# 'The status quo is not an option': Community impacts of school closure in South Taranaki, New Zealand

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**ABSTRACT**

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This paper explores the impacts of proposed school closures on families in rural communities in the South Taranaki region of New Zealand. We situate this instance of educational restructuring in a critical policy context and present an account of its regional unfolding through drawing on local media coverage. We then interpret narratives gathered during an interview-based study of the proposed changes undertaken in 2003–2004. Our analysis highlights the impact of school closure for rural settlements in terms of affect as well as effects. More generally we reflect on the place of schools in the experience of place itself, as well as their contribution to social cohesion and the broadly defined health of a community.

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## 1. Introduction

… there are plenty of communities without schools, but there are no schools without communities. That's the thing townsfolk don't understand … (study participant, 2004)

A strong school is both an asset and a drawcard for a rural community. In recent years, rural primary schools in New Zealand have faced a number of pressures and, as a result of Ministry of Education (MoE) Network Reviews, some have been required to close. Research elsewhere confirms that place-based community may be consolidated through the opening of schools (Hankins, 2007). Our paper explores the contention that threats to a rural school may, in some cases, undermine the viability of the community itself. Our work on the geography of schooling begins with two observations from educationists: that education is a central social process through which culture is expressed, struggled over, and transformed (Williams, 1961); and that it is highly political (e.g. Young, 1971). What counts as education, how it should be organized and how, where, and by whom it should be delivered are enduring and highly contested questions (Dale, 1989; Dale and Robertson, 2006). To these reflections we add the observation that generally, but especially in rural areas, schools are more than sites for the education of young people. Rather, they are also portals to sets of opportunities and resources that range from the informational (e.g. news of community events), to the emotional (e.g. support in the face of illness), the material (e.g. grounds available for community use) and social (e.g. networks of support). School closures, we contend, will therefore have significant *effects* as well as *affects* in their communities (see Thrift, 2004), and are suggestive of the 'strength of weak ties' phenomenon discussed in social capital literature (Granovetter, 1973).

In earlier research, we investigated the impact of school closure in Invercargill, a regional New Zealand city (Witten et al., 2001, 2003). We drew attention to the educational *effects* of the loss of local knowledge in teaching and learning, the effects of increased travel on daily lives, and the economic effects of stripping yet another service from a disadvantaged community. By highlighting the multiple uses of schools as community institutions, their centrality in the (re)production of community life, and the performance of schools as markers of community memory, identity and senses of belonging, we also focused on the *affects* of closure. We showed how schools are both situated in, and contributory to, continuously contested community politics. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, schools remain largely taken-for-granted elements of social infrastructure until they are placed under threat of closure or amalgamation. At such times they can become the overt objects and contexts of political contestation.

In this paper we turn attention to rural schools. In 2000, 32% of New Zealand's 2727 schools were either located in settlements with a population of less than 1000 or in a rural area where there is no settlement. Roughly 10% of all students attended a rural school (ERO, 2001). These rural schools are generally very small, with 43%

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having rolls of under 50 students, and 71% rolls of under 100. In the years 2000–2005 more than 75 schools were closed.

We examine this programme of school closures in rural communities and investigate the place that schools occupy in their production and reproduction. While other geographers have queried the economic implications of closures (Phipps and Anglin, 1993), we ask different questions: what is the significance of the school within a rural community; and what arguments are mounted by the state for closing or amalgamating rural schools? To address these questions we report on a field-based study of the impacts of a Ministry of Education-driven review of the schools in south Taranaki, a predominantly dairy-farming region of New Zealand. The Taranaki region has a distinct physical geography, with the mountain of the same name dominating the volcanic ring plain and the coast beyond. The plain provides fertile free-draining soil which, coupled with a temperate climate and abundant rainfall, supports intensive pastoral farming. Dairying is central to the region's economy, with the 2700 dairy farms concentrated on the ring plain producing almost 20% of New Zealand's total milk solids (Taranaki Regional Council, 2006). Sheep and beef farming are also widely practiced, while oil and gas processing off-shore and on the south east of the ring plain generate over 70% of New Zealand's total gas (Taranaki Regional Council, 2006).

In recent years Taranaki has experienced comparable waves of rural decline associated with industrial restructuring and the neoliberal reforms of the state as other New Zealand regions (Le Heron and Pawson, 1996). South Taranaki, our focal sub-region, experienced a 9.1% decline in population in the decade 1996–2006, with a total population at the latter date of 26,484. The amalgamation of dairy farms has put pressure on traditional social organisation and is routinely argued to be responsible for much of the population decline. While the populations of smaller Taranaki towns have declined, the regional population has become further concentrated in New Plymouth, its urban centre (2006 population 68,000) (Taranaki Regional Council, 2006).

Our case study focuses on settlements in South Taranaki that, with the exception of Opunake, (2006 population 1368) are better regarded as rural localities than villages. This is because their schools often comprise focal points within an agricultural landscape complemented only by an (often abandoned) petrol station, general store and/or post office. The surrounding populations tend to be low density, given the large size (relative to other countries) of dairy farms. Most households travel to larger centres on a weekly basis for shopping and other services. The six schools we focus on are thus small in size, with enrolments in 2000 ranging from 30 (Te Kiri) to 138 (Opunake Primary). However, of these six, only three had experienced decreasing rolls over the preceding decade (Poskitt, 2000).

We begin by situating our paper within geographical interpretations of the school, the neoliberal restructuring programme that gave rise to the Network Review programme of school closures, and local politics of school closures. In the second half of the paper, we present and interpret material gathered from interviews undertaken in Taranaki in 2003–2004. We end with reflections on how this 'window' into one district's experience speaks to broader trends evident in both the neoliberalising education sector and rapidly restructuring rural communities. We conclude that there are considerable merits in 'reading' the impacts of policy on rural areas from the ground level of community experience.

## 2. Schools as community institutions

Schools are spaces where knowledge is reproduced and disseminated, human capital formed, cultural capital invested, social status rationed and ascribed, and the opportunity sets available to individuals mediated. In Foucauldian terms, they normalise, discipline, and shape people's knowledge of themselves

(Foucault, 1977). Schools manage the tensions entailed by producing common (though not uncontested) space from diverse cultural practices and traditions (Postman, 1995), within which they construct individuals via examinations, records, reports, curriculum choices and activities (Peters, 1996). They are key sites where those with a will to govern are able to reach and shape subjects. In sum, the interventions and activities of schools are influential in the reproduction of culture, community and economy. State schools provide governments with opportunities to intervene directly in these processes (Harvey, 2000).

Schools are also 'placed'. Although conditioned by educational norms and overt governmental design, they are institutions of particular places and their communities are firmly attached to them (Bondi, 1987). Schools have histories and special characteristics that in turn offer experiences particular to their places. Through the activities of schools, and the loyalty of communities to them, schools facilitate the development and maintenance of local knowledge and identity. Different schools produce different experiences and knowledge, and normalise and construct place-identity in different ways (see Peters, 1996).

Schools are central in the production and reproduction of communities and the social cohesion of neighbourhoods. In both urban and rural neighbourhoods they are one of the few portals through which all families with children pass. For parents as well as young children themselves, the local school is an amenity/service central to their everyday lives (Witten et al., 2007) and where the institutional fabric of neighbourhoods may be thin and fraying, schools can take on an added significance as community institutions. Rural schools are literally and metaphorically well placed to become a focus for community interaction and identity because of the common needs and life stage experiences of parents with young children, the existing social ties between neighbours who are also parents, intergenerational connections, and their location within the wider rural areas in which schools are literally and symbolically 'central places'. Schools can be important informal meeting places where friendship networks form, exchanges around childcare negotiated, and news of local events shared (Witten et al., 2001, 2003). Arguably, therefore, school closures present a context in which to investigate the relationships between local social capital and bureaucratic power (Basu, 2004).

One expression of bureaucratic power is the argument in support of school closure relating to resources and outcomes. The generally small size of rural schools makes them inherently vulnerable. However, in the British context, Harrison and Busher (1995) regard the contention that small schools deliver substandard curriculum as essentially unproven. Speculatively, therefore, the closure of a rural school will have implications for the wellbeing of children, parents and teachers, as well as the economic and social dynamics of its catchment (see Valencia, 1984).

## 3. Neoliberalism, restructuring, and the respatialisation of schooling in New Zealand

Over the last two decades neo-liberal restructuring programmes in New Zealand have altered the way in which policy is imagined, made and implemented in dispersed sites. Centralised planning and bureaucracy have eroded into partial forms of remote governance, universal provision to targeted delivery, and the productive citizen to the acquisitive self as idealised political subject (Robertson and Dale, 2000). These changes in governmental rationalities are reflected in the meaning, purpose, organization, and delivery of schooling. Several features of neoliberal restructuring set the context for our narrative of rural school closures under the Network Review process.

Firstly, the administration of schooling was reorganised. Neoliberal instruments of marketisation, contractualism, audit, risk

management, and targeted interventions were devised and deployed in a mix of individual and community responsibilisation and central state control (Lewis, 2004). Intermediate layers of administration between the central state and local schools were devolved to elected community Boards of Trustees (BoTs), which govern schools under charters that make communities responsible for delivering schooling. Unlike 'Charter Schools' in the United States which are established under private–public partnerships and emphasise consumer choice (Hankins and Martin, 2006), in New Zealand all schools have charters which involve a legal obligation to deliver a national curriculum according to established administrative and pedagogical practices, and a statement of the school's approach to these obligations.

This model of control was later complemented by a system of parental choice that mobilised competitive market forces as a disciplinary device over schools (Hogan, 1997). Parents were given the right to enrol their children at any state school, subject to the provisions of formal enrolment schemes that set out criteria for the selection of students in oversubscribed schools. Choice was normally exercised on the basis of a mutually reinforcing bond of social composition and socially formed school reputations (Fiske and Ladd, 2000). This quasi 'school market' is regulated by the Education Review Office (ERO), which audits schools and reports on whether they are meeting their performance goals and the full raft of legal obligations and state expectations set down in the charter and other legislation (Lewis, 2000). However the disciplinary practices arising from this surveillance system do not appear to prioritise institutional change around the production of social or community equity. ERO's reports, published as reviews of school performance, became market-making instruments.

Second, dominant understandings of education, its relationship to society, and the role and rationale for state involvement were also overturned. The purpose of education became understood more singularly as the production of human capital and enterprising subjects (Peters, 1992). Recast as investment in human capital rather than a public good, education became seen as a private benefit and personal advancement its goal (Peters and Marshall, 1996). Schools became sites for the production of neoliberal economic and social subjects, for preparing aspirational young people for life in highly competitive urban settings.

Third, these altered governmental rationalities imposed a new spatiality on the organisation of state schooling. The development of public education in New Zealand was underpinned by a commitment to universal provision and an ethics of equality of access to services across space and society. This commitment to spatial equity has been described as a 'spatial contract' (Lewis and Moran, 1998). In a country like New Zealand, with its extensive central planning and its commitments to rural areas built on agricultural dependence, this contract was foundational. The delivery of 'equal' state schooling to all communities was one of its principal clauses, even if access and outcome were not achieved in practice. Large numbers of scattered, often very small, schools were provided for rural communities with free school buses extending access across the catchment. Zoning tied communities to their schools, whilst universal curricula sustained a commitment to a national ideal of equality of outcomes.

Neoliberal governmentalities overturned this 'spatial contract'. An ethic of spatial efficiency and rhetoric of the level playing field as both a 'natural' condition and normative ideal stripped the spatialised identities of communities from policy rationalities. Place became distance – to be priced by the market and borne by individuals. Market justice, equal opportunity to compete, and targeted provision to those unable to play the game, replaced equal access to standardised services as the ideal. This new spatial logic dovetailed with the technologies of remote control to produce the so-called 'devolutionary paradox' of neoliberal statecraft (Rose, 1999). The

compulsory elements of charters, ERO audits, and the dominance of choice over voice circumscribed meaningful community control of schools (Fiske and Ladd, 2000; Robertson and Dale, 2000).

Parental choice disturbed the relations between schools and their geographic communities, recomposed them in more voluntaristic, self-interested terms, and undermined devolution. The promise of opportunities to escape place, especially its enduring and embedded class-based disadvantages embedded in place, proved alluring for parents (themselves increasingly exhorted to adopt aspirational subjectivities). However, they were based on an idealised vision of space and the nature of schooling (Hogan, 1997). Opportunities to choose are uneven, choices are made for social rather than educational reasons, and there is always excess demand at high reputation schools. Not all can or do choose, and even then moving children between schools does not guarantee an escape from disadvantage, which persists in the home, the neighbourhood, and social practices in destination schools (Apple, 2004). Moreover, the schools from which parents flee cannot be dismissed as simply 'poorly performing'. The local can be a resource for local schools, rather than a set of conditions to be transcended wherever possible. Community schools can draw on shared place-centred ethics and committed communities, and develop appropriate place-specific curricula, pedagogies, aspirations, and understandings of the purpose of education.

Researchers in many settings are divided on the effects of parental choice regimes on both equity and performance (Gorard et al., 2003; Merrifield, 2006). In New Zealand parental choice produced spirals in the fortunes of different schools (Fiske and Ladd, 2000). Those in strong market positions (e.g. wealthy areas, strong reputations, good results, attractive to teachers) flourished, while those 'placed' in weak positions lost students to population decline and competition. Vulnerable to the neo-liberal landscape of opportunity and risk (Collins and Kearns, 2001), they entered downward spirals that saw parents opt to send their children elsewhere as rolls, funding and resources fell. The schools of many small, poor and isolated communities failed to conform to the model school in profile and performance. The loss of jobs, services, people, and local identities (Le Heron and Pawson, 1996; Britton et al., 1992) fed through the competitive school market and demographic changes resulting in falling rolls (Fiske and Ladd, 2000; Gibson and Asthana, 2000). These schools were cast as inefficient, demonstrably failing, and unable to prepare students for the knowledge economy. The obvious market response was to allow supply to respond by encouraging popular schools to grow and forcing the unpopular to close. Commonly linked to discourses of educational failure via arguments about quality and scale, roll decline became the justification for disciplinary ultimatums from central government to 'perform or close'.

We argue below, however, that while falling rolls demand a response in educational and efficiency terms, they reflect a social reality composed of a wider pattern of winners and losers tied to neoliberal governmentalities. Small size and/or isolation do not necessarily mean ineffective teaching and closure is neither the only nor necessarily the 'best' option. Small, isolated schools can develop an intimate knowledge of their children and their backgrounds, inspire enhanced teacher commitments, and take advantage of strong community participation and responsibility. Although compromised by referring solely to its own limited work as evidence (see Lewis, 2000), ERO's review of New Zealand's primary schools confirmed that small schools enjoyed excellent and supportive relationships with their communities (ERO, 1999). They had smaller class sizes, and were perceived by parents to have a supportive 'family' atmosphere that fostered a strong sense of belonging, helped teachers build a rapport with students over many years and respond to their individual needs, and encouraged students to take responsibility for younger students. Its later review of rural schooling confirmed that there 'can be both

advantages and disadvantages for students in attending small schools' (ERO, 2001). It warned, however, that although there is no evidence of poorer performance of small schools, especially into the longer term of their students' lives, parental perceptions of a lesser-quality experience were being registered in the choice of larger schools. It also highlighted the disadvantages of scale in good governance and management, providing resources (especially in ICT), and attracting excellent teachers.

## 4. Network reviews after-neoliberal re-engineering of school space

In recent years, these neoliberal governmentalities have been augmented by 'after-neoliberal' political projects (Larner et al., 2007) launched by New Zealand's Fifth Labour government to rebuild social and economic institutions "after" the failures of market-led neoliberalism. Elected in 1999, the government re-engaged in economic and social planning participation, albeit still relying heavily on neoliberal statecraft and treating space as a level playing field (Prince et al., 2006; Larner et al., 2007). Both the reintroduction of zoning provisions within enrolment schemes and the more concerted repackaging of neoliberal understandings of education as education for the knowledge society can be interpreted in these terms. So too can the emergence of the Network Review process for planning school mergers and closures – the dominant context for our narrative.

From the early 1990s the rationalization of schooling had occupied education technocrats. Under the 'Education Development Initiatives' (EDIs) established in 1991, school communities (particularly those of small and/or struggling rural schools) were invited 'to consider 'reshaping' the structure of schooling in their area' (MoE, 1991). Whilst Ministry pressure was brought to bear on the EDIs (Witten et al., 2003), such reshaping was to be, at least in policy rhetoric, voluntary and community-led. Proposals for amalgamation were to emerge from the community and require all party agreement. Schools had options to reject them. The EDIs produced 95 closures from 1989–2000, just over half of the schools closed in New Zealand over that period.

A decade later, in 2001 the government began to develop an orchestrated, national programme of rationalisation referred to as the Network Reviews. Described by the New Zealand School Trustees Association as Ministry-led EDIs, the stated aims of these Network Reviews were to deploy national resources efficiently (fiscal efficiency), address what was termed the 'mismatch of supply and demand due to changing demographics' (spatial efficiency), and enhance curriculum and improve performance in non-model schools (educational efficiency).

The Ministry pointed to surplus capacity within schools of 20–50% and population decline of 10–20% in school-aged children from 1991 to 2001 across the school networks identified, and to projections that suggested the primary aged population was set to fall by 62,000 by 2021 (MoE, 2003). Drawing on arguments linking scale to educational quality in the knowledge society, the MoE argued that all children have the right of access to a quality education wherever they live, the implication being that this was not feasible in small isolated schools, and that schools must change to meet student needs as the size and make-up of communities change (MoE, 2003).

Mergers would, the Ministry argued, provide platforms for enhanced cooperation among schools, effective governance, stability via efficiency and strength in numbers, scale economies for effective resource use, and specialised teaching and other scale economies in curriculum delivery. Communities were to be participants in the review process amid promises of heavy investment in those schools that emerged from the review.

Once a network was identified, a reference group including MoE representatives, BoT members and principals was formed and a professional facilitator was named to mediate reference group discussions and consultations with communities. The facilitator reported to the MoE with feedback from the reference group and the MoE made recommendations to the Minister. A further round of discussions was held in each network prior to a report and final recommendation from the MoE and a final decision from the Minister. Representatives of closing schools were invited to comment and a mediation process made available.

In practice, the process was far more variable – through time and across the networks. In 2004, it was criticised by the School Trustees Association as non-transparent, inconsistent, and unfair, with inadequate on-going evaluation and few standard procedures. The level and nature of consultation, and the provision of information to facilitate it differed across the networks, and was seen by communities as inadequate. The different resolutions and levels of compromise in different settings also drew criticism. The Ministry reports on the different reviews suggest that although there was always local politics at play, decisions were made primarily on the basis of a rationalisation imperative worked through a calculus of central place logics, constrained by prior distributions of fixed assets and specialist facilities such as swimming pools, computer suites, dental clinics, and gymnasia and guidelines for maximum allowable travel distances and times. Recombining schools of different types gave facilitators added flexibility. While established teaching, management, and governance qualities were considered in decisions, they did not guarantee survival for schools. One particular issue was the protection of opportunities for parents to have their children educated in *Te Reo* (Maori language) in total immersion streams or specialist schools (Kura Kaupapa Maori). In most cases, these schools were able to mobilise the politics of the Treaty of Waitangi to resist closure. The review programme stretched from 2001 to 2005, but growing opposition at the local level finally led the Minister to announce a moratorium on new reviews early in 2004 (Mallard, 2004).

## 5. Network reviews in South Taranaki: debates, resistance and hardening of policy

In late 2000 the Wanganui regional office of the MoE published a report on primary school provision for the area served by Opunake High School in South Taranaki. The report, which drew on the views of the MoE, Federated Farmers, principals, teachers, and BoTs, painted a familiar picture of declining school populations, out-migration of young people, and the displacement of families by younger single males associated with farm amalgamation. It built on earlier local initiatives to respond to falling rolls in the Opunake District by absorbing years 7–8 into Opunake High School thus making it years 7–13. In the mid-1990s, the principal and BoT of Opunake High School had discussed the possibility with local contributing schools. The proposal provoked community opposition but attracted attention from both regional MoE representatives and the teachers' union. It laid the ground for bringing local schools into a later EDI process.

Whilst EDIs were successfully initiated elsewhere in Taranaki, progress on an EDI was thwarted by response to the publication of the 2000 Report which recommended establishing a steering group of senior teachers and community representatives. A facilitator was appointed and the group was given a brief to devise various models for providing education in the Opunake High School catchment (Poskitt, 2000). Twelve schools were involved: Pungarehu, Rahotu, Oaonui, Opunake Primary, Opunake High, Pihama, Otakeho, Te Kiri, Riverlea, Auroa, Kaponga and Kapuni. As the Ministry became more directive of the process, it later transformed into a Network Review.

Most of the schools had rolls of less than 90, and while these had fluctuated, most were declining. Oaonui, Pihama, and Auroa schools were the exceptions; their rolls had in fact increased between 1990 and 2000. Our interviews with school trustees and principals revealed that they accepted a need for change, but were

determined to maintain their school's individual identity and protect the values of local schools in rural communities. The principals favoured initiatives that encouraged schools to work together by pooling resources, especially in administrative matters. As the MoE's interest in the fiscal and educational significance of declining school rolls solidified into the Network Review process within national policy (MoE, 2002), the total school roll in the Opunake area continued to fall at the rate of one full classroom of children per year, and was forecast to continue. The deliberations of the Steering Committee report on schooling in the area stressed the social and educational advantages of larger schools, including increased learning and financial resources, greater sporting and cultural opportunities, increased professional support and opportunities for teachers, and the availability of a larger support pool of parents and caregivers. These benefits were argued to be realisable with the assistance of EDI funding.

In June 2002 the Steering Committee members visited other rural communities where mergers of schools had occurred and recommended the formation of an Action Group consisting of representatives of schools in the area. Although the Action Group was notionally led by professionals and community representatives, it was working to a MoE brief that "the status quo is not an option" (McLean, 2002, 1). The area's school communities, well versed in the neoliberal language of 'community consultation' and informed by school representatives on the Action Group, were not to be deceived. At a meeting called by the Oaonui School BoT shortly after the formation of the Group, "dozens of concerned parents" reportedly "expressed their disgust" at what was now seen as "the MoE plan to merge schools in the district" (McLean, 2002, 1).

As the MoE firmed up its new policy framework for Network Reviews, resistance mounted to suggested mergers and closures. Communities began to contest the rhetorics of roll decline and performance risks. In community forums and local newspapers, they began to mobilise opposition to what they presented as an assault on rural New Zealand by reference to prior dairy factory closures and loss of services. According to one participant at a public meeting "if our school closes, we lose our community" (Opunake & Coastal News, 2002a, 1), a view expressing the real fears underpinning this discourse of resistance. Worries were expressed about the short-to medium term implications of students attending schools marked for closure, the disruption of changing schools, and the difficulty of attracting workers to an area where there was so much uncertainty around schooling.

Those associated with Oaonui school, which faced closure under various models, were particularly vocal. In a community meeting, the chairman of the BOT suggested that his school roll had increased by 50% since 1996 and that it was stable. Others joined the chorus of opposition, mobilising other narratives of the value of local schools and community rights and adding new layers of resistance. A former senior education inspector with links to the region described the MoE's stance as being at odds with the devolutionary thrust of the Education Act (1989). Although history had already proven this a somewhat naïve interpretation of neoliberal intent (Lewis, 2004), this intervention introduced the language of rights and raised the spectre of the MoE "riding roughshod over parents' wishes" (Daily News, 2002, 3). When the Minister organised a visit to the district in October for public meetings at Opunake and Kaponga, these were scheduled for 2–3.30 pm and 4–5 pm, sparking derision from farmers in Letters to the Editor of the local newspaper. Scheduling the meetings during milking time sent the message to the farming community that the Minister failed to understand rural life, held them in contempt, and perhaps even sought deliberately to prevent them from "having a say about our school's closing" (Opunake & Coastal News, 2002b, 1).

This growing opposition was described by an MoE regional manager as "a denial of realities" (Daily News, 2002). He questioned the rationale for schools that were in close proximity and had rolls of less than 160, and argued that the policy was to achieve more value for money rather than save money. In the same vein, when the Minister appeared at community meetings, he encouraged people to "plan for something which is inevitable" and to support initiatives to resource "schools that have a long-term future" (Daily News, 2002). He emphasised the financial inefficiency of sustaining small schools with declining rolls, and drew selectively on ERO reviews and anecdotal evidence to describe a record in the area of inappropriate corporal punishment, teacher incompetency, low levels of pre-school education, poor curriculum delivery, and rising resource costs. He applied this assessment collectively to all schools in the area and concluded that "what we've got to face up to is the fact that education is not actually doing too good in this area" (Opunake & Coastal News, 2002b). In two teacher schools, he insisted, one poor teacher could compromise half a child's education. From the community perspective, the Minister was clearly reporting a highly disturbing and done deal (Opunake & Coastal News, 2002b).

Five months later, in March 2003, the Minister announced his preliminary decision to cut the number of schools in the area from 12 to nine and to initiate two further Network Reviews – to the east and north. Five schools were to be closed (Opunake, Oaonui, Te Kiri, Pihama and Riverlea), but new schools would be created from the merger of Opunake and Oaonui on the former site, and Te Kiri, Pihama and Riverlea on the Auroa site. Three schools continued in their existing forms and on their existing sites (Opunake High School, Auroa Primary School and Te Kura Kaupapa Maori O Tamarongo) (see Fig. 1).

The decision produced immediate criticism from the teachers' union, the staff and the BoTs, who had been working with the MoE for 3 years on the review of schooling in the area. The Oaonui community collected and forwarded to the MoE more than 3500 submissions following the announcement, and a group of 50
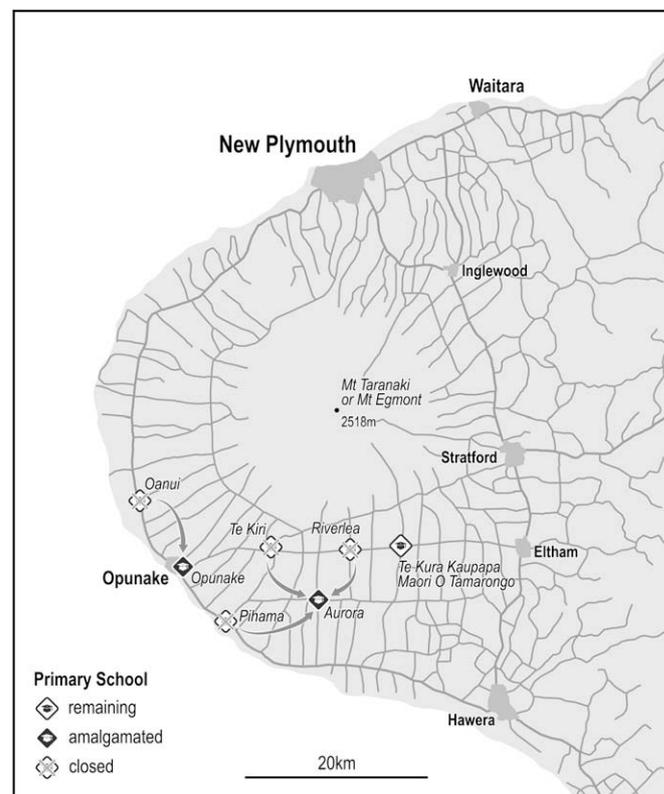


**Fig. 1.** School closures in south Taranaki.

travelled by bus to Wellington to protest on the steps of Parliament. The Minister received the group, but did not change his mind. In June 2003 the MoE linked the coastal closures into the other two Network Reviews and announced that it would 'unlock' $3.5 million to ensure 'quality education' in the South Taranaki Region.

The four schools marked for complete closure did not reopen in 2004. In the final weeks of 2003, communities staged emotional farewells to their schools. Each held ceremonies for generations of former students that lasted up to 3 days. The Taranaki Daily News described them with great nostalgia, setting the tone for wider regional and national understanding of the process.

> … under giant marquees and aging wooden halls, the communities of Te Kiri, Pihama, Riverlea and Oaonui have given the last rights (sic) to their schools. Tears, anger and frustration were prevalent at the four sites as farming families said goodbye to more than a century of memories and waved goodbye to the last symbols of their settlements. School buildings now sit among the rest of the deserted villages' dairy factories, shops and post offices ….The closure of their schools has hit these communities hard. For many, the school was the bow that tied the community together, a place to focus on, meet and work to improve future generations. Most feel a deep-seated anger towards a Government that has further alienated rural communities in its agenda to change New Zealand's education landscape. (Daily News, 2003, 3)

The announcement only 3 months later of a national moratorium on reviews gave those who had fought to save the schools some consolation, but could not save their schools. They provoked a further round of protest and another march on Parliament, this time by affected parents and pupils from around the country.

## 6. Investigating community constructions of closure

### 6.1. Method

The foregoing narrative was assembled from a critical review of the now rapidly disappearing accounts of closure in community newspapers and correspondence. However, it lacks the voices and experience of participants that might allow us to see behind the trauma of closure and disaffection. We now seek to flesh out this analysis by exploring the local constitution of a genealogy of school closure. To do this, we visited the South Taranaki region and conducted 29 interviews in September 2003 (pre closure) and then in April 2004 (post closure). We invited principals, parents and trustees associated with four of the schools to be closed (Te Kiri, Riverlea, Pihama and Oaonui), and two which were to remain open (Opunake and Auroa) to participate in an interview concerning the impact of school closure for their children, themselves, their neighbourhood and the wider community. We approached respondents through a letter sent by the school principal and used a purposive sampling frame to select participants from those parents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed. We sought to ensure the sample included Maori and non-Maori families, farm owners and employees (including sharemilkers) and both parents active in the closure debate and those who had been more peripheral. Anonymity was preserved by the use of pseudonyms and masking details where necessary.

We began from the position that experience is constituted in participants' accounts as they talk about events and reactions in ways that others can accept and understand. A series of questions and probes formed the basis of semi-structured interviews which lasted from 40 to 90 min and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. We sought data that was experiential and inscribed with the subjectivities of the participants, so our thematic analysis is oriented to language and the interpretative resources that participants drew upon in relating their experiences of school closure. Our goal was to draw out the common features of informants' insights, as well as the variations deriving from particular perspectives, in order to highlight the impacts of school closure. We collated verbatim sections of text relating to various themes (at first rather loosely defined). We further clarified the patterns of ideas and images used in talk about the topics by further intensive reading of the data, allowing the researchers to describe and illustrate the content and function of the common themes. Two of the researchers (KW, TM) worked independently to sort text excerpts into theme files and then came together to discuss and ratify the coding and develop the descriptions of each theme. An 'audit trail' from interview to theme files has been retained as part of the research records.

### 6.2. Findings

We discuss parental discourses on the closure of the Taranaki schools according to a number of themes that emerged from our analysis relating to two broad concerns: the uniqueness of a rural school environment; and the implications for the community with the dissolving of the school.

#### 6.2.1. Rural places and intergenerational investment

Communities were described as "close-knit … as most rural areas are". There was unity through involvement in similar occupations. For example, "we're all based around the agriculture sector here. … If anything needs to be done it is done … just do some phone calls." A number of people spoke of having close relationship with the neighbours and of the support given by members of the district especially in times of crisis.

> If there is anybody sick in a family, the whole district knows almost straight away. There tends to be a telephone call to every household and there is baking and things … like with funerals … there is so much support in the area. It's very much school-orientated I suppose with sports functions and things. (Beth)

While a number of participants acknowledged that on-going contact with local people was likely post school closure, primarily through children's activities, there were concerns that without the incentive provided by school events to draw the wider community together it would be more difficult over time to sustain community life despite people's best efforts.

It was evident that the social dynamics prevailing at small rural schools lend themselves to intergenerational support and community cohesion. We encountered people whose family histories in the area dated to the late 1800s. Several generations, living and dead, had connections to the schools.

> … my grandmother went to this school, my father went to this school, and my mother-in-law went to this school, and my husband went to the school and my four children. So it has been a real family tie here. (Leonie)

There were many accounts of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents going out to support the school. Some voiced a concern that once a school closed grandparents would lose some of their connection with the community.

> … Granddad plays in the tennis tournament … They won an overseas trip last year, he went up to the school and did a presentation to the children … about their European trip, yes they're very much involved, as are a lot of the other grandparents, too. (Lucy)

The place of schools as markers of community history remains evident in the proximity of a number of the schools to memorials to those who died in the world wars.

### 6.2.2. The particularities of rural life

During the closure process parents felt that the MoE continually demonstrated a lack of understanding about the ways that rural communities function, particularly the seasonality of a rural community and how the farming cycle affects the school roll numbers. In the Taranaki region, June is known as the 'gypsy season' as share-milking families move in and out of communities creating an uncertain equation for predicting school enrolment numbers from season to season.

> … that is where the Government don't understand, they say your rolls are falling, but they don't understand. It's like the tide it comes in and out and it all depends on the farming community who comes in and who goes. They don't stay in one farm for very long. Some do, but others change every year, sharemilkers or workers …. They don't understand that in this day and age you're not going to have a common number. (Rob).

In addition to a concern that there was a lack of understanding about rural life, parents had grave concerns about the practicalities of the mergers. While it is obvious to an 'outsider' that transport and distances are key factors affecting travel to school in a rural area, the finer details of bus routes, travel times and other associated factors are far less well understood.

> To put a five or six-year-old on a bus for a long length of time it's just not acceptable, and it's frightening for the parents. We don't want our children on buses with high school pupils …. (Mary)

One interviewee claimed that the MoE had no answer to the key question many parents asked, "if you close our school what are we going to do for bus runs?" It was reported that the MoE-appointed independent facilitator had stressed a policy that no children should be on the bus for more than half an hour. By late 2003 the new bus routes had still not been notified to parents. For many, the routes were a significant factor in the choice of school so that at the time of interview a number of parents had made no definite decision about which school their children would attend in 2004. It was claimed that at one school, "… everyone is waiting to find out what the bus routes are going to be."

Paramount among concerns regarding bussing and commuting times was a fear that schedules would not take into account the sharemilker's farm duties. This scenario would make it very difficult for parents to fulfil their obligations to both be 'good' parents (e.g. putting them on the bus in the morning and meeting the bus after school) as well as meeting their farm duties. An employer put forward this perspective:

> … we're dairy farmers, that means we milk night and morning … if a child has to get on the bus at quarter to 8 in the morning the logistics at this time of year, springtime, of one of the parents if you've employed both of them …, for one of those parents to get home to get that child up and breakfasted and on that bus. It is very difficult to operate a dairy farm and for them to fulfil their obligation to the job of what they're being paid to do. (James)

One respondent said that while the MoE talked of saving money on buildings by merging schools, in reality when there are greater distances to travel to schools there is a considerable increase in the cost to the MoE of the school bus programme. There was also anxiety expressed about whether a commitment to provide a school bus service would be ongoing.

While farm amalgamations and decreasing population in the area were claimed by MoE as evidence for the need for closures they were not issues at the forefront of the interviewees' minds. One described the farming changes thus:

> Fifteen years ago … there were my husband's parents and us. Now on the same farm we've got three full-time staff, at this

stage only one of them has got family, but … we could have easily employed another two couples with families … I just think that with farm amalgamation, that's an argument that they're using that there'll be less number of people working on it, but you still need the same number of staff if not more when you amalgamate farms. (Beth)

A strong view that the dynamics of farming is not understood by 'ministry people' ran through these narratives.

### 6.2.3. The school's place in social and economic life

Parents saw the school as more than just an educational institution. Rather it was understood to be the focal point of the community and for some people the school was the only site at which they has contact with other local people. Community spirit was built through the school and for many the school was the heart of their community:

> I believe a school has a big role to play in the stability and security of people's lives. They know where to go if there is a problem. It is like, well OK, we'll meet at the school ….(Lucy)
> … whatever is going on at school, all your neighbours are there, you mightn't have seen them for a few weeks but you can guarantee to see them at school. (Matt)

In addition to the usual forms of parental support you would expect to find, the schools provided the venue for an array of activities that involved the wider community. These included everything from school fundraisers to calf days to local mock Olympics that brought the community together to support the school. The schools served as a nexus for social interaction.

> Calf day is huge, like I think there are more mums, dads, aunties, uncles, friends, people from the area itself come to Calf Day, than there are kids at the school, you know it is a big turnout. They just turn up at the school for whatever is going. (Matt)

Parents and other residents reported that they had contributed time, money, and a great amount of effort to build their local community through the local school. A reciprocal arrangement was described whereby the community supports the school and the activities organised through the school also support the community.

> I still stay in contact with the school. … (it) is the central focal point to a community and we still get newsletters from the school. They keep us in touch. I could go down there and see most of them, quite a few of the kids would know who I am still. (Jeff)

There was concern that the loss of the community's focal point would essentially shut down the community and therefore had potential economic effects.

> People are going to think twice about coming here and investing in this area, too. When people come to share milk they invest a lot of money in the herds … they might think, well we'll go to other places where the schools in an area will suit.(Bill)

In sum, the school is clearly central to not only the social, but also the economic, life of the rural community.

### 6.2.4. The advantages of smallness

A number of participants suggested that their strong loyalty towards the local school and the level of support the school received from its community was due to its small size. Residents built a community identity through support for their school and this support kept the school premises in good repair and kept members of the community connected:

> When there's a working bee called in any rural school they all turn up with spades, shovels … that's why a lot of rural schools

are up to date … any building maintenance we've always done (Joe)

A small school was regarded as an asset. In particular, the smallness of the school gave parents a sense of accessibility to the teachers, the curriculum, their child's learning environment and other parents in the community.

When you go there you're welcome, you're not sort of, oh here's that mother again, you're very welcome to interact with them. (Lucy)

Parents thought that the smaller class sizes of rural schools provided greater opportunities for their children. Supporters of one of the schools that closed had prepared a dossier of past pupils who had gone on to excel or hold roles of responsibilities at the secondary schools they attended.

The teacher, in most cases knows the children really really well, both in and out of school, so they can give them that extra support that they need. (Leonie)

Several parents indicated that they would be reluctant to become as involved again in a new school. Their reasons were twofold: a feeling of disenchantment incurred by the school closure process and a belief that the larger scale of the new school might dissuade them from adopting the active role they had previously taken. In a bigger school they felt that their involvement would not make an impact, it would not be recognised and/or it would not be as rewarding as involvement in a small school.

Jan used to go and do mother help all the time and that when the kids were younger. At a bigger school you wouldn't be encouraged to do that, or you wouldn't feel encouraged to do that in a bigger school because there is more people there and more teachers. (James)

Parents were aware that educational disadvantage was associated with small school size in the closure debates but many did not feel they had been given adequate evidence for how 'bigger schools were superior'. Participants indicated that no one in the community had any desire to hold his or her child back from a better education.

They made a point of saying that the education that the kids in these small schools received wasn't below par, but they would receive a better education [in a bigger school]. But, there was no proof of that. You know, how can they? But, there was no indicators to prove that they would get a better education. (Nicole)

Others were very aware of the 'downsides' of a small rural school but because of the favourable ERO reports and stable or growing rolls, the prospect of school closure was not something they expected to affect 'their' school.

I thought that there would be mergers in the district and I actually agreed that there should be mergers because I think that a school of 40 is actually not healthy for the children socially. Academically they may be doing OK … I think socially they need to have a number of peers … but I didn't think that our own school would close … when it is your own school that they're talking about you think well this is the one that should stay and all the others should go …, I had no idea that they would close this school. (Joe)

### 6.2.5. Competitive process and discrepant outcomes

We encountered a deep sense of dismay and sadness in the aftermath of the review of South Taranaki schools. People deplored the amount of money spent on the review itself which they felt could have been put to better use. There was also resentment about the time taken and lack of clear direction given by the MoE about

plans for the schools. Schools formerly had worked together in a spirit of cooperation, but as one parent said "it took just 16 months to (see) … people getting more and more upset … it was like divide and rule". The uncertainty was especially unsettling:

Basically we just wanted to know if the Ministry was going to close our school. They couldn't say, yes, we're going to close your school (Pete).

It seemed that even those who were involved in the life of a school as members of the BoT were confused about what was happening.

Well I was on the BOT at that stage when it was first initiated and yes we got information then. It was on it was off it was on it was off and then it came back and yes it was going to happen. … it actually just wore the BOT members down and there just seemed to be no one there who could make a decent decision …. (Julia)

The ongoing effects of the drawn out process generated uncertainty among teaching staff and in the community's view appeared to take its toll through the loss of valuable personnel resource to schools.

I think the teachers were told they had jobs with the new school, then they didn't have jobs, because they took out the word merger and put in the word closed, which meant that it changed the whole thing and our junior room teacher was unemployed basically at the end of January …. (Beth).

People spoke of the lack of clarity in the way the MoE operated and of changes in direction, which did not generate any confidence among parents in the communities, involved. Perceived discrepancies in the way the process applied to different schools caused difficulties.

Pihama has got 87 kids, they've told it to shut, and then there's a school … that have only got 14 or 16 children … and they're allowed to stay open. They've got access to no end of money and here we are we've got to watch every dime. (Pete)

People's accounts of the way the MoE representatives initiated and applied the process reveal a sense of disappointment and surprise for both communities and individuals.

Mergers, they can either make or break a community … this merger here nearly broke this community because the Government did it the wrong way. (Kevin)

Accounts reveal that parents' efforts were directed towards 'fighting for the existence' of the school their children attended. The way a school whose immediate future was assured canvassed for pupils dismayed some of those whose school was to close. One respondent claimed that the resulting feeling of alienation experienced by the community of the threatened school would take years to overcome.

… the review has perhaps alienated some communities because of the stance in the neighbouring communities. I think it is going to take years or a generation perhaps even to overcome that. (James)

Trust between communities was said to have disappeared and people felt that these broken relationships between communities and individuals would affect community interactions for years to come. There was a profound change in relationships between groups and individuals within the community. By employing a 'divide and conquer' tactic communities would be left fighting amongst themselves.

Had it been done quickly and in a more effective way I think it would have had a much more positive affect. I think what it's done, is it has pitted community against community … (Kevin)

In sum, the imperative to 'consult' added to the anguish of, and tension between, the constituent rural communities.

## 7. Conclusion

While policy attention turned to evaluating the educational impact of the Network Reviews (MoE, 2004), we remain interested in the social geographies of closure. We conclude that notions of 'place' underpin the development and implementation of the process of closure. While place-based community activism has achieved the opening of education opportunities elsewhere (e.g. Hankins, 2007), in our example activism failed and the particularities of place were annihilated by a rationalist spatial logic of provision. Our paper sustains a critique of both the failure of the process to recognise the centrality of schools to their communities and the affects of both process and outcomes (closure and merger) on community well-being. Previous New Zealand work (Witten et al., 2003) suggests that the process involved has been a 'one size fits all' policy consistent with a 'level playing field' mentality: the complexities of educational gains were under-theorised; emphasis was placed on property, finance and administration; rationalisation took precedence over localisation policies in other spheres such as community development and sustainability; outcomes were largely pre-determined despite invitations to communities to participate; and it was ultimately a demoralising and energy sapping experience for communities. The South Taranaki example confirms these assessments and reiterates the failures of policy makers to recognise the topography of social space. Arguments were made that improved transport links enabled easier access between communities. However, the importance of the social landscape was consistently overlooked. Our paper also draws several new insights on the process of closure and the upheavals wrought by it, two of which we wish to emphasise by way of conclusion.

First, the case emphasises the determination to impose Network Review logics of rationalisation on schooling in the area, to bring to bear on the review process discourses of fiscal efficiency, the knowledge economy and narrowly interpreted notions of performance. It also highlights the discourse of spatial neutrality and efficiency underpinning these logics. Our case study further demonstrates the level of state intervention and orchestration now at work in reengineering of rural space. These features are increasingly being recognised by critics of this engineering, but our focus has been on the way in which the imposed models of control form the 'objective' conditions of the decision framework and impact upon the argument for closure in multiple ways. Thus, we argue, the voices of stakeholders such as those we interviewed are, by default, constructed as subjective and inherently less relevant to the dominant policy-driven discourse of Network Review.

Second, the efforts we observed parents making to retain viable local schools is confirmation of the central role that educational institutions can have in rural community life. The school represented both a legacy of previous generations and a gateway to broader sets of resources. As in the case of rural health care institutions, similarly invested with, if not built by community effort (Barnett, 2000; Kearns, 1998) the closure of rural schools disconnects communities from their past, shuts down a crucial focal point and meeting place for the community, and blocks the paths to other resources. Within a landscape of restructuring, and at least in New Zealand rural settlements, a school may be the last viable public service agency to remain in a locality. Thus, while there may be some agreement among members of a community regarding the need to redistribute educational resources within an area, there is likely to be resistance to a logic that seeks to close schools, particularly where they apparently perform well in economic and academic terms. 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. To this extent, our paper has been a contribution to the emotional geographies of rural life in New Zealand. Our paper demonstrates the value in 'reading' the texts of policy from the level of the local landscape. For it is only at the ground level that place is fully understood as both locatedness and that bundle of identity markers that affirm and confirm peoples' place-in-the-world.

## Acknowledgements

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