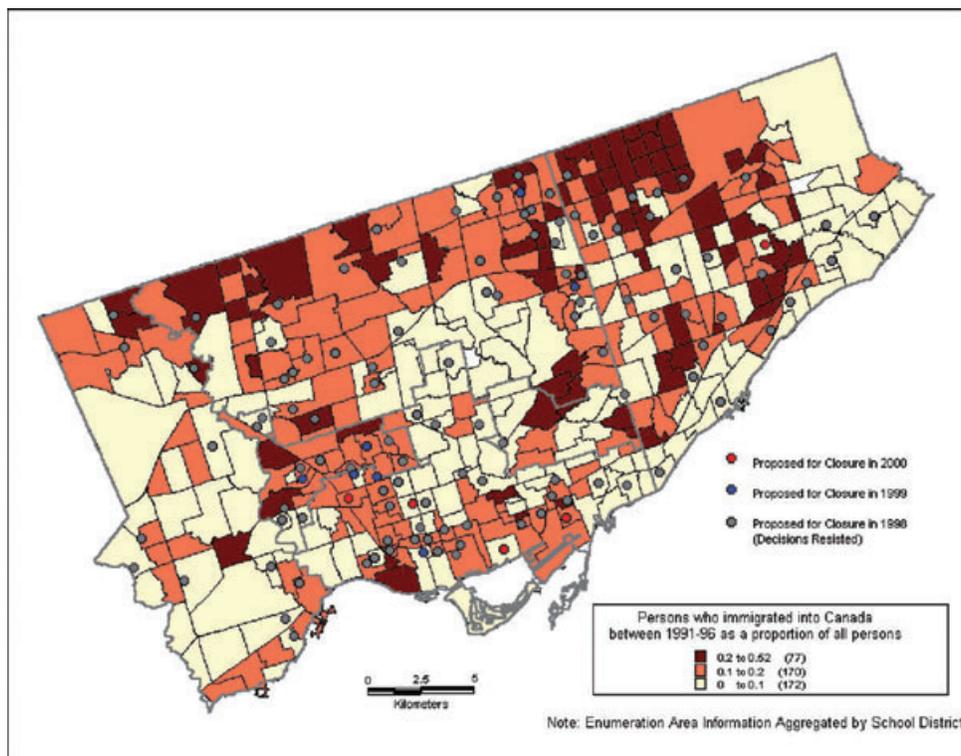
Figure 1 Elementary school districts in the TDSB showing the proportion of the most recent immigrants and school closures

argued, would cause disruption of the well being and security of residents. These webs of connections, they argued, had not been considered in the funding formula. This was evident in all of the presentations made by various ARCs where common themes repeatedly emerged, i.e. related to the protection of child care centres, senior's programs, reading clinics, parenting centres, peace-making programs, lunch and nutrition programs, swimming programs and other unique programs. Concerns that had been brought up in phase I were once again addressed. Some examples included issues of safety, overcrowded portables, boundary delineation, new residential developments. However, these problems were now addressed in much greater depth than they had been in phase I. Three case studies are presented below describing the enactment, performance and negotiations of citizenship between and amongst various neighbourhood groups, constrained, however, by rules and regulations imposed by higher scale state institutions.

Acts of citizenship: phase II, case i

As in phase I, power struggles arise within one ARC whereby a school not named by the TDSB (school B) had been chosen for closure (the TDSB had proposed school A). I had a chance to attend six of the seven individual ARC meetings for this community.[6] Among the many arguments made to close the alternative school B (e.g. size of the school, traffic design) the most forceful one came as a surprise to all of those living in the community. Information had been received that school B was in close proximity to

---

6 The meetings rotated among different schools in the ARC. The meetings also involved tours examining each of the school's facilities, design and layout. In this process I was able to examine the internal premises of many schools in great detail. For example, during the tour it was observed that school B also hosted a special program for disabled children and as a result required extra space.
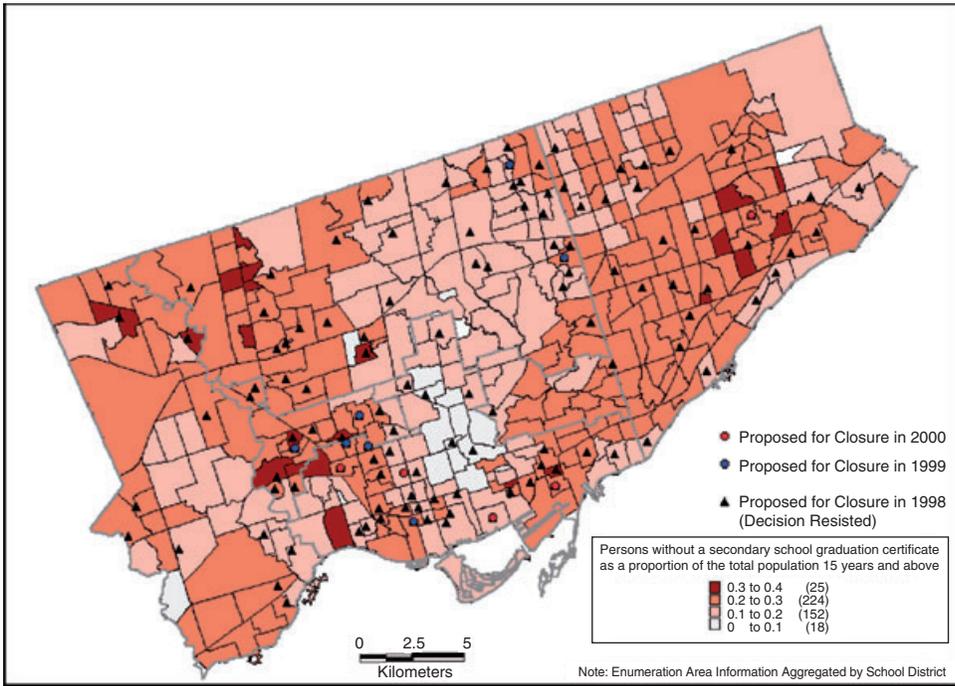
Figure 2 Elementary school districts in the TDSB showing the proportion of persons without a secondary school certificate and school closures
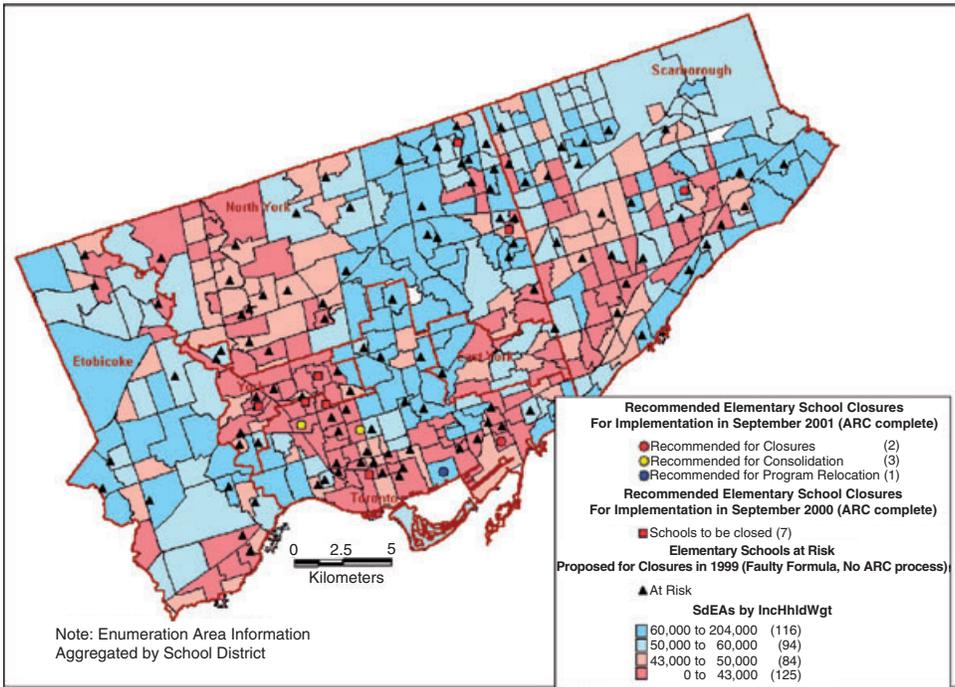

Figure 3 Elementary school districts in the TDSB showing the average household income and school closures

a post-war hazardous waste dump site that could prove risky for students. Though planners were unable to find any evidence to confirm these findings, the argument became the dominant rationalization by school A and was used successfully to protect the school.

The role of leaders is important in the success of collective action. During the ARC meetings it was observed that the local trustee and principals of the ARC schools in this area kept a low profile and did not appear to spearhead any action at all. Instead, the parents and community members took a more active role. During the early stages of these meetings, an ARC member and a long time senior resident and president of the local community centre astutely recognized the internal divisions that would later arise. He presented a new strategy based on the success of the school that had avoided closure in phase I. He proposed that a middle school be added to the ARC boundaries in order to change the demographic composition and capacity levels. Unfortunately, this 'mediating' argument, which could have alleviated the tension between schools, would not be considered in the initial stages of phase II. Planners argued that neighbourhood groups had no control over the boundary designation process or its possible modification. In the fifth week of the ARC process, when a public meeting was held for the surrounding community, a parent from school B expressed the frustration faced by many members of her school and questioned the process:

> If the Board's recommendation was to close School A, why have we now examined so many options? The committee was set up to review the recommended closing of School A or, at least that is how it was presented in all public notices. Now by having a recommendation that either School A or School B close this committee has created a school vs. school situation — half the objectivity of the committee goes out the window, remaining votes appear to be self serving. Data has no bearing — numbers can be manipulated and not be reliable when we talk about forecasts (Public Meeting, April 2000).

During the public presentation, it appeared that residents in general had accepted the mandate to close one school and its focus instead was diverted towards competing against each other. The inter-neighbourhood conflict led to the preparation of a counter minority report to the TDSB arguing that recommendations made by the ARC were unfounded. At the board meeting in June 2000, school B argued that they had been under-represented in the ARC (since they were not the original school chosen for closure) and therefore did not get the time to marshal enough support. They also argued that most of the students attending this school were already marginalized along lines of poverty, language, disability and other barriers. The decision as of 15 June, however, resulted in a vote to cancel the closure of the original proposed school (school A) and close the alternative school (school B) instead. Unfortunately, this case is an illustration of the negative aspects of power that resulted in hurting those groups that were already vulnerable. Based on census data, it is noted that school B had a higher percentage of recent immigrants, non-Canadian Citizens, movers, unemployed population, lower education levels, and lower income compared to school A.

Acts of citizenship: phase II, case ii

Another school recommended for 'relocation' argued along similar lines (i.e. the vulnerability of its student population) but was more successful in its ability to defer the move. However, since this school was not recommended for closure per se, the ARC process did not take place. Though many special needs students attended the school they had garnered the support of many outside community organizations. The principal of this school also took a more active role. The principal argued that the issue of relocation was 'an issue of equity'; that a 'dislocation effect would guarantee them further marginality'; and argued that 'if it is not an issue of equity, then it is an issue of morality'. Many of the students in this school faced intellectual disabilities and the school had over the years developed specialized programs to address their unique concerns. In spite of these limitations every student from the school had sent a letter as a method of protest.

They argued that this was not a relocation process but instead another form of closure. Using their organizational power and based on arguments of social justice the school was successful in their negotiating strategies. In this case the decision to move their school was delayed. Pre-existing networks formed within the community (intrinsic networks) and beyond the community (extrinsic) was a latent form of power that had worked towards their advantage (see Basu, 2004b).

Acts of citizenship: phase II, case iii

Another school successful in its efforts to delay the process of 'relocation' was also able to demonstrate the strength of its community alliances. Unlike the previous example of more extrinsic relations, the alliances within this school were more intrinsic in nature. An ARC was not part of the decision-making process since the school was chosen for relocation. The school's main strategy was to demonstrate its international reputation of initiating a special peace-making program. They argued that they had built a strong community presence over the past 20 years (mentioning the presence of a daycare centre, parenting programs, carnivals etc.) and had strong ties with the local neighbourhood association. They also mentioned the large amounts of fundraising that they were able to foster. The school, however, did not want to integrate with any other school, and if the TDSB were to do so, they argued that it would be necessary to provide 'separate space and separate entrances to maintain the uniqueness of the program'. This school, primarily elitist in nature, was also successful in delaying the process of relocation — nonetheless, within a zero-sum game.

Analysis: theorizing acts of citizenship

Broadly defined, when individuals with similar interests come together for a common purpose they are collectively active. Some scholars have argued that geographically defined neighbourhoods act collectively on the basis of needs and solidarities that are endemic to the locality itself (Davis, 1991) where local residents do not usually organize in response to macro societal changes and general conflicts, but typically around specific issues perceived as critical at the *local* level (Cox and Mair, 1988; Hasson and Ley, 1994; Basu, 2002). It is these place-bound communities that exercise their citizenship in a common interest to improve local safety, services or amenities that are often important in the aspects of day-to-day life. Yet micro negotiations work within the spaces of larger social and political structures; and the capacities, resources and constraints set up at each scale of governance are different. The relationship among and between these scales is complex and fickle and the products of such negotiations constantly changing. As Miller (2007: 224) argues and as the case studies aptly demonstrate, the 'mismatch between scales of everyday life-world experience and higher scales — where fiscal capacities reside — often results in frustration and disengagement as local activists become locked in counterproductive zero-sum contests over local resources'. In phase II as in phase I, similarities and differences in acts of citizenship are observed — there are winners and losers in the game of school closures. The nature of internal and external group dynamics promotes different kinds of power relations and a variety of strategies and tactics were used to present compelling arguments. Those demonstrating community alliances were better prepared at maintaining their schools especially in the case of disadvantaged communities. Elitist schools, however, were less dependent on outside agencies. The downloading of blame to the grassroots level as a micro strategy misled groups towards internal conflict rather than challenging neoliberal policies at the macro level. Schools assigned with ARCs — ironically the community consultation process — a tool to enhance citizen engagement, were faced with the more difficult task of conflict resolution within communities — within a zero-sum game framework.

The case studies illustrate a fundamental tension between the two ideological approaches to school closures in an age of neoliberal reform — one based on

Micro Scale/Macro Scale

(Group A: Across neighbourhoods) / (Group B: Board and Province)

Type A **Consensual/Consensual** **Group A/Group B** (+)	**Type B** **Consensual/Conflictual** **Group A/Group B** (+)
Type C **Conflictual/Consensual** **Group A/Group B** (-)	**Type D** **Conflictual/Conflictual** **Group A/Group B** (-)

Figure 4 Relational citizenship—positive and negative collective action

bureaucratic decisions of accountability and the other based on neighbourhood attachments and a 'loss of community'. The fundamental problem appears to be due to the stark separation of education policies from a social policy and civil society framework. Policies formulated at the provincial level are interpreted differently at the local level whereby closure of a school facility (savings in education costs) entails the loss of other community ties (loss in social connections). The centralization of education control (as distinct from responsibility) has contributed a further lack of appreciation for the struggles and meanings of smaller schools (see Witten *et al*., 2003).

The following section theorizes these findings in a more general framework taking into account the multi-scalar power negotiations that consider relational citizenship through collective action. The fusion of ideology and practice (Delaney and Leitner, 1997) emerges through this matrix. This theorization adds a scalar dynamic to the analysis of collective action; considers conflict and consensus built into the model simultaneously; acknowledges the heterogeneity of neoliberal politics as central to its understanding; and untangles progressive (positive) and recessive (negative) collective action based on the outcome (Figure 4).

Positive collective action

When collective action is consensual across a diversity of neighbourhoods and implemented for the positive benefit of all (such as the benefit of a common collective good) without affecting any party negatively, it can be viewed as positive. All parties benefit equally and not at the expense of another. Positive collective action is usually consensual, altruistic and the aim is to prevent loss to any party and the citizenship that arises from these acts is *solidaristic* (see Isin, 2002; forthcoming). Positive collective action can be further classified as A (consensual-consensual) and B (consensual–conflictual) across scales.

Type A (consensual-consensual)
When there is internal consensus within party A (e.g. group of neighbourhoods across the city, local scale) and party A also negotiates consensually with party B (e.g. provincial scale) the outcome is often positive. This is because the party that is involved

in the collective negotiation process is often receptive to the ideas proposed as they usually are not difficult to implement. Such issues require minimum costs and effort and are easily negotiable. Examples of this within the education sector include implementing safety standards within schools, policy on zero tolerance of violence and implementation of parent councils. There is no antagonistic confrontation on either side.

Type B (consensual–conflictual)
A common goal may be agreed upon by a group of neighbourhoods (i.e. group A is internally cohesive) but may be in conflict with the interests of the province (i.e. group B). The groups may act together collectively to challenge the norms set by the state and if powerful enough bargain effectively for the benefit of all. The example of the mass movement against school closures in 1998 is an example of this form of activism. Organizational capacities are powerful in this form of activism and common consciousness is raised. This is the most effective and radical form of collective action as it serves to improve the quality of life of all residents regardless of differences between them.

Negative collective action
Collective action is negative, however, when there are losers involved from an inequitable or unjust system of decision making. The citizenship that arises from these acts is *agonistic* and *alienating* (see Isin, 2002; forthcoming). Power has negative effects since one group has power *over* another group. In this form of action either one group benefits at the expense of another or all groups stand to lose. Power is most evident within groups that are able to use rationalization techniques most effectively. Negative collective action between the different scales can be further classified as C (conflictual–consensual) and D (conflictual–conflictual).

Type C (consensual–conflictual)
When all neighbourhood groups (group A) are able to agree on a common issue (internally consensual) but cannot convince or legitimize their arguments forcefully or tactfully enough with group B, they stand to lose. This failure may be due to a variety of reasons. This could arise due to a smaller number of players actually participating in the cause (i.e. a few leaders); group size not being large/strong enough (due to the free rider problem); outside interests being more powerful (i.e. private versus public interests); the issue dwindling in importance (often evident in media coverages); and perception by outsiders having changed. Due to a loss or diminished interests there are no winners.

Type D (conflictual–conflictual)
This is the most harmful kind of collective action where power is only used negatively. This is an example of where leaders do not respond to the preferences of constituents but instead shape their preferences and opinions (see Lukes, 1974). Such interaction results in conflict among neighbourhoods, where one group works against the interests of another group for its own purpose. Conflict is generated across scales as well, with the vision of local communities working in stark contrast to macro-policy recommendations. In the case of the post-1998 period of school closures, these forms of activism were evident in many of the neighbourhood 'turf' wars across the city. Neighbourhood groups had worked against each other, often harming previous histories of alliances; and the primary goal of collective improvement was lost at the expense of self interest. In this form of activism, groups (within group A) expend their collective energies conflictually with one another. Group B is most strategically powerful at this stage since they are able to avert or transfer conflict to another level. It is in these forms of activism that power works in its most insidious ways. This latent form of power must be acknowledged and uncovered in rational democratic decision making, not only for

politicians, planners and other bureaucrats, but also for the members of the immediate communities affected. The case studies alert us to the perils of type D collective action, often a consequence of neoliberal governance strategies that can lead to fragmentation of civil society and threaten the cohesiveness of cities.

Conclusion

This article has explored various acts of citizenship and corresponding power relations that transpired through the success and failure of collective negotiations during the community consultation process (ARCs) of school closures in Toronto. The purpose was not only to examine the evolution of the planning process (design, implementation and particularly the negotiation of school closures) at three different time periods, and to demonstrate the slow and steady construction, advancement and legitimization of neoliberal policy; but to also note the corresponding spaces and citizens it makes and unmakes through this process. Empirically investigating similar case studies at different time periods and geographies unpacks the complex interplay of the various 'acts' within the specificities of neoliberalization on the 'ground'. However, such interrogations have also provided the opportunity to develop a broader framework noting the scalar interplays at work. The case studies demonstrate that various acts of citizenship can both positively and negatively affect the relationship within and between neighbourhoods across the city. Relational citizenship among and between different scales is complex and can result in consensual or conflictual acts or a combination of both. The process of citizenship appears as one that is 'shifting, contested and profoundly spatial' (see Mitchell, 2003).

The planning process altered by massive protests across the city led to adjustments in the funding formula (including adjustment in the criteria for closures) and to fewer schools being affected. However, this did not necessarily lead to a better outcome. First, this decision led to certain complacency among districts not affected by closure. The mass protest of 1998 was not evident in the later phases and acts that were originally a collective-city agenda transformed to a more individualistic-neighbourhood agenda. Of those affected, dissent tended to be scattered and fragmented across neighbourhoods in the city, each school protecting its own interest and in some cases at the expense of other schools. It appears that the ARC process in phase I and phase II was not only symbolically a democratic procedure but also a very successful neoliberal planning tool. During implementation, some of the fundamental flaws in the ARC process were noted. Residents were made to feel that they faced more of a choice than they actually had in reality and the ARC process was a mere formality. Finally, there were clearly winners and losers, based on how the ARCs were able to present their cases or *produce knowledge*. Consequently, the acts of citizenship were noted as being productive and nurturing for some communities and divisive and detrimental to others.

In an era of neoliberal reform, emphasis on competition and market-based policy is often associated with efficiency, productivity and new forms of governmentality. However, the project of neoliberalism is not necessarily hegemonic (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). As the various case studies in this article reveal, in response to devolutionary practices implemented by the state, acts of citizenship at the local level demonstrate *different forms of agency* contextualized by spatial dynamics resulting in solidaristic/antagonistic, collaborative/fragmented, inclusive/exclusive, and ultimately positive and negative outcomes.

The purpose of this article as stated upfront was to understand acts of citizenship in an era of neoliberalism. However, the narratives from the various case studies indicate that the malleability and fluid nature of neoliberalism is also a function of the various acts of citizenship. Both work in tandem and reciprocally (rather than rationally and independently) in turn implies that policies are in themselves a confluence of various 'acts' — dynamic, political and spatially contingent. Understanding the social, political

and ethical consequences that arise is fundamental to our progress as a democracy and it is imperative to delve into them in their entirety if we want to create just, equitable and civil societies.

Ranu Basu (ranubasu@yorku.ca), Department of Geography, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada.

References

ARC report (1999) School closures — phase one. Staff response to Area Review Committee recommendations. Toronto District School Board, Facility Services, 15 September (revised).

Basu, R. (2002) 'Active' and 'dormant' spaces: a geographical response to school based care. *Journal for Planning Education and Research* 21.3, 274–84.

Basu, R. (2004a) The rationalization of neoliberalism in Ontario's public education system, 1995–2000. *Geoforum* 35.5, 621–34.

Basu, R. (2004b) A Flyvbjergian perspective of public elementary school closures in Toronto: a question of 'rationality' or 'power'? *Environment and Planning: C, Government and Policy* 22, 423–51.

Bondi, L. (1987) School closures and local politics: the negotiation of primary school rationalization in Manchester. *Political Geography Quarterly* 6.3, 203–24.

Brenner, N. and N. Theodore (2002) Preface: From the 'new localism' to the spaces of neoliberalism. *Antipode* 33, 341–7.

Cox, K.R. and A. Mair (1988) Locality and community in the politics of local economic development. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 782, 307–25.

Davis, J.E. (1991) *Contested ground: collective action and the urban neighbourhood.* Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Delaney, D. and H. Leitner (1997) The political construction of scale. *Political Geography* 16.2, 93–7.

Flyvbjerg, B. (1998) *Rationality and power: democracy in practice* (translated by Steven Sampson). University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Forester, J. (1993) *Critical theory, public policy, and planning practice: toward a critical pragmatism.* State University of New York Press, Albany.

Forester, J. (2001) An instructive case-study hampered by theoretical puzzles: critical comments on Flyvbjerg's *Rationality and power. International Planning Studies* 6.3, 263–70.

Foucault, M. (1994) *Power* (J.D. Faubion and P. Rabinow eds.). The New Press, New York.

Gordon, C. (1991) Governmental rationality: an introduction. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds.), *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Hasson, S. and D. Ley (1994) *Neighbourhood organization and the welfare state.* University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Isin, E. (1998) Governing Toronto without government: liberalism and neoliberalism. *Studies in Political Economy* 56, 169–91.

Isin, E. (2002) *Being political: genealogies of citizenship.* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London.

Isin, E. (forthcoming) Theorizing acts of citizenship. *Economy and Society.*

Lukes, S. (1974) *Power a radical view.* MacMillan Publishers, London and Basingstoke.

McCarthy, J. and W.S. Prudham (2004) Neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism. *Geoforum* 35, 275–83.

Ministry of Education and Training (MET) (1998) November [WWW document]. URL http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/nr/nr.html (accessed February 2000).

Miller, B. (2007) Modes of governance, modes of resistance: contesting neoliberalism in Calgary. In H. Leitner, J. Peck and E.S. Sheppard (eds.), *Contesting neoliberalism: urban frontiers*, The Guilford Press, New York and London.

Mitchell, K. (2003) Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, 387–403.

Peck, J. and A. Tickell (2003) Neoliberalizing space. In N. Brenner and N. Theodore (eds.), *Spaces of neoliberalism: urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, Blackwell, Oxford.

TDSB (Toronto District School Board) (1998) *School closures: a response to the provincial government's student focused*

funding model. Toronto District School Board.

TDSB (1999) *Pupil accommodation review: 2000 and beyond*. Toronto District School Board.

TDSB (2000) *School closures: September 2001*. Toronto District School Board.

Toronto Star (1998) Tories blink on schools: hundreds of schools win reprieve as Premier restores $200 million. 7 November, A1.

Witten, K., R. Kearns, N. Lewis, H. Coster and T. McCreanor (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, 203–23.

Wolch, J. (1989) The shadow state: transformations in the voluntary sector. In J. Wolch and M. Dear (eds.), *The power of geography: how territory shapes social life*, Unwin Hyman, Boston.

Résumé

Au cours des dix dernières années, le paysage de l'enseignement public en Ontario a changé très rapidement. D'après les critiques, les politiques néolibérales de privatisation et de marchandisation du système éducatif ont eu des effets différents d'un groupe à un autre. L'un des problèmes les plus sensibles de cette période a été la fermeture d'établissements: en trois ans (1999–2002), près de 200 d'entre eux ont fermé en Ontario. Ces multiples transformations ne se sont pas faites sans contestations et les communautés se sont adaptées de manières diverses: les actes citoyens face au changement sont allés de la solution indépendante au défi collectif. Cet article examine les échecs et succès de plusieurs actes citoyens tentant de défier les logiques gouvernementales néolibérales. Plus spécifiquement, il décrit le difficile processus de négociation des fermetures d'établissement à partir de cas à Toronto. En s'appuyant surtout sur l'observation des participants pendant une année, il étudie la politique appliquée au processus de consultation des communautés au sein d'une 'famille d'établissements' hétérogène en termes de revenus, de capacités et de besoins. A partir de ces études de cas, il examine si ces actes sont de nature à intégrer ou à exclure, à homogénéiser ou à diversifier, à être positifs ou négatifs. L'évolution de la planification, analysée sur trois périodes (1998, 1999, 2000), montre la construction, la progression et la légitimation lentes et régulières de la politique néolibérale et, par là même, les espaces et citoyens qu'elle crée et défait en cours de processus. La conclusion présente un cadre d'action collective en isolant les aspects relationnels de la citoyenneté qui ont des impacts positifs ou négatifs pour la société civile.