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## School closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting values?

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Graduate Program in Education  
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of  
Philosophy  
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School closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting values?

(Spine title: School closures in Ontario)

by

Richard Wm. Irwin

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
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entitled:

**School closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting values?**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

## **Abstract**

In response to financial pressures and declining school enrolments, the Ontario provincial government in 2006 developed a new policy on school closures that established specific criteria to determine the value of a school to a community and required every school board to involve the local community in any school closure decision. Despite these provisions, the implementation of this policy at the local level by school boards created anger and active resistance from parents, students and other community members.

Focussing on two school closures within an Ontario school board, and using ethnographic methods, this study explores how one board implemented the provincial policy, and the impact this implementation had on those directly affected. Informed by debates on neoliberalism and on communitarianism, this critical policy-in-practice analysis of school closures provides a detailed case study of policy development and implementation. By examining how school closure policies are actually implemented and how these policies affect the people and communities involved, this study contributes a new dimension to the school closure literature which, to date, has focussed largely on providing advice to board administrators and trustees on how to ease the school closure process.

At the centre of my analysis is the interplay between public policy and community, particularly how the values of key institutional decision-makers shape the agenda and its delivery, and what values shape the responses of local community members. I demonstrate how the dominant policy paradigm based on adherence to neo-liberal economics and new managerialism is adopted by school boards in their decision-

making practices and underlines the conflict between institutional imperatives and community wishes. The research reveals a deep and divisive institutional-community dichotomy where the social purposes of the local school as defined by the community are in constant tension with the school board's economic and fiscal policy purposes.

**Keywords:** school closures, Ontario public policy, values and decision-making, neoliberalism, public participation, communitarianism

## **Dedication**

I dedicated this work to my family: to my wife Helen, whose on-going love and support makes all things possible, and to my daughters Emily and Carolyn, who through the example of their own outstanding scholarship provided me the courage to try.

## Acknowledgement

A major undertaking of this nature cannot be accomplished without the help and support of many others, others who through a variety of assistance and sound advice make the work of this magnitude possible. I have been blessed to have just such help and support in this endeavour and wish to acknowledge those individuals who contributed in so many ways to my enterprise.

**To my committee:** To Doctors Rebecca Coulter, Allen Pearson and Marshall Magnan thank you for your guidance and patience as I worked through the issues and struggled for answers (and sometimes questions). I would like to especially acknowledge my supervisor Rebecca whose council I have come to value so dearly over the several months we worked together.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*Policy, to put it simply, comes from those who have the legitimate authority to impose normative guidelines for action. (Pal, 2010, p. 6)*

In 2005, responding to financial pressures and declining school enrolments, the Ontario Ministry of Education developed a new policy on school closures. Across the province, 172 elementary and secondary schools were closed or were recommended for closure between 2009 and 2012; a further 163 schools are currently under review (People for Education, 2009, p.2).

As part of this latest policy on school closures, the Liberal government established a process that required school boards to involve the local community when making decisions about school closures (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Ministry of Education guidelines provide criteria that school boards must use to determine the value of the school – to the community, to the students, to the board and to the local economy. The guidelines also provide an outline of the public consultation process that school boards must follow, and the minimum timelines for the review process.

Despite these provisions, the implementation of this policy at the local level by school boards has created much turmoil and active resistance by many parents, students and other community members. The emotional debates and ensuing forms of resistance are well illustrated by the media attention reflected in newspaper headlines such as “Loss of school kills a part of communities” (Blizzard, 2011), “Council backs call to stop school closures” (Dubinski, 2010), “Alliance calls for stop to school closures” (The

Community Press, 2009), and “Boycott battles school closures” (Matyas & Dubinski, 2008). Ruptures appear to have been created between the policies intended by the province as a means to create a more stakeholder inclusive process, and their actual application in communities.

In considering this state of affairs, a number of questions arise. How do the values of decision-makers at various levels influence and shape the policy agenda and its delivery? How do community members describe the concrete and practical application of school closure policy in their locales? How do they understand the consequences of school closings, especially as they occur in local settings? How does (or do) the end results of school closures reflect what community members value?

Pal (2006) states that policy (decision-making) is the creation of (or is created by) values, which in turn, establishes a set of normative standards. The major focus of my research, then, is to further the understanding of the impact of values in the design of public policy. At the centre of my research is the interplay between public policy and community, particularly how the values of key institutional decision-makers influence and shape the agenda and its delivery, and what values shape the responses of local community members. In other words, I am interested in the nature of the relationship between the values of policy-makers and the values of the members of affected communities.

A review of current literature (see Chapter Two) shows a dearth of research in terms of the impact of school closures on communities. However, current professional educational journals contain many articles that focus on how to make the closure process

“appeal proof.” This legalistic emphasis brings to mind Ralston Saul’s (2009) contention that our leadership at this time is unable “to begin their thinking with the real lives of their real citizens” (p. 272), and therefore to write policy that is more community and less institutional in focus.

To better and more fully understand the dynamics of school closure policy in Ontario, I conducted a critical policy-in-practice analysis (Hood, 1986; deLeon, 1994; McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009; Pal, 2010) of two specific school closures to provide a detailed study of policy development and implementation. While informed of debates of neoliberal marketization and communitarianism I also was guided by deLeon’s (1992) argument

[a] democratic policy analysis should make for much more effective policy because it would be operating under the recipients' values and needs hierarchies (i.e., those directly affected by the programs) as opposed to those of the removed (however sympathetic) analyst and policymaker. (p. 127)

The inclusion of the voices of affected community members therefore becomes central to an analysis of school closure policy. For this reason, an ethnographic approach was employed to gather evidence from the two school closure sites selected for in-depth study and analysis.



## Important Definitions

Before turning to an examination of school closure policy-in-practice, it is important to set out how I understand and use the concept of values since values are central to my analysis. In constructing a working definition of the term *values*, I draw upon the work of Pal (1987, 2006, 2010) because the interaction between values and policy development is a central theme in his work. He describes public policies as artefacts that have to be deliberately constructed, and argues that the forces that drive the creation process are the creators' interests, values and casual assumptions (Pal, 1987, p. 109). He further describes policies as responses to problems, and explains how the way in which the character and shape of the problem is understood will deeply affect the nature of the response. Values, in this sense, help explain how one sees, or does not see, an issue. In addition, education is a highly political act (Apple, 2010; Freire, 1970). As such, the decisions and methods that create the policy frame for educational decisions that shape the form and delivery of education can be seen as political as well. For example, Kerr's (2006) review of Ontario educational decision-making argues that the neoliberal focus on restructuring education can be attributed to factors more pervasive than the ideological orientation of political parties in power at any given moment in time.

Similarly Pal (1987) asserts that in terms of an applied critical policy analysis it is important to look for evidence that reveals the values that shape policy content, and also the values that inform the responses to any policy implementation process (p. 3). Howlett, Ramesh and Perl (2009) argue that in terms of policy studies, our scope should broadly examine not just individual programs and their effects, but also their

presuppositions and the processes that led to their adoptions (p. 8). These presuppositions also can be seen as values driven.

Critics of contemporary educational policy and policy-makers (Aboites et al., 2008; Anderson et al., 2006; Keeney, 2007; Kerr, 2006) consider current policy development as occurring within the neoliberal narrative, and, as such, when decisions are made, the economic or market values trump all other considerations. Current administrative practice is described by Giroux (2004) as “buoyed by the spirit of a market fundamentalism that subordinates the art of democratic politics to the rapacious laws of the market values of a market-driven society” (p. xxii). Apple (2006) argues that the dominance of a neoliberal hegemony has had a significant transformational impact upon our democratic institutions. He states that, “neoliberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one” (p.15). The critics of current educational policy posit that the adherence to market fundamentalism can be seen as having a pervasive influence and impact on the educational policy makers’ current agenda. Kerr (2006) describes the impact of this influence as “the juggernaut of neoliberal reform” (p. ii).

My own twenty-year experience working in Ontario for non-profit and public bodies at the community level suggests that there is much truth to this claim. During this period I observed how the neoliberal meta-narrative dominated the public policy agenda, with an ever increasing emphasis on the fiscal issues to the exclusion of public service imperatives. This also reflects the observations of a number of critical policy analysts (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007; Pal, 2006; Stein, 2001). Giroux (2004) describes this meta-narrative as a new public pedagogy, that is a hegemonic discourse of marketization and

efficiency, where decision-makers naturally place considerations of market values above all else. In educational policy, adherence to this narrative has been described as being so pervasive that the result has been the implementation of normative business-focused practices for school boards as a core principle which takes on the position as an intractable institutional value (Aboites, et al., 2008; Anderson et al., 2006; Griffith, 2001; Giroux, 2004; Keeney, 2007; Kerr, 2006; Stein, 2001; Taylor, 2001). As Apple (2006) observes, the adherence to neoliberal values is not only seen as the best approach for organizations to contemplate, it is seen as the only approach, taking on “something of a sacred aura now, especially since we are repeatedly told that there are *no* [original emphasis] alternatives worth considering” (p. 15). This approach to the delivery of public services, usually called “marketization,” has been seen by education advocates as a direct attack on the core conventions of public education (Compton & Weiner, 2008), but the emphasis on educational efficiency and business models of accountability appeals to large segments of the cost-conscious electorate (Keeney, 2007; Lakes, 2008).

My research explores the degree to which these neoliberal values shape school closure policies and related practices. Kerr (2006), in her research on Ontario educational policy, posits that closures may be framed as improving the quality of education while they are really decisions motivated by institutional economic imperatives. Among other things, my study investigates the views of individual members of communities affected by closures: do they see closures as a means to improve educational quality or as a fiscal inevitability? Furthermore, do closures actually result in substantial cost savings? Is bigger necessarily better? Case-in-point, throughout my research the impact of long distance busing of students was referenced by parents and

community members on numerous occasions in terms of both the financial and quality of life costs on family, community and students themselves. These costs, as they occur outside of the institutional jurisdiction, do not appear to be a factor in terms of the final decision-making process.

Given its claim of inclusiveness, whose values are then being respected in the current provincial policy on school closures? Valencia (1984) observes that school closures are burdensome to families and raise issues of equity (p. 7). Further, he cites several examples that demonstrate students' cognitive and affective advantage when they attend smaller schools rather than larger ones (Valencia, 1984, p. 12). These findings challenge claims about the superiority of larger schools from a different value position. Current literature in this area is also sparse leading one to postulate that considerations of the benefits of small schools over large may not be a key influence in the decision-making considerations of policy makers.

Understanding and defining the meaning of *community* is a more challenging undertaking. Many attempts have been made to describe what constitutes a community. There is an abundance of literature (reviewed in detail in Chapter Two) dedicated to consideration of the role of community in the development of public policy (Arvind, 2009; Campbell, 2010; Hampton, 2009; Keevers, Treleaven & Sykes, 2008; Smith, 2010). In terms of my investigation, a useful definition of community is found in Valencia's (1984) school closure research. He offers a pragmatic definition of community, one that was developed at neighbourhood meetings held to address local school closures. He suggests that community is understood as having a relationship with local cultural activities, is marked by short distances from home to school, and provides a

sense of neighbourhood (p. 19). Valencia's definition is supported, in part, by Schmidt, Murray, and Nguyen (2007) whose research defines community as offering a sense of civic engagement. Egelund and Laustsen's (2006) concept of "place identity" which they used in describing community in their research on school closures should not be overlooked. It grounds community in a concrete physical sense. They describe this concept as an area or a place that acts as a common denominator for the development of a shared cultural, social, physical and economic environment.

Dewey (1932, as cited in Flanagan, 1994) states that the ordinary contacts of day-to-day community life, whether social, economic, cultural or political, provide real and significant learning situations. He contends that the school has an obligation to prepare the child for active participation in the life of the community.

The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends.... [E]ducation, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. (p. 2)

Gates (2005) argues from a communitarian position about the need for a revitalized sense of community. He believes that the idea of "community lost" filters through Western society. He, too, states that rigid adherence to principles of marketization has superseded those of community.

Gates (2005) compares the consequences of a rigid adherence to market principles by policy decision-makers to the Buddhist metaphor of the monkey-box. He

shares his views on the intractability of the current policy mindset by recounting how one entraps a monkey by placing a piece of fruit inside a box with a hole large enough for the monkey to put his hand inside and grasp the fruit. Once the fruit is grasped, the monkey cannot free himself from the box without letting go of the fruit. This he refuses to do and remains trapped with his hand in the box. The refusal to release the fruit is analogous to the current blind adherence to market principles.

As part of their adherence to market principles public school boards have become fixated on the “language of the measureable, the quantitative and the productive” (Stein, 2004, p. 7). Ironically, the agenda of true public accountability is diminished, and this goes to the heart of the relationship between a government and its citizens, a school board and the community. “Efficiency turned inward becomes silent about values, neutral about goals, but vocal about means. It became silent about values because what matters is not what I value, but what’s good for me” (Stein, 2001, p. 28).

Gates (2005) offers an alternative to the dominance of the efficiency agenda through a focus on reinitiating civic conversation and a rediscovery of the commons (p. 141). Policy is more representative and therefore more democratic when developed through conversation, held at the level of the commons. With this convention in mind, Arnstein (1969), an urban planner in United States inner cities, designed a ladder with eight rungs (see Figure 1, Chapter Two) as a means to evaluate the extent to which policy makers engage the local citizenry in their efforts. Arnstein describes the ladder as a gauge of the true nature of citizen participation in the policy process. I employ Arnstein’s ladder to assess the degree to which school closure policy recognizes the importance of community values in both design and deliberation. In terms of school

board practices, school closure procedures may create the appearance of community consultation when, in fact, the process acts simply as a democratic formality.

How community is understood, and by whom, is a central element in my analysis. An understanding of how those affected by a local school closure define their community and its values is, as a previously stated, central to the research. Therefore, I draw on communitarian literature to inform my analysis of the responses of community members to their experiences with school closure (see for example Etzioni, 2004; Olssen, 2009; Strike, 2000; Wolfe, 1995; Tam, 1998).

For this reason, communitarianism provides a useful alternative model that focuses on developing a community-approach to public policy issues in order to emphasize "the human element." Human association is the central tenet of communitarianism. But Waltzer (1995) states that "association is always a risk in a liberal society [and] [o]urs has evolved into a society devoid of the very communal dimensions that might bind us together around a conception of common good" (p. 63). Etzioni (2004), a stalwart advocate for communitarian culture in public institutions, best describes the underlying principle of communal culture as a form of moral ecology.

Theobald and Dinkleman (1999) contend that within the communitarian emphasis "the locus of policy-making power [is] allocated to the smallest level of community possible" and a key value emphasises "that all members of that community be given a voice in shaping these policies that affect their lives" (p. 20). In terms of an educational policy-making model, Giroux (2004) advances the position that policy is enhanced when broader societal influences generate the procedural aspects of its practice. He cites the

need to create modes of “individual and social agency that enable rather than shut down democratic values [calling] practices of social relations” (p. 119). This approach to policy-making challenges the current consultative practice in Ontario education, decisions that Kerr (2006) describes as “token [and] ... cosmetic, lending the appearance of creditability and democratic process to final decisions” (p. 157).

Etzioni’s (2004) position on policy development calls for recognition of the “difference between citizenship (legal status) and membership (common good)” (p. 147) and argues for a move towards a more reflective community-oriented approach. In this way the communitarian discourse provides a striking contrast to that of the neoliberal. Tam (1998) describes communitarian liberty as “a model of power relationships which must be progressively extended to all citizens in society” (p. 23). Wolfe (1995) describes communitarians as those who think of themselves as searching for solutions that go beyond both the market and the state.

### **Introduction to the Research Study**

In order to explore the implications of school closure policies for communities while bearing in mind the central issue of this research is the interplay between the values of policy-makers and the values of community members, a number of questions are considered in addition to those identified earlier.

- Are efficiency/accountability measures understood differently by those implementing school closures as opposed to those affected by the closures? If so, how?



- Who do efficiency and accountability measures serve?
- What are the values under-pinning the different perspectives on school closures?

To answer these questions, two schools and their associated communities, each at a different stage of the school closure process, were chosen as research cases (see Chapter Three). The research draws on Stake's (2008) understanding that we should seek the particular rather than the ordinary in the nature of each case, particularly its activity and functioning; its historical background; its physical setting; other contexts, such as economic, political, legal, and aesthetic; other cases through which this case is recognized; and those informants through whom the case can be known (p. 128). My work also is influenced by Gobo's (2008) contention that the power of case study research is that it can be employed to examine and explain human systems which "have a wholeness or integrity to them rather than being a loose connection of traits" (p. 255).

Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) introduce the concept of the "ecology connect between the environment [geographic and spatial aspects] and social structure" (p. 35). I drew on this and chose to study one urban and one rural case. By choosing geographically diverse communities of study, I created possibilities in the analysis that added to the interpretive richness. Such an approach addresses, in part, the question of "ecological validity" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, p.10), as it "look[s] at what cultural practice does" (Harvey, 2005, p. 214), and proves most useful because it examines the findings found from setting in terms of their validity, by comparison, with the findings of another setting. This comparison proves to be an important characteristic in the examination of the universal application of public policy – and a central argument

for the communitarian position that we need to consider different approaches to policy design and application in different settings.

In summary, this research project, using data from the ethnographic study of two school closure processes, describes how a centrally mandated policy is implemented in a school board, and how that implementation is experienced and understood at the community level. It demonstrates the importance of understanding both the specificity of community as well as the impact of the larger, more global forces on the local.

The relationship between means and ends is a central issue in my research. As such, this research provides a further understanding of the impact of values (Pal, 2006) in the design of public policy. deLeon proposes an alternative to what he identifies as the “shortcomings of the rational actor paradigm” (p. 126), which has led to a sense of public disenfranchisement and lack of direct involvement with issues of public policy. Examination of the values issue will contribute to a central educational policy debate about the purposes of schooling. A number of issues come together to provide a context for the ensuing critical analysis.

### **Issues forming the critical inquiry**

Do schools have a responsibility to take a lead in building a sense of community (Chapman & Aspin, 1997, p. 176)? What position best enunciates society’s current paradigm? Is it Dewey’s (1964) contention that the school has an obligation to prepare the child for active participation in the life of the community or the position expressed by Bill Tucker (February 8, 2010), the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB)

Director of Education, at a meeting with London City Councillors that, “we need to look at the big picture [when deciding to keep a school open]. There’s savings in teacher, heating and cleaning costs?” Communitarianism provides an alternative narrative to the current dominant emphasis, an emphasis in which institutional decision-making is founded upon fiscal imperatives. Smith (2010) expounds a communitarian agenda for schools because, as he argues, it better suits an agenda that conceives of school as a integral part of community, promoting participation in a shared life, and a concern for a democracy as advanced by both Dewey (1964) and Lindeman (1956).

In Chapter Four a critical policy analysis is applied to the current provincial and local school board closure policies. This allows for further assessment of approaches in terms of policy application. Valencia (1984), in his research on school closures, recommended the development of a model of decision-making that moved beyond the efficiency-model to look at the additional costs of closings, including transportation of displaced students and the maintenance, insurance and security of the closed schools (p.11). Throughout my study other potential costs to closures beyond the fiscal budgetary are considered. These costs, recognized by others in similar studies (Bredo, 2009; Campbell, 2010; Hampton, 2009; Keevers, Treleaven & Sykes, 2008), include costs in terms of human and social capital also expressed as the loss of a sense of community as seen through the eyes of those affected by the closure of their local school. As well, previous research into the subject of school closures makes note that there is an opportunity cost to the school board in terms of disaffected parents, students, staff, and others opposed to the decision. The extent of this opportunity cost as it applies to areas of my research is examined in further detail in Chapter Seven. Significantly, however,

TVDSB's *Pupil Accommodation Review Policy* (TVDSB, 2009), in its introduction and in its terms of reference, underscores a neo-liberal preference through the repeated use of terminology such as "operating costs," "fiscal accountability," and "economic restraints," when setting out the conditions in which a school review will be conducted. The same policy is silent in terms of setting out conditions of review on the subject of community impact and considerations of social and human capital.

Should considerations of community matter? Schmidt et al (2007) focus on the costs to social and human capital deriving from school closings. Their research asserts that by accounting for all costs, small schools are more cost efficient on a per capita student basis than larger schools. The question that the role of matters of economic efficiency plays in the final decision was put to a variety of interview subjects. John Thorpe, a retired TVDSB Executive Superintendent, when asked to comment on the issue of economies of scale over a prevalence of more smaller local schools saw the issue thusly, "failure to address the inventory issue would mean that the board would be spending disproportionately on the ledger side of the books related to infrastructure and disproportionately the other way on programming" (personal communication, May 17, 2011). Chapter Five provides further examination of this question from the local school board's perspective.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

*... involving citizens on a nominal basis through such means as administrative hearings or public surveys is insufficient; citizens need to be directly involved in the design of programs that affect them. (Hampton, 2010, p. 235)*

As outlined in the previous chapter, a number of questions drive my research. Of those questions, I am most interested in how the values of the decision-makers influence and shape the policy agenda and its delivery, and thus how institutional policy unfolds at the community level in terms of its practice and delivery. Furthermore as Apple (2010) argues “understanding education requires that we situate it in the unequal relations of power in the larger society and in the realities of dominance and subordination and the conflicts that are generated by these relationships” (p. 152). At its core, this research is a quest for a better understanding of the relationships between the institutions of education, represented by the provincial Ministry of Education and the local school boards, and the community.

Furthering this understanding will require addressing the question: How do people view the concrete and practical application of school closure policy in their communities? Fredua-Kwarteng’s (2005) observation that the provincial government makes use of school boards (interestingly both bodies are elected by the same group of people) to regulate the citizenry to their own end provides a useful lens when addressing this question. In Chapter Four, I undertake a critical analysis of both provincial and local school board policy, in part to determine if there is indeed an agenda on the province’s

part regarding local school boards' policy and practice when it come to school closures, what Fredua-Kwarteng, drawing on Foucauldian analysis calls "a [government] regulation of conduct by more or less rational application of appropriate technical means" (p. 5).

Post-structuralism, put forward by Apple (2010) as an alternative lens in critical analysis of educational policy making, provides a useful underpinning to my work because, "with its focus on the local, on the formation of subjectivity, identity, and the creation of subject positions, [it] can creatively work together [with the moment] to uncover the organizational, political and cultural struggles over education" (p. 153). This lens assists in addressing the remainder of my questions: How does the community view the consequences of school closings, especially as closings occur in local settings? How does (or do) the end results of school closures reflect what community members value?

To advance my understanding I have undertaken a literature review to better comprehend both the issues of policy design and delivery within a community context, and how the issue of school closures specifically has been reviewed and evaluated in terms of its community impact and potential consequences. A synopsis of that review follows.

### **Policy in Practice Literature**

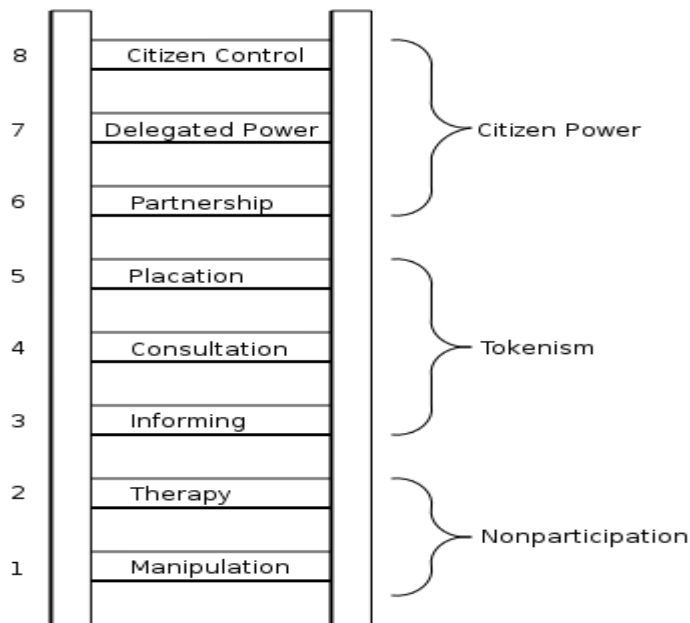
In the current policy literature there is a growing school of thought that questions the efficacy of policy design that is removed from community. Building from Arnstein's (1969) model of citizen participation, the themes of collaboration, meaningful

engagement, and bottom-up policy development have emerged to dominate the discussion. While approaches vary, there appears to be a developing consensus (Campbell, 2010; Keevers et al., 2008; Smith 2010; Stout, 2010) favouring a move away from the rational-technical method of policy design to a meaningful public participatory approach in policy development practice.

Within a critical policy analysis framework there is a rich contemporary literature on the implementation of policy-in-practice. The following review is representative of the research and speaks to broader community issues, thus providing meaningful background to support my study. As noted, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation has re-emerged in the literature 40 years after its initial introduction and has formed the basis of much of the current thought in this area. As an urban planner in the United States, Arnstein was interested in examining why urban inner-city residents were apparently disenfranchised by the public planning process. Consequently, her research focuses on the role of the citizen in the policy process.

[C]itizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society. (p.1)

She employs the image of an eight rung ladder as a means of identifying a continuum of approaches with respect to citizen participation.



*Figure 1. The Ladder of Citizen Participation. Adapted from "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," by S. R. Arnstein, 1969, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, p. 217.*

Arnstein (1969) contends that this continuum can be grouped into three main categories: nonparticipation (manipulation and therapy), tokenism (information, consultation and placation), and citizen power (partnership, delegated power and citizen control). What makes Arnstein's model so compelling in terms of my research is her description of the positions of the various policy players who populate the ladder.

The ladder juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful in order to highlight the fundamental divisions between them. In actuality, neither the have-nots nor



the powerholders are homogeneous blocks. Each group encompasses a host of divergent points of view, significant cleavages, competing vested interests, and splintered subgroups. The justification for using such simplistic abstractions is that in most cases the have-nots really do perceive the powerful as a monolithic "system," and powerholders actually do view the have-nots as a sea of "those people," with little comprehension of the class and caste differences among them. It should be noted that the typology does not include an analysis of the most significant roadblocks to achieving genuine levels of participation. These roadblocks lie on both sides of the simplistic fence. On the powerholders' side, they include racism, paternalism, and resistance to power redistribution. On the have-nots' side, they include inadequacies of the poor community's political socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base, plus difficulties of organizing a representative and accountable citizens' group in the face of futility, alienation, and distrust. (Arnstein, 1969, p. 3)

deLeon (1994), in his work on policy democratization, discusses a "dichotomous relationship" (p. 126) between those who made policy and those who received policy. His review notes a prejudicial state of practice employed by many policy analysts at the time, and as such supports Apple's (2010) argument for a critical post-positivist approach to policy review. deLeon also notes a definite preference for the policy analyst to favour policy makers and centre his or her work in that particular camp by adopting the rational technical mindset in the work. This leads to a dichotomous relationship that he describes as a "separation syndrome [which] almost surely contributes to ineffective programs and results" (deLeon, 1994, p. 126). He further observes that this separation

syndrome is exacerbated by policy analysts on two fronts. First, deLeon notes the tendency held by analysts to view policy-makers as their “legitimate-often, only-client” which “effectively sequestered from the demands, needs, and (most critically) values of the people they are reputed to be helping. As such, they are helping to establish and sustain the gap between the ruler and the ruled.” This can be seen as leading to a marked deemphasising on the importance of the *public* when studying public policy. Second, analysts tend to take a positivist stance in terms of their work which effectively locks out the need for contributions from the “ruled”. He describes this approach as “arrogant” with its reliance on applied economics as having “ascribed talismanic qualities,” and as one “reinforced by economists who predicated their policy recommendations on *objective* economic relationships pursued by rational actors, again requiring little knowledge of the intended client's particular needs and the political climate in which public policymakers, by definition, must operate” (p. 126).

Stout (2010) supports the need to establish participatory practice in local government policy making on the basis of her own experience as a citizen-participant. She details her experience in Tempe, Arizona, over a fifteen year period (1989 to 2007), as an attempt to institutionalize participatory practice in local governance policies through community planning efforts. She draws upon Arnstein’s (1969) model to provide an analytical lens, chronicling how citizen engagement techniques “can become tyranny, giving only ritualistic attention to participatory practice in the face of economic pressures and political directives” (p. 45). Stout concludes:

What is troubling is that in the 40 years since Arnstein developed her model, we seem to have gotten much more sophisticated in our methods and rhetoric to

*appear as if* we are pursuing Partnership, Delegated Power, and even Citizen Control, while still resulting in outcomes typically associated with Informing, Consultation, and Placating at best, and Manipulation and Therapy at worst. Participatory practice in this case could be described as a “tyranny of methods.” (Stout, 2010, p. 83)

Stout (2010) states that the *spirit* of meaningful citizen involvement in public administration is an important, and often overlooked element. It is an element that requires attention to both purpose and technique simultaneously. According to her, institutional policy-makers appear to have focused on making policies to achieve certain procedures and methods, instead of paying “equal attention to the goals for participation and how those intentions play out in attitudes, practices, and actual outcomes” (p. 83).

Similarly, in making the case for narrative policy analysis as a means of incorporating public involvement in decision making, Hampton (2009) also draws on Arnstein (1969) when he asks whether the goal is consultation or participation. In adopting a narrative policy analysis which he describes as a process that consists of identifying and embracing all narratives that describe a policy situation, Hampton contends that when there is a commitment to uphold the public preference, a narrative policy approach is the most useful as it allows for the juxtaposition of both expert and local knowledge.

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

narrative policy analysis is of particular use when there is a commitment to upholding public preferences in a decision. The question of whether public preferences are taken into account in a decision is dependent upon the commitment of decision makers. (Hampton, 2009, p. 236)

Hampton's approach provides important support for my research, as I am interested in both the position of the policy initiators, the school board and the province, and the policy recipient, the community and the range of stakeholders who reside there. Campbell (2010) contends that effective public policy requires policymakers to rely less on technique in terms of the policy mindset and more on the concept of civic engagement, moving beyond a technique-centred approach. He champions the concept that citizenship involvement be viewed as public work, and argues that citizen-based policy in practice must be akin to community barn-raising "if citizens are to be co-creators of public work, rather than simply consumers of expert shaped policies" (p. 315). In this observation Campbell cites Arnstein's (1969) ladder, highlighting research which demonstrates that, in practice, current policy makers most likely engage citizens in a token fashion to support system legitimacy rather than furthering meaningful policy participation.

Beginning with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, research has noted the relative ease of engaging citizens in a token fashion that supports system legitimacy and elite prerogatives. By contrast, inclusive, effective participation requires elites willing to share power and citizens willing to invest their time, energy, and responsibility—conditions that are not routinely met. (p. 320)

Additionally, Campbell (2010) states that there is a need for public managers to move beyond the notion of citizen as consumer to “a more robust notion of citizenship” (p. 336). This implies rejection of the neo-liberal position that classifies the public as mere consumers of public goods (Stein, 2001; Harvey, 2005). Rather, Campbell calls for a recasting of both experts and citizens as “co-creators of public goods, including public policies and their implementation” (p. 336). This position would require citizens to achieve the highest rungs of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder, sharing equal power and control with institutional policy makers. Campbell’s (2010) proposed arrangement depicts a scenario vastly different from the one described by the majority of my community research subjects (see Chapter Seven), and best illustrated by Accommodation Review Committee (ARC), the local body charged with reviewing schools under consideration for closure, member Roxanne McDougall, in her description of the dissatisfaction she felt as a parent participant in the school closure review process: “It was a frustrating experience. It was geared to go in one direction, and if you got off that direction you were corrected” (personal communication, March 5, 2011).

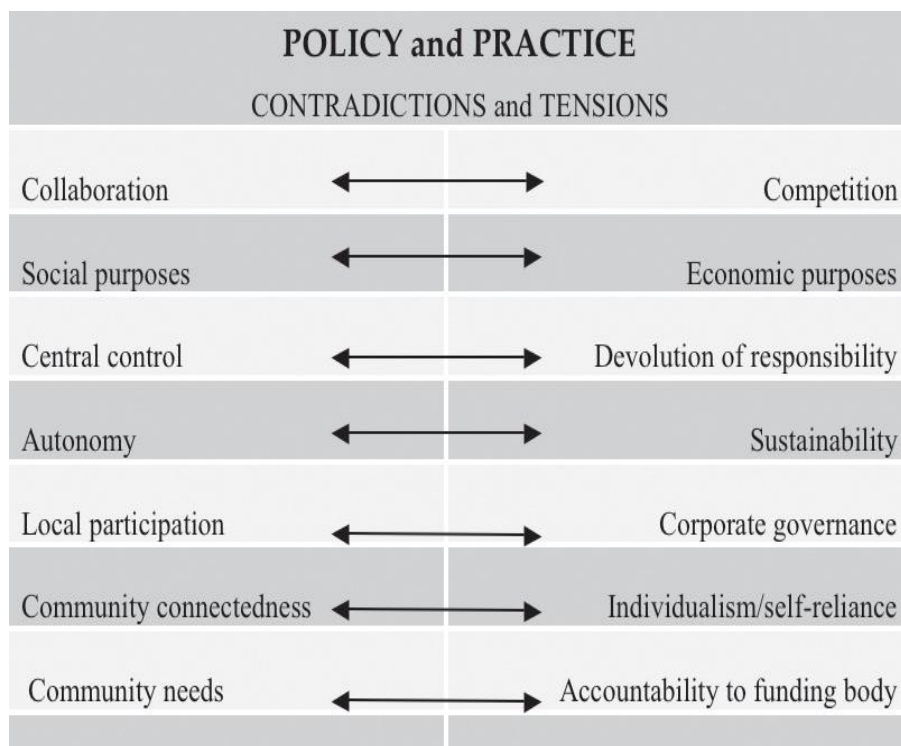
Smith (2010) expounds a position similar to Campbell’s (2010), the need for the policy maker to be more citizen-focused in his exploration of the public administrator as a collaborative citizen. He reviews three approaches to collaborative public policy: critical theory, pragmatism, and virtue-based theories. The common ground of all three approaches, Smith contends, rests with their ability to assist in integrating theory into practice through building more participatory relationships with citizens: “[T]hey are all based upon dialogue or discussion – administrators and citizens are called upon to talk and decide collectively on the best course of action to address public issues” (p. 248).

While the approaches vary when it comes to the degree of these relationships between public administrators and citizens, Smith (2010) contends that all provide a more laudable outcome than current practice. In other words, without an emphasis ensuring a sound process, the purpose of the consultation tends to slip away. Much of the literature on public participation tends to concentrate on the how, who, where and when of public involvement, that is to say the operationalization and refinement of the process, rather than the why of public participation, more particularly the underlying rationales and consequences of the adoption of such an approach. (p. 251)

The theme of greater partnership and participation between the policy makers and the community is also noted by Keevers, Treleaven and Sykes (2008). They provide an overview of the current tensions and contradictions between policy design and practice within the context of community organizations. In their study they identify four current policy discourses relevant to my research: neoliberalism (top down engineering to reduce the role of the state), managerialism (expert knowledge is given priority over local knowledge); new paternalism (controlling patterns of behaviour), and network governance (place-based policy making and participatory planning processes). The authors posit that the first three discourses are the most dominant, and as such they shape the current policy space, which has a penchant for non-participation and tokenism.

Conversely, Keevers et al. (2008) promote network governance as the preferred model because of its ability to potentially include a range of discursive practices such as whole-of-government approaches, partnerships, place based policy making, and participatory planning processes. Network governance “offers the promise of participation, co-ordination and collaboration at a time when governments prefer ‘the

steering not rowing' model, [while] simultaneously softening some of the competitive effects of neo-liberalist policy reforms" (p. 466). Figure Two, taken from Keevers et al., illustrates the major contradictions and tensions between two approaches, the current discourse of neo-liberal managerialism versus a whole-of-government model. When reviewing Figure Two it is useful to consider a similar contention made by Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) in her review of Ontario school closures. Citing Roberts (2004, p. 331) she states that while current Ontario school closure processes appear highly participatory, in reality they are strictly managerial by nature. "Most are one-way transmission of information from public official to citizen or from citizen to public official, rather than citizen engagement in dialogues and deliberations over public policy with fellow citizens and public officials" (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, p. 19). Apple (2006) explains the attractiveness to public administrators of adopting a managerial posture. As managers, "[t]hey are not passive, but active agents – mobilizers of change, dynamic entrepreneurs, shapers of their destinies" (p. 25). At the same time Apple cautions that there are limits to managers' entrepreneurial activities because "[a]ctive professionals are free to follow their entrepreneurial urges – as long as 'they do the right thing'" (p. 26).



*Figure .2 Policy and Practice, Contradictions and Tensions. Adapted from: “Partnership and participation: Contradictions and tensions in the social policy space” by Keevers, L., Treleaven, L., & Sykes, C., 2008, Australian Journal of Social Issues, 43, p. 469.*

Bredo’s (2009) examination of the current nature of educational policy development also emphasizes citizen engagement and challenges the rational choice policy model drawn from economics. He argues that, “when this instrumental way of thinking comes to be viewed as the only way to think, or the only rational way to think, it functions as the equivalent of a religious dogma, a ‘cult of efficiency’” (p. 534). Bredo further states that the rational choice model fixes habits of thought, is blind to ethical commitment, and limits policy-makers to the role of technocrats removed from the situations they describe. A situational model for policy making is offered as an alternative, a model whose purpose is to insure that the policy debate includes “what is



really needed [...] more democracy, more openness and fair play” (p. 547). Bredo also endorses a post-structuralist approach, where situational decision-making dominates the policy approach, “as each situation can be somewhat unique” (p. 548). A post-structuralist approach is seen as preferable as it focuses on “public discussion and reasoning where parties with different aims and perspectives can attempt to persuade others by open presentation of evidence and arguments” (p. 547).

Arvind (2009), in his work on local democracy and the rural school community in India reaches a conclusion similar to Bredo's. In a review of rural Indian case-studies Arvind draws from bottom-up approaches to school-governance, examining an array of diverse participatory governance practices. He contends that “for democracy to become truly empowering, it must be fully alive at the grassroots level” (Arvind, 2009, p. 2). Through collaborative efforts between policy makers and citizens within local communities studied, those schools which initiated greater community involvement in decision-making emerged as more effective public spaces, creating a more egalitarian process for the formally disenfranchised to participate not only in the decision-making process but in the educational experience as well.

Arvind's (2009) paper has three main purposes. First, it proposes participatory deliberative governance as a way to reconfigure the relationship between state and people in a manner in which ordinary people, including the most subordinated, can experience empowerment by effectively participating in and influencing institutional arrangements that affect their life options. Second, it examines the realization of participatory governance in the context of real educational settings. Third, he argues for the possibility of realizing social and educational changes under a system of governance

in which particularism rather than universalism is a guiding factor in providing education (Arvind, 2009, p. 2). True public participation in any policy decision rests not only with the institution listening to the community; the institution needs also to consciously include the community's insight into the final outcome. Arvind contends that the institutional context has a pivotal role in determining a group or individual's capacity to make informed choices, and then transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. It is the institutional perspective, a perspective both formed and informed by its own leadership and how values are translated into policy and practice that enable greater or lesser participation from the broader community.

### **School Closure Literature**

The literature on school closures in Canada, and Ontario specifically, is sparse particularly in regards to the relationship between the design of public policy and the impacts on and consequences for communities attributed to policy delivery. This dearth of research on the impacts of school closures is not solely a Canadian phenomenon. A Danish study of school closures conducted by Egelund and Lausten (2006) reviewed more than 100 references on this subject in international educational journals and found that “few were concerned on [sic] the effects on local society” (p. 430). Kishner, Gaertner, and Pozzobonil (2010), in one of the few recent studies on the effects of school closures, observe that although approximately 5000 schools have closed in the U.S. between 2008 to 2010, “the research base examining effects of closure on displaced students, however, is remarkably thin” (p. 407).

The Danish researchers, Egelund and Lausten (2006), initiated their study on school closures in a context where several schools were anticipated to close given a national reorganization of municipalities merging several smaller communities, and their schools, into larger units. A key rationale for their work was the actuality that the last in-depth look at the effects of school closures occurred in Denmark over twenty-five years prior to their study's launch and, "due to the lack of prior knowledge of the effects of school closure a qualitative explorative study was deemed most appropriate" (p. 431). It should be noted that their work commenced after the decision was made to close schools in the interest of greater institutional efficiencies, namely fewer, larger schools being more efficient to operate than many and smaller ones. Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, and Witten (2009) launched their study into the impact of rural New Zealand school closings under similar circumstances. In their case they posit that:

(O)ver 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. (p. 132)

They make the case that the influences behind school closures are clearly aligned with an agenda alien to that of the affected communities and the majority of their members.

Valencia's (1984) study on the impact of school closures on inner-city communities in seven large U.S. cities states that, "very few studies are concerned with the policy implications of closures and communities" (p. 7). Valencia's observation has been similarly supported by the Canadian research conducted by Doern and Prince (1989). Doern and Prince's work, which actually did examine issues of policy design as influenced by several factors including values, reviewed the school closure decision-making process of the Ottawa Public Board of Education in the 1980s. It found on the part of school board trustees a "conflict between a philosophy of education that sees public education as a critical part of the local community and another that views schooling in a more individualistic orientation" (p. 454). In 1989, at the time of Doern and Prince's study, they found that the educational researchers favour smaller schools, "and support the educational philosophy that underlies the neighbourhood or community-based school" (p. 454). I will come back to this point later.

Hines' (1999) review of Ontario school closures is more typical of the direction of much of the literature on this subject. It focuses on issues easing implementation rather than on policy design or implication, and reassures trustees.

Fortunately (for trustees), litigation challenging school closing decisions has rarely been successful. The courts have consistently made it clear that they do not feel comfortable second-guessing the wisdom of specific school closing decisions. Rather, such community-specific decisions are properly left to democratically elected trustees. (p. 30)

Hines' review notes that the courts are more keenly attuned to issues of procedural fairness than the actual decision and its outcome. School boards, he advises, need to

ensure that the common law principles are adhered to, and, if they are, then the boards can pretty much do as they please in terms of their decision.

In the common-law realm, the courts have held that school boards owe a general "duty of fairness" to stakeholders when they exercise a statutory power such as the power to close a school. This duty does not guarantee a fair result (fairness, of course, being in the eye of the beholder); rather, the duty guarantees a fair process. (Hines, 1999, p. 30)

Michaluk (2007), in his article on the subject of school closure processes, directed to Ontario school administrators, continues in the same vein as Hines. He advocates for a robust and diligently adhered to closure process, and shows how such a process will provide a school board assurance that its decision for closure could withstand a community's challenge. Written after Ontario lifted its temporary moratorium on school closures in 2006 and implemented a new set of guidelines, Michaluk's article serves as a legal navigational guide to school administrators contemplating closing schools. He does issue a caution.

Parents, teachers and other individuals may ask the Ministry to review whether a board has complied with the new guidelines and, failing a satisfactory response by the Ministry, may ask a court to conduct a similar review. Failure to follow the new guidelines may ultimately mean that a decision to close a school or group of schools is overturned by a court. If critical restructuring programs are to proceed smoothly and without legal liability, it is important that boards understand and follow the new requirements. (p. 10)

Michaluk makes the case that as long as local school boards adopt a procedure that is in line with the provincial guidelines and it is rigorously followed, then the school boards' decisions will be upheld. In her review of Ontario school closures Fredua-Kwarteng's (2005) came to a similar conclusion.

[S]chool boards in Ontario have a substantial administrative authority to make school closure decisions, provided they follow the spirit of their own closure policies and that of the ministry regulations on school closure. Once these are complied with, boards have the freedom to implement closure decisions, regardless of the concerns or dissatisfaction of communities or neighbourhoods affected by those decisions. (p. 5)

Those few studies that have examined the correlation of school closures and community impacts have established that there are potential societal consequences to the decision. While Egelund and Laustsen's (2006) Danish study concluded that very few systemic attempts at mapping the effects of school closures on local societies have been performed, they did find that in general school closures are followed by reduced socialisation and social control at the local level (p. 430).

Fredua-Kwarteng's (2005) study maintains that parents and other community members perceived local schools as belonging to them; they saw communities as the "real owners" of the schools. Further, Fredua-Kwarteng's research observed that closure processes are perceived by those affected as little more than one-way communication channels from board officials to communities, as opposed to a process of full and open citizen engagement in dialogue and deliberation over public policy (p. 20).

The principle of procedural fairness does not obscure the fact that school boards are the real makers of school closure decisions, not communities affected by closure decisions. In terms of governmentality, public participation in the form of consultation --hearings, meetings, publicity and presentations- are often used to create the impression that school closure is a community business and that community members whose interests or privileges are impacted could influence the outcome of closure decisions. (pp. 19-20)

Pascopella's (2004) work on rural U. S. schools focused not only on the increased costs for busing but on the social costs of school closures. He argues that in large schools students tend to be alienated, crime is more prevalent, and the student drop-out rate is higher. Valencia's (1984) earlier work on inner city U.S school closures drew similar conclusions. School closures resulted in higher social costs by reducing parental involvement in their children's education, increasing the flight to private schools, and decreasing public support for educational bonds and levies. In this sense a claim can be made that closures negatively impact local communities. Valencia's study also points to further research which suggests that student participation decreases with increasing institutional size, and that a school should be sufficiently small to reach all its students.

This position is also supported by Schmidt, Murray, and Nguyen's (2007) Canadian study which examines the long-term social impacts of small schools on student achievement, social cohesion, and civic engagement. This study concludes that small schools offer potential for longer term benefits which may offset short-term costs of keeping them open.

[A] growing body of research on small schools, both in Canada and in the U.S., finds that small schools do a better job at promoting educational attainment through s cohesive sense of community. (p.60)

While the body of literature on school closures is slim, the themes of closure, school size, student impact, and community are recently beginning to emerge in educational research. For example, Hargreaves (2007) examines a new consultation approach on school closures taken by the Scottish Parliament where the impact of increased travel for pupils and staff as well as on the environment has resulted in legislation that defines the closure of a rural Scottish school as a decision of last resort. Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, and Witten's (2009) study of school closure in Invercargill, New Zealand draws "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" (p. 131). In a way, Kearns et al (2009) provides a provocative comment on why there might be such sparse research on community impacts of school closures, stating that "schools remain largely taken-for-granted elements of social infrastructure until they are placed under threat of closure or amalgamation" (p. 132).

While there is a rich, and growing, literature on the importance of policy design rooted in citizen and community engagement, my review fundamentally exhausted the literature in terms of the impacts of school closures. It does not appear that research on the consequences of the current round of closures in Ontario on affected communities is being undertaken. This lack of study lends significance to the contributions of the data and analysis my work offers.



### **Chapter Three: Method, Methodology and the Case Studies**

*[T]he politically committed ethnographer is presumably not the morally neutral observer of positivism. (Denzin, 1997, p. 274)*

In order to view the impact of policy implementation, policy-in-practice, through the eyes of those directly affected, I conducted an ethnographic study, within a critical policy analysis framework, that examined an Ontario school board, the Thames Valley District School Board, and two associated communities (one rural and one urban) that have experienced school closures. This study focuses on achieving a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between school community members and the school board during two school closure processes. Let me begin with a brief description of the two schools that serve as my specific cases.

#### **The rural case: Caradoc South Public School (Melbourne, Ontario)**

Opened in 1898 and rebuilt in 1923, Caradoc South Public School is located in the small village of Melbourne, 35 kilometres southwest of London, Ontario. The school was the subject of an accommodation review during the 2007-08 school year. At that time it had 81 students, all in split grades. Approximately two thirds of the students were bused to school from the surrounding countryside. Under the accommodation review process, the school building was declared “prohibitive-to-repair,” meaning substantial capital dollars would be required if it were to remain open in the future . It was recommended that the school close and the students be bused to a school in another,

more distant, community. Parental opposition has been quite vocal. There has also been extensive media coverage of this case.

The decision to close this school was appealed by members of the local community, and a Ministry of Education facilitator, Dave Cooke, reviewed the decision and issued a report in 2009, in which he provided several key reflections. Case-in-point, “The closing of a rural school must be even more difficult. These small schools are a symbol of these communities, Caradoc South Public School for example is 100 years old” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 9). The school officially closed in September 2010.

An important development occurred during the closure review process for this school, and the subsequent development of organized local opposition to the announced closure. The Community-School Alliance (CSA), initially comprised of elected officials from several adjacent rural municipalities, was formed. The CSA’s genesis was primarily a move by elected officials from rural communities and smaller municipalities to stem the closing of schools in their environs.

The community actually underwent two accommodation reviews. The first round commenced in 2004 and abruptly ended in 2005 when then Ontario Minister of Education Gerrard Kennedy imposed a province wide moratorium on school closures. The second review occurred during the 2007-2008 school year and was one amongst the first set of accommodation reviews conducted by TVDSB under the province’s 2006 guidelines.

My research focuses on the second accommodation review and the unsuccessful challenge to and appeal of the decision by the community. I observed through my several trips to the community of Melbourne, where the Caradoc South School is situated, the same sort of pessimistic transformation I have observed in many smaller rural Ontario communities. This transformation is recognized and acknowledged by many community members. The comments of Richard Golden, Melbourne United Church Minister, in his description of what is currently occurring in the community are representative of what was expressed by other interviewees:

There used to be two or three grocery stores in Melbourne at one time. Now all there is, is two little variety stores and one gas station, one restaurant, a bank that is open three mornings a week; a library branch just open a couple times a week. If you need health care you need to go to Strathroy or London or Newbury. There is not a whole lot to draw people into Melbourne where at one point it was a strong, thriving community (personal communication, March 17, 2011).

The Caradoc South School is situated directly in the centre of the community, on the same block of land as the fairgrounds, ballpark, agricultural building and Legion. Beyond its physical location, the school appears to have functioned as a community hub. For example, when it was open prior to September 2010, its playground served as the community park. Much of the playground equipment was donated by various community bodies (B. Fletcher, personal communication, March 8, 2011). The school gymnasium was utilized, as the arts and crafts display area for the annual fall fair until 1999, when the Middlesex County Board of Education was amalgamated into the TVDSB. The fairly stable base of the local population contributed to the creation and maintenance of the

school's local status. The nature of this base is best expressed by 18 year old Kaylyn Carruthers, a graduate of Caradoc South (personal communication, February 27, 2011). "My dad's aunt was a principal there at the school, his dad went there too, at least three generations of my family went there." I observed a tenacious nature to this community and its residents in their passionate stance to keep the local school opened. This nature was displayed in part by their appeal to the board's decision to close it, which makes this case a very significant one to explore. This determination can be demonstrated by Betty Fletcher, a 92 year old community resident and graduate of Caradoc South, in her reply to a comment made at the Lions Club Pancake Supper. The comment references a feeling by some in the community that the school's closure would mean the end of Melbourne as a community. Her response was, "Melbourne is going to be here regardless. I'm telling you, Melbourne is going to be here. God Dammit!" (personal communication, March 8, 2011)

### **The urban case: Sir Winston Churchill Public School (London, Ontario)**

Opened in 1953, this school is situated in an existing subdivision in East London. It was built to accommodate what was at that time a new residential development in an expanding part of the city. In the 2010-2011 school year it underwent an accommodation review process. The school at this time was operating at 70% occupancy, and was one of five schools in the local family of schools reviewed under what was titled "the Churchill ARC." It was the one deemed most likely to close, and had been declared publicly as

such by TVDSB administration prior to the commencement of the review. There also has been extensive media coverage of this case.

The situation surrounding this accommodation review became very political in nature and was driven by acrimonious comments among members of London city council and between members of city council and the school board. An added political element is the long standing feeling emanating from many residents of East London that they are a “forgotten part” of the city, as services and amenities appear to favour the more wealthy neighbourhoods of west and north London. There was also a move by the CSA to enlarge their base of support to larger municipalities as the Churchill review was on-going, indicating that the Alliance has moved beyond its initial rural roots. Representatives from the CSA sought and ultimately obtained from London City Council its support for a provincial moratorium on school closures.

An accurate descriptive of the school community and surrounding neighbourhood is contained in the comments of Laura Kohut-Gowan, who as a public health nursing student, did a placement in the Sir Winston Churchill School in 2008:

So there was a lot of that cycle of poverty for that part of London. A lot of rental properties, young families going down. A lot of sheets in the windows, no window coverings. I remember when I was there, there was a little sign on one of the doors inside the school and it said “close blinds when you leave the room” and the kids go, “What are blinds?” like they didn’t know, because they didn’t have them at home. So that was really impacting on me. It kind of threw me a little bit. There are also bungalows, retired people, which are better kept,

manicured lawns, they had tidy and neat. There were a lot of young people with children versus the provincial province; we had 21% of children live in a lower income household as opposed to 16.5%. 18% of parents have some post-secondary education, as opposed to 36.9%. 1.9% have English as a second language, as opposed to 21.2, and 27.6% of the kids at Churchill were receiving special education services, as opposed to 13%, the average. So definitely their demographic was much different than the province. Like it was a much more fragile, I would say, demographic than a lot of other communities. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

The neighbourhood is a mixture of small brick bungalows and older rental units. It is landlocked on three sides by major arterial roadways and the only park and playground in the neighbourhood is the school yard. Aside from two variety stores and a childcare centre no local businesses reside in the neighbourhood, although the Argyle Mall is situated directly east of the neighbourhood, across the busy four lane arterial street, Clarke Road.

Similar to Caradoc South, local residents appear to have a strong connection to the school. Bina Chokshi, a co-owner with one of the local variety store with her husband, shares her sense of this connectedness:

Sometimes they say the school is closing but in this neighbourhood my old regular customers they are sturdy on this school, attached to this school. So no, they always talk about when they were kids. “When I was small I go to school, is

very nice school.” It’s like the people who are 40 or 45 years old but they also, when they small, they go to this school. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

### **The Study Design**

Cohen, Manon and Morrison (2007) state that ethnographic approaches are more concerned with description rather than prediction, and induction rather than deduction enquiry (p. 169). Furthermore, given my interest in the impact of values on policy, I saw my understanding of this policy impact on both the school board and affected communities of school closures as a search for the subjective as much as the objective. In my search I wanted a certain nimbleness, what DeVault and McCoy (2006) describe as the process of providing analytical descriptors in social processes, “[a] process of inquiry akin to unravelling a ball of string” (p. 20). In my desire to unravel the social processes at play between the players involved at school board and the community, I concluded that an ethnographic approach would provide my research with a method to better grasp what Pal (2006) describes as that pivotal means-ends relationship.

Beginning my research with a review of the issue-relevant provincial and board policy documents, (see Chapter Four) I used a critical analysis lens to identify and give perspective to the policy-makers’ goals. My critical lens was informed by the literature review process, with a particular focus on planned and stated outcomes. The review of relevant policy texts revealed the policy intent and the values of the policy-makers, and the influence of these values on the written procedures and guidelines.

Utilizing the material from the textual documentary review, I then commenced my field studies. I had hoped to begin this part of the research with officials from TVDSB, followed by the relevant parties from two school communities that have experienced a recent school closure process. I intended to start with the school board officials to garner a better understanding of their policy delivery objectives and how they *see* the policy in operation. I believed that this, in turn, would assist in my comprehension of the narrative perspectives from members of the two school communities involved in the school closure experience (see Chapter Six and Seven). Unfortunately this did not play out as I had anticipated. I encountered what can only be described as significant gate-keeping in my attempt to interview TVDSB officials. In a section which follows entitled “The Thames Valley School Board: The interview challenge,” I provide a detailed account of this experience because it grants valuable insight in terms of a central conclusion of my research. Chapter Five provides further perspectives on TVDSB.

Finally, I bring a critical approach to the data I gathered as detailed in Chapters Seven and Eight. There I unpack the power relationships and value positions as I found them. This analysis provides an essential element in the understanding of how policy in practice is operating.

Based on a model described by Gobo (2008), my research involved a range of methods which I employed in my two case communities. These methods included: open ended interviews, direct observation, collective discussions, analyses of documents produced within the groups, self-analysis, and life-histories. This line of attack enabled



me to collect data in a naturalistic setting, providing me with a research method that acted as both a data collection method and an analytical tool (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002).

I conducted 23 separate interviews, in addition to two focus groups, one comprised of seven former students (between the ages of 12 and 14) of recently closed South Caradoc Elementary School, and the other with 11 members of the Melbourne Lions Club. My interviews included members of the two case communities, parents, business owners, members from both Accommodation Review Committees and two TVDSB school trustees. The two trustees wavered on the issue of whether to be identified or anonymous. At one point one trustee was in favour of being identified and one was undecided. At the end both decided to be anonymous. I provide insight into this particular issue in the upcoming section on the TVDSB. As well, I attended three public meetings, two at the TVDSB administrative offices and one at the City of London Municipal Offices where Board officials discussed issues of school closures. The meetings at the Board offices specifically dealt with matters pertaining to my two case communities.

In my endeavour to capture lived-experience (Brewer, 2000), and recognizing that this method has a degree of vulnerability for the researcher, I utilized Denzin's (1997) criteria for the ethnographic researcher, which align with Apple's (2010) position on embracing research that acts as a repositioning process. I conducted my research using Denzin's (1997) principles as my guide by displaying a willingness to listen to ordinary people, celebrating and loving the concrete and the ordinary, reproducing stories that move people to action, listening to the powerful stories about the underdog, acting as the voice of empowerment, and, showing a commitment to democracy. These

principles not only guided the research phase of the work, they have also guided my data analysis and writing.

Prior to launching my research activities, I expected that there might be resistance to the research from within my case communities because I was an outsider. I thought community members might be hesitant to open up to me. Conversely, given my lengthy past professional experience with the TVDSB, I assumed I would have relative ease of access to decision-makers there. As I will show, the opposite is what actually transpired. Probing into these key dynamics provides a key focus of my findings (see Chapter Nine).

I also feel I must acknowledge that I have a personal history with this issue. I started my elementary schooling in a century old village school to which I could easily walk, and come home at lunchtime if desired, and ended it in the modern new school “on the highway” which required at least 90 minutes each day of my time riding a school bus. This experience provided me with an understanding of the question’s situational terrain (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) and a personal connectedness to better comprehending how this policy discourse plays out at the community level. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) describe situational terrain as, “a landscape of meaning... the shape and meaning of a narrative is subject to local understandings and expectations for how a story should be composed as well as for preferred outcomes” (p. 33). Having been a student who underwent the experience of a school closure myself, I feel better able to identify with the issue and with those individuals currently living with their own experiences of the issue. Perhaps to some degree this is why community representatives were so readily forthcoming when asked to participate in the research.

In addition I believe that my past history grounded me for the participant-observer approach in this case. Given Pal's (2009) conviction that citizens today want a more direct say in both policy development and in policy implementation (p. 33), my personal experience provided me with an initial base of empathetic understanding in approaching the research. I also recognize that several methodological considerations are inherent in this research model. These I will address in turn.

### **The research technique: Reflexivity and post-positivism**

Howlett et al. (2009) recommend a post-positivist approach when investigating issues of policy impact. They propose utilizing a methodology focused on the interplay between politics and values, suggesting that, "policy goals and means are products of constant conflict and negotiation between policy-makers guided by their values and interests, and shaped by a variety of contingent circumstances" (p. 27). My own critical policy analysis was enriched by embracing a post-positivist approach of this kind. In addition, this stance assisted in centering my ethnographic standpoint. Given the insights provided by deLeon (1994), Hampton (2009) and Apple (2010), I chose a post-positivist research stance, one that better enabled me to achieve an understanding of the consequences of the closure of a local school on the surrounding community and those living in that community. Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) suggests that post-positivism provides a better way of proceeding when conducting ethnographic research given that it "investigates social processes in everyday settings rather than those set up for the purposes of research, [and thus] the danger that the findings will apply only to the research setting is generally lessened" (p.31).

When considering how best to examine the policy in practice issues of school closings, I deliberately selected one urban and one rural school, and their associated communities, in the hope that any discovered differences in their narrative realities would add to the richness of the findings. My focus is on elementary schools. They are more prevalent than secondary schools, they are smaller in student size, and, in terms of closings, more tend to close, and their closings tends to elicit a greater emotional response from the associated communities. In the selection of my study communities, I followed Stake's (2008) maxim, "my choice would be to choose the case from which we can learn the most" (p.130).

I believe that an ethnographic approach assisted me in addressing my research question and reaching a more complete understanding of how those most directly affected by the school closure are impacted by the policy's application. As well, this approach provides an understanding of the role of, and potential conflict that, (competing) values may play from the participants' vantage points. Gobo (2008) maintains that research struggling with questions of broad public interest can benefit from an ethnographic approach because the lived-experience of the participants provides strength of voice to the findings given that the lived-experience:

- is easily understood by a wide audience;
- can catch unique features and might hold the key to understanding the situation;
- is strong on reality; it can provide insight into other similar situations (not generalized though);

- and, can embrace and build in unanticipated events and uncontrolled variables (p. 256).

Gobo (2008) also states that the power of case research rests with its ability to examine and explain human systems. Following this observation, the choice of research communities was essential in terms of my desire to conduct rich and interesting research. As a result, I chose communities where I believed that I could learn the most and where I have some sense of personal affinity, which in turn would give me a base for understanding. For this research, I selected the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) in South-Western Ontario as the location of the school closure cases I explored. There were a number of reasons for this choice.

First, choosing two school communities within a single school board provided a common institutional culture (Smith, 2006); common texts such as key policy documents, political statements, and school board practices; common points of contact; and the ability to conduct dual purpose interviews (e. g., with TVDSB Trustees as they describe the decision making rationale for each community case). Also, I felt that it would be worthwhile to note how similar (or not) the approach to this issue was in each scenario and how similar (or not) is the view of the associated community members in each closure case.

Secondly as I live in the TVDSB area I have easy proximity to my research communities, and the school board office. Given the nature of ethnographic research, the ability to return to the research communities many times was important.

In addition, the TVDSB is geographically large and very diverse in terms of communities and settlements. It provided a vast range of choices required for my case

selection. As well, the school board has a maturity and a rich history which make for interesting issues surfacing from the research. In anticipation of the actual research commencing, I foresaw varied topics coming forward including the amalgamation of several boards into the TVDSB a decade previously, the sheer size of the Board, and a sense of participant frustration arising from a perceived rural-urban dichotomy. As I conducted my interviews these topics did, in fact, arise in the conversation on several occasions. There is currently a robust and active policy on school closures, which is fully catalogued and accessible on the TVDSB website (the Board reviewed 72 schools in the three year period (2007 – 2010) under their Pupil Accommodation Review policy).

I also felt that access would be relatively easy. From previous employment and community involvement, and given that Western's Faculty of Education has a solid research relationship with the TVDSB, I believed that I had several points of entry with both the TVDSB, and with the local media. While access to TVDSB administration proved to be frustrating, my anticipated sense of connectedness did make access to Board trustees relatively straight forwarded. Finally, as a resident in the area I hoped to be seen as an insider to members of my study communities.

Careful consideration also went into determining my case selection. I sought those cases from which I could learn the most (Stake, 2008). As such I chose to seek the interesting cases and asked "what is the case's own story?" (Stake, 2008, p. 128)

These requirements encompassed a robust set of criteria for case selection which in turn I believe would add additional credibility to the work, ensuring the success of the research. Gubrium & Holstein (2008) identify insight of the situational terrain by the

researcher as a critical element for understanding how the policy discourse plays out at the community level. In this circumstance my research insight included:

- embracing the emotional,
- understanding the history of local community involvement and awareness of the issue,
- choosing cases which have some basis for comparison (e.g. socio-economic status of community members),
- and, going where there is an interesting story that could be easily told.

### **The Thames Valley District School Board: The interview challenge**

Formed in 1998, the TVDSB is the result of the amalgamation of the boards of education of Oxford, Middlesex and Elgin counties and the City of London under Bill 104, *The Fewer School Board Act, 1997*. The TVDSB is a very large board geographically, and in terms of its administrative reach has 148 elementary schools, 32 secondary schools and a 2009-2010 operating budget exceeding \$ 716 million (TVDSB, 2011b). Given this complexity, it has a set of well-developed and articulated administrative policies and practices readily available for study.

The TVDSB has been actively engaged in the process of school closures, since the 2007-2008 school year. It is currently undergoing a third round of the accommodation review process. Many challenges and issues have arisen from this process, and these have been well documented in several sources, including board minutes and reports and the local media. School board trustees and the Director of

Education have spoken about and have gone on record many times regarding the process and its outcomes. The amalgamated nature of the board has added to the richness of the debate on this issue.

As previously mentioned, I did not anticipate undue challenges in securing access to key TVDSB decision-makers. In mid-October 2010, upon approval of my thesis proposal, I submitted a standard research request form to TVDSB. Given the on-going and positive relationship between Western's Faculty of Education and the school board, I understood that the standard time for approval would be about two to three weeks. It was my intention to meet with board officials prior to commencing my community round of interviewing. After submission of my request, I did not hear back from TVDSB for several weeks. Finally by early December I sent an e-mail with a status inquiry, followed by a phone call to the manager of Research and Assessment Services for the board, Dr. Steve Killip. On December 13<sup>th</sup> I received the following reply:

Hello

The proposal will be going for review. I will get back to you in the new year with any questions.

Steve (Killip, personal communication, December 13, 2010)

No explanation why it had taken approximately two months to respond to my submission was given.



On January 5, 2011 I finally received feedback on my research request, as follows:

Dear Mr Irwin

I have reviewed your proposal "Public school closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting value?" with senior administration. Before we can make a determination there are several questions and requests that we have for you.

Could you forward to me a list of the topics/questions (in some detail) that you propose asking of the participants.

Could you detail the rationale for the selection of the two cases you have identified?

You indicate that the study revolves around school closures, however, in one case (Churchill) the review is still in progress and as such we could not support use of this case. There are several other completed reviews (e.g., Lucan area; Lambeth area) that would be more suitable.

A broader and more important question/issue for us is that the reviews are not about school closures but instead are about providing the best possible learning environments for all students. So to look at one school in isolation from the broader Area Review may not do justice to the process. We are presuming, based on your title, that you are only looking at the one school in each case - Is this the

case and if so could you detail the rationale. Our suggestion is that you need to broaden your perspective to better understand the impact.

Steve

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Steve Killip, Ph.D.

Manager - Research and Assessment Services

Thames Valley District School Board (Killip, personal communication, January 5, 2011)

The first thing I noticed was that the e-mail style was of a more formal nature than the December 13<sup>th</sup> correspondence. From this style change I suspected that my submission was receiving some “special” attention. What I also found interesting was the suggestion that I change one of my case communities, Sir Winston Churchill Elementary School, as the accommodation review process was currently on-going in this community. Alternative schools were offered. Although I was never directly given a reason why this was an issue with the school board, I was verbally told by Dr. Killip (personal communication, March 30, 2011) that if I did agree to go with an alternative school community that had already completed its ARC process, the Board would be willing to help me with access to community members and school staff, the interview process, and so forth. On this particular point I replied as follows:

My research uses the topic of school closures to examine policy-in-practice. It is not the closure of schools per se that primarily interests me; rather, I am exploring how a provincial education policy works itself out at the local level. In this context, case differences will greatly aid my research and provide for far richer

analyses. Through the study and comparison of a completed review and an on-going process, a stronger policy-in-practice study is made possible. Stake (2008), for example, notes the importance of selecting cases for their particulars and then asking in each instance, “what is the case’s own story?” (B. Irwin, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

In terms of the final point of the Killip e-mail, that reviews are not just about closures but are about “providing the best possible learning environments for all students,” I believed that I had addressed this aspect of the question in my original research request submission when I laid out a research plan that included a critical policy analysis of current provincial policy directives.

I replied as follows:

As stated, this study goes beyond the issue of school closures. It is essentially a study in the delivery of public policy, an analysis of policy-in-practice. I have every intention of looking at the broader Area Review as well as at the provincial politics and policy driving school closures and the even wider trends that contribute to the construction of educational policies more generally. (B. Irwin, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

In terms of the question asking me to outline why I chose these two particular cases I answered as follows:

Specifically, I am seeking two cases that will provide the broadest possible set of experiences relevant to the issue of school closures. With that in mind, it has always been my plan to have one urban and one rural school as case studies. In my selection of Caradoc South and Sir Winston Churchill Schools, I believe I

will accomplish this. One school is rural, it had a 110 year history in the community, the closure process is complete, and the process underwent a Ministry of Education review. The other school is urban, it is in a typical suburban setting, and the process is on-going. (B. Irwin, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

I thought my responses provided sufficient detail that would satisfy the TVDSB in their deliberation for interview access to Board administration and staff. In fact the first question of Dr. Killip's request asking me to supply a detailed list of questions and topics I was proposing to ask participants led me to create a document that I utilized as a key resource in conducting the open-ended interviews I would undertake. I actually went beyond providing detail for just those interviews within the Board's jurisdictional area, and submitted a complete set of questions and topics to be applied to any potential interview subject in regards to this research. I have reproduced this list as follows, not only to show the response to TVDSB, but also because the detail provides a fuller sense of context of participant responses that follow in subsequent chapters.

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Interview Focus</b>	<b>Guiding Questions</b>
TVDSB Trustees, – preferably the trustees representing the school areas being researched.	The interviews will be used to understand the trustees' views and perspectives on the provincial policy and on community responses.	<p>What is your view of the provincial policies and guidelines around school closures?</p> <p>Is the role of community important in terms of the overall task of creating a learning environment for students? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?</p> <p>How does the decision-making process unfold with respect to the accommodation review process? What influences</p>

		<p>this process? Do community perspectives on this policy practice influence your decision-making? If so, how? What do you see as the benefits (and challenges) of the accommodation review process?</p>
<p>TVDSB Administration, preferably the superintendents for the families of schools from which two cases selected.</p>	<p>To better understand the administration's underlying policy principles and its decision-making processes</p>	<p>Please describe your vision of education, and how you see your (the Board's) role in realizing that vision. What do you see as the key rationale for undertaking the ARC process (How does it advance your vision)? Who are the key benefactors? What do you see as the most challenging aspect of this process? Do community perspectives on this policy practice influence your decision? If so, how do they influence your position?</p>
<p>Community School Alliance (CSA) members, preferably Chair of CSA.</p>	<p>To explore the rationale behind the group's existence and involvement in this issue, e.g. is it motivated by community or economic imperatives?</p>	<p>Please describe how your group came about. Is it meeting its original goals? What is your perspective on the accommodation review process, its impact on local community, your group's potential role in this process? Describe the accommodation review policy as you see it. What do you see as its intended purpose?</p>

Accommodation Review Committee members.	Their understanding of the review process, and insight into how and why decisions are made.	What was your understanding of the ARC procedure before you began working on the committee? And today? Please describe your perspective on the decision-making process in terms of both its strengths and weaknesses. Is your experience with the ARC process what you anticipated? Why or why not?
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As stated, interested parties from two school-communities will be identified. Within each community interviews will be sought from people in the identified categories.

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Interview Focus</b>	<b>Guiding Questions</b>
Community members who are owners/managers of local businesses.	To seek their impressions and interpretations of the impact that the school has on the local community. The stories of these community members will help build the contextual backdrop.	What is the role of a school? Does it have to be local to accomplish this role? What do you see as the goal of the accommodation review policy? Please describe the accommodation review process and its community impacts, as you see them. How would you describe the decision-making process in this situation, if you can, in terms of both its strengths and weaknesses?
Parents of students currently, recently, or potentially in the near future, attending the school in question.	To assist in understanding the nature of the impact that the local school has on parents.	Is the accommodation review issue important to you? Please explain why or why not... What is the role of a school? Does it have to be local to accomplish this role? What is your understanding of the ARC procedure? Please describe the decision-making process, as you

		<p>understand it?</p> <p>How significant is this decision, in terms of lived experience, including family economic and quality of life issues?</p>
<p>Community group members (drawing from service clubs and other community organizations) Actual community groups may vary from community to community. Groups will be identified during the course of the research.</p>	<p>Members of community groups tend to be the most active participants in the community. Their group participation demonstrates great community affinity. Their stories will serve as a gauge for community values.</p>	<p>Describe your community its assets and its liabilities. What makes it what it is?</p> <p>Is the accommodation review issue important to you?</p> <p>Please describe and detail, as you see them, the review process and its potential community impacts.</p> <p>In terms of both its strengths and weaknesses please describe the decision-making procedures used to determine school closures.</p>
<p>Representatives of local bodies which have specifically organized regarding the school closure issue.</p>	<p>The dynamics of managed opposition is of note here: who are members of these groups, why are they participating in this fashion, and what do they hope to achieve (do they have realistic goals)?</p>	<p>Why and how did your group come about, and is it meeting its original goals?</p> <p>What is your perspective on the accommodation review process, its impact on the local community, your group's potential role in this process?</p> <p>What do you see as the goal of the accommodation review policy?</p> <p>Please describe the process and its community impacts, as you see them.</p>
<p>Current and previous students.</p>	<p>Assessment of what the students think about this issue, how their impressions are formed, and what they see as benefits and/or drawbacks, will provide insight into how, or if, a sense of community exists and is challenged by the (potential) closure.</p>	<p>What do you think of your school (current or previous)?</p> <p>What do you know about the existing situation (your school closure or the discussion of a possible closure)?</p> <p>What do you think this issue is all about? Why?</p> <p>What have you heard from adults (family, teachers, and media) about this issue? How do their comments make you feel?</p>

Selected school staff	Given that these individuals work in the local school, do they see themselves as community or institutional members? Their position, on the question, will provide valuable perspective.	What benefits and challenges do you attribute to the accommodation review process? Do the community's views on the subject have an impact on your views? If so, how? Please describe your perspective on the decision-making process in this situation.
Local politicians- municipal, provincial, federal	Similar to community group members, these subjects tend to be the most active participants in their community. Their stories will also help to gauge the local pulse of the issue as well as providing insight into tangible economic, political and social considerations.	Describe your community its assets and its liabilities. What makes it what it is? Is the accommodation review issue important to you? Please share your perspective on the process and its potential community impacts (if any). What do you see as the goal of the accommodation review policy? Please describe the decision-making procedure, in terms of both its strengths and weaknesses.

(B. Irwin, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

Given the detail of response for the requested additional information and clarification of my research purpose, the fact that I had already successfully completed the doctoral thesis proposal process at the Faculty of Education, and that I had a twenty year record of working TVDSB on many community initiatives, I again felt confident that my request for research access would be approved. By early February, I had not yet heard back from TVDSB, aside from an acknowledgment that they received my additional material. I called Dr. Killip and was able to discuss with him the status of my submission. During the conversation he acknowledged that he recognized the value of my proposed work, and also my ability to conduct all interviews plan excluding those dealing with Board employees on Board property. As it was always my intention to



interview current and former students of the schools in question through community and parental contacts, their involvement was outside of the Board purview. I also offered to meet with Dr. Killip, my thesis supervisor, and any other TVDSB official to answer any questions or provide further clarification. This offer was not taken up. I commenced my research interviews by late-February.

On March 3, 2011 I received the following e-mail from Dr. Coulter, my supervisor:

Actually talked to Steve today and he says he will be getting back to us today or tomorrow. Senior admin met yesterday so he should have their decision shortly.

Rebecca (R. Coulter, personal communication, March 3, 2011)

I did not hear from Dr. Killip throughout the month of March as I progressed with my research in the first of my case studies, Melbourne community. On March 30<sup>th</sup> I called him. The following e-mail to Dr. Coulter outlines the conversation:

Hi Rebecca:

Following from my call earlier today, I phoned Steve Killip this morning and was able to speak to him on the phone. He told me that he thought he had gotten back to us.

While I spoke to him, he tried to search his files and recover the message he believed he sent, no luck.

The same issue remains, and he confirmed it, that being the discomfort that senior administration has with me speaking to anyone at the Winston Churchill School as it is engaged in the ARC process. He offered to help me with other city schools that have recently completed the process.

I spoke to him about the broader policy issues that I am most interested in, and asked him about the possibility of speaking to senior administration on these issues. He said he would meet this week with Karen Dalton, Business Superintendent, and share my intention with her. I then said I would like to interview Bill Tucker as well. Certainly the scope of my work was detailed in the follow up information I supplied at his request.

I told him I have almost completed my series of interviews in Melbourne (I still have a few left, including two focus groups). He knew I was there, and said he saw my poster at research day.

Again he repeated that he appreciated the research and saw the importance of it, but he needs to work within the Board direction.

I thanked him for his efforts, and told him I'll call back the first part of next week.

Thoughts?

Bill (B. Irwin, personal communication, March 30, 2011)

Following a conversation with my supervisor, I sent the following e-mail to Dr. Killip on April 5<sup>th</sup>:

Dear Steve:

I am writing to follow up on the status of my research request with TVDSB. As we recently discussed, I am on a tight schedule regarding my research and in terms of one of my two research communities - Melbourne - I have all but completed my work. I need to move on to my next community, and as per my original request I would certainly like to interview senior administrative staff on policy matters regarding the ARC process. Have you had the opportunity to consult with Karen Dalton or Bill Tucker yet?

At this time, I am planning to commence the next phase of my research in the Winston Churchill School area on Monday. The opportunity to speak to Board Officials (prior to interviews in the Churchill area if possible) would add a meaningful perspective to the work.

I hope to hear from you soon. Feel free to call me as well if you wish to discuss timelines, etc.

Best

Bill (B. Irwin, personal communication, April 5, 2011)

I received the following response from his office, and subsequently never heard officially or otherwise from him or representatives of the TVDSB about my research request:

I will be out of the office until Monday the 11th and will return emails at that time.

(S. Killip, personal communication, April 6, 2011)

Tellingly during one of the first interviews I conducted in Melbourne, the TVDSB's reluctance to participate in my research was alluded to by interviewee Joanne Galbraith. Her comment was made on March 1<sup>st</sup>, when I was still dialoguing with TVDSB about interview approval.

Through the grapevine somebody said you have stirred up the school board. You stirred up a kettle of worms. Rehashing all the old memories. You shouldn't worry though about someone local meeting you with a shotgun.

(J. Galbraith, personal communication, March 1, 2011)

In addition to "the never-ending dance" I experienced with TVDSB, in my attempt to secure interviews with its senior administration, the struggle that the two interviewed school board trustees underwent deciding on whether or not to claim anonymous status needs to be noted in this context. As previously stated, both finally decided to seek anonymous status. Interestingly this did not occur until after I had a complete draft of my thesis in hand. Both expressed concern about how their fellow trustees might see their participation in this research. I got the sense that they were concerned that their comments on this issue may potentially jeopardize their ability to participate in future discussion at the school board governance table, especially given that I had declared that I would be taking a critical look at the neoliberal values that appear to be driving decision-making at TVDSB. I assume that their participation in my research may be viewed as heretical. As Apple (2006) states the neoliberal hegemony in

administrative decision-making is now so prevalent as to make any other mode of thought appear unprofessional. Peck and Tickell (2002) have labelled this phenomenon “an ideological ‘thought virus’” (p. 381). To be fair though, neither trustee felt it necessary to review their interviews, nor the context in which I used them.

### **The interview process**

In my effort to get at the core of the participants’ lived experience, I utilized an open-ended interview approach, adapted from Brewer’s (2000) recommended methodological imperative. This involved: asking people for their views, meanings and constructions; asking in such a way that they could tell them in their own words; asking them through in-depth probing because those meanings are often complex, taken for granted and problematic; and, addressing the social context which gives meaning and substance to their views and constructions (p. 35)

Through utilizing open-ended questions, I engaged what best can be described as conversations-with-a-purpose. Community participants were extremely forthcoming and showed no reluctance when recounting their reflections on events. In terms of the issue of being on the public record this was a very important consideration to many of the community members I interviewed. The statement made by Pat Zavitz, local Melbourne business owner, is representative of the respondents’ views when the offer to keep their identities confidential was made. “No, I want my name known. I hope they’ll hear me, but I don’t think it’ll make a difference” (personal communication, March 5, 2011).

I consistently employed DeVault & McCoy's (2006) research sequence in the interview process, namely having participants identify an experience, identify some of the institutional processes shaping the experience, and, investigating those processes in order to describe analytically how they operate as the grounds of experience (p. 21). This approach allowed subjects a greater voice, and reduced my influence as the interviewer. This interview method required me as researcher to act as listener and not be a participant in the conversation. In terms of my major research interest, seeking to better understand the impacts and conflicts that values may have on policy development and delivery, it was essential that the participants' stories could come through unfiltered.

Prior to initiating the interview process, I undertook a thorough review of relevant policy documents and texts (see Chapter Four). This review included applicable TVDB policy documents and Ministry of Education directives on accommodation reviews and associated issues. DeVault & McCoy (2006) describes texts as being akin to an institution's central nervous system, running through and coordinating different sites (p. 33). My document review focused on a critical examination of the policy content. In addition, throughout the interview process participants' insights provide me with further understanding of the text, which in turn proved to be a useful tool in enhancing my comprehension the actual actions taken.

As previously stated, I had planned on starting my interview process with the institutional inquiry, focusing on issues of Board responsibility, policy design considerations, the role of school and community, and the interviewees' views on the policy in practice. However, the TVDSB proved hesitant to participate. This hesitance, in itself, is worthy of consideration. It seems to be antithetical to the TVDSB (2010) stated

core value of communication, “Communication which is interactive, open and honest builds trust and commitment.” In terms of this research, there has been a distinct lack of official communication from Board Administration – although as I have stated two TVDSB trustees were very open and forthcoming with their time and input.

My original goal in commencing my fieldwork with the institutional interviews was to garner a better understand of policy orientation at the macro level, and to hear from policy-makers whether they felt that the program goals were meeting the stated policy objectives or was their application resulting in unanticipated problems with important societal consequences at the micro level. In lieu of any direct communication, I have instead endeavoured to ascertain an answer through attending public meetings, analysing Board policy text and other documents, and by reviewing media accounts, and interviews with Board trustees and retired Board officials. Through this combination of approaches I am confident that an acceptable degree of trustworthiness has been reached.

### **The role of the researcher**

As the ethnographic researcher invariably serves as the research instrument, I created the data coding as the research process progresses. This process necessitated a focused discipline on the procedure. The practitioner guidelines set forth by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) were employed in this task: separating narration for analysis with explicit awareness and care throughout the work; organizing thematically by being conscious and alert to themes that might emerge throughout the work from unexpected

sources and, especially, critically adopting themes only through careful consideration; and, understanding the relationship between audiences and texts (pp. 221 – 225).

Recognizing that all research is value laden I explained stating up front what my position and views were when I was asked and I believed this helped me to gain the trust of my research participants. Denzin (1997) states that the researcher needs to understand his/her values and the influences that they may have on the research and “rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher, we should set about understanding them” (p. 17). Forthrightness on my part eliminated any sense of a “hidden agenda”.

### **The insider/outsider challenge**

I am genuinely interested in the policy implications that this research is exploring, and how the findings can be applied to a variety of public institutional settings in future. I also believed that I would have experienced more of a challenge gaining entry into the two school communities than I actually did, and that I would have relatively little challenge in gaining access to the Board. Perhaps naively on my part, I saw TVDSB as a public institution which, as such, should in its practices adhere to the principle of transparency. As a public institution it should be open to honest and critical review at all times. In addition, I have had a long standing relationship with the Board working at times quite closely with its senior administration in its previous manifestation as The London Board of Education by serving on review panels and committees, and helping to form and provide access to programs and services. For example, as the previous Program



Manager of the London Investment in Education Council, I worked with the Board to help launch its compensatory education program, established mentoring and literacy programs, strengthen in-school nutrition and breakfast programs, and I had a pivotal role in re-casting its co-operative education program. Being cast as an outsider was totally unanticipated.

Of course, for most ethnographic researchers the insider/outsider challenge is a familiar concern. Given that a key consideration in this study focused on reaching an understanding of the influence and impact of values, those shaping policy development and those driving community responses, the ability to connect to the research subjects was of prime importance. Wolcott (1995) describes insider status as referring to orientation, not membership (p.144). With the objective of obtaining insider status in mind, my research case selection was purposeful in terms of my personal orientation. I am the product of a rural community, one that underwent a school closure, and I was raised within a blue collar background. This helped to provide me with common ground with many members from both school communities I studied.

In the Caradoc South School community of Melbourne, I instinctively was drawn to those community events and meeting places that gained me immediate access to community members: the Legion Hall, the United Church spaghetti supper, and the Lions pancake supper. Aside from initial orientation, Gobo (2008) maintains that the ability to connect, to establish relationships with social actors comes from interaction with them in their environment, and by doing so learning their code (p. 254). My personal background granted me a natural starting point from which to situate myself within the code of the school communities under study. Surprisingly, my professional

experience of 20 years in public sector institutions did not provide a similar sense of familiarity when interacting with Board officials. My previous professional experience, however, did ease access to TVDSB trustees, municipal elected officials, and retired Board employees.

In the Caradoc South community of Melbourne, I started my research by looking for community places to post informational posters describing my research and seeking out interested parties who might wish to learn more and participate. On a weekday afternoon in February, I stopped at the local Legion, to find the manager vacuuming the carpet. After a brief conversation with him, he agreed to place a poster on the Legion community bulletin board and then asked me if I had another five available. He then said that the key places to post them were the two variety stores, the library, the restaurant and gas station. He felt that my research was of an important nature and offered to personally put up the posters. He also volunteered to “talk up” the work and direct potential participants in my direction. Finally, he told me that every Sunday during the winter-spring period the Legion hosted a community breakfast and if I chose to attend he would “introduce me around.”

That day when driving about the Melbourne community and familiarizing myself with it, I spotted a notice announcing the upcoming spaghetti supper to be hosted at the local United Church. On the appropriate date, I returned to the community for that supper. Before proceeding to it, I checked my information posters. I saw one prominently posted in the centre of the public library’s plate glass window on the main street. Unfortunately at that time it was closed, but on a subsequent visit I was able to secure an interview with the local librarian, Susan King. In addition to the interview, she offered to

organize a focus group with former Caradoc South students to help advance my research. I later conducted that group with local Grade 7 and 8 school students who formerly attended the school. Her organization consisted of contacting parents and students as they came into the library over a one month period, explaining the research on my behalf, providing them with my information letter, providing the parents and students with consent forms, obtaining their contact information so I could directly follow up with them, arranging the time and day of the session, securing space for the focus group meeting in the library, and finally providing refreshment out of her program budget. I had been granted true insider status in this situation.

At the spaghetti supper I was able to speak to the United Church Minister Richard Golden, who agreed to be one of one of my research participants. At this initial meeting, he took a copy of my poster, which I subsequently discovered was reproduced in the church bulletin, and distributed to the congregation of three area United Churches for the following three Sundays. As well, I later learned that Reverend Golden, during the community announcement moment of each service for those three Sundays, from the pulpit directed the congregations' attention my request for interview subjects and encouraged them to contact me. I discovered in the community a strong desire by its members to tell their story, and an almost instantaneous acceptance of me as an insider.

Through the Lions Club pancake supper, the United Church spaghetti supper, and the Legion breakfast I recruited almost all my Caradoc South research subjects. At one point during the Lions Club pancake supper I ended up in the Legion kitchen (where it was being held) with the club executive and was invited to speak at future upcoming regular meeting and conduct a focus group with the club. Still not all my interviews were

recruited at supper and breakfast meetings. For example, “killing time” between interviews one Saturday, I dropped in the local farm equipment sale and repair business, and asked if I could put up an information poster. In an instant it seemed I was conducting an interview with the mechanic who was also part owner of the business. Upon reflection, given that there was no hesitance on my part in shaking his grimy hand when offered, this might be seen as a contributing factor to the ease of my acceptance and offer for an interview.

My acceptance at the local community restaurant best demonstrates the degree of insider status I achieved in Melbourne. I conducted many of my interviews there, plus used the location to unwind between interviews, read my notes, and gather my thoughts. By my third visit to the restaurant, as soon as I sat down the staff immediately brought over to me a black coffee (my beverage of choice) without asking and engaged me in conversation. I had become a regular.

The acceptance I experienced in the Sir Winston Churchill School community was of much the same type as in Melbourne. For example, at the local variety store which I visited to post an information poster, I met the husband and wife couple who owned and operated it. They were very interested in the research and quite forthcoming. I ended up interviewing the wife. When I stopped at the local childcare centre seeking interview subjects, I found a very welcoming environment, which led to a very pleasant interview with both its owner and the program director. One of the members of the Churchill Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) committee was a member of London city council, and someone I have been acquainted with for several years, Bud Polhill. I was not sure when I approached him for an interview just how open he would

be given the highly political environment that accompanied this process. However, I found him co-operative and his interview was very insightful and honest, not at all the guarded political conversation I initially anticipated.

I attended a TVDSB meeting in early May where two individuals provided public input about the Churchill ARC. After the meeting I spoke to them, and both immediately agreed to an interview. In addition both welcomed me into their homes to conduct them.

The openness and access to community members was very similar in both communities. The Melbourne community itself was much better organized as a community than the East London neighbourhood encompassing the Churchill school area. This, in part, I believe was a contributing factor in my securing fewer interview subjects for the Churchill school area than the Caradoc South area. There was also a sense in the Churchill community that the process was merely a formality, contributing to fewer community members' willingness to become involved. As one participant noted,

[W]e could have done more, but it just seemed like there was just three bodies all the time. It just seemed to be like the same three people: myself, the other person on the ARC, and another mother from the school. So it was hard. I guess because the school, the parents of the school figured it's closing so why bother waste their time. (A. Jacques, personal communication, May 16, 2011)

The themes and insights of both communities were very much analogous in nature. There appear not to be a significant rural-urban dichotomy in terms of the participants'

discernment and observations of the accommodation review process as it impacted their respective communities.

### **Assuring trustworthiness**

Assuring trustworthiness is another key consideration addressed throughout the work. Given that my research is ethnographic in nature, and to a large degree qualitative, I undertook a methodical approach towards the work. As stated by Stainback and Stainback (1988) a holistic description of events occurring in naturalistic settings is needed to make accurate situational decisions. I have striven to achieve this degree of trustworthiness through the utilization of data collaboration, triangulation, and a balanced participation-observation approach.

The multi-participant interview approach aided my data collaboration. In this case, the purpose of collaboration was not to confirm the veracity of the subject's perceptions but rather to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected their perceptions, whatever they might have been. In turn, this advanced the probability that my findings would be seen as credible and worthy of consideration by others (Stainback & Stainback, 1988).

Triangulation also aided in assuring my research trustworthiness. Denzin (1978) has identified several types of triangulation, two of which I make use of in my work. One type involves the adoption of multiple data sources. This is achieved through both the comparative evaluation of texts from multiple sources and a series of subject interviews. My research is supported by an additional type of triangulation, namely

methodological triangulation. This involved the use of two or more methods, which I did in my research.

Finally the credibility of my research is assisted through a balanced participant-observation approach achieved through an equilibrium acting as both an insider and an outsider (Gobo, 2008). Through employment of this approach, I have detached myself periodically from the field situation to review records from the position of a social scientist and I have continually monitored observations and records for evidence of personal bias and prejudice, thus improving both the understanding and the credibility of my study through self-reflexivity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The policy implications and political consequences of this research were a matter for little more than speculation at its onset. It was not in the nature of the research to “promise” to any of the participants that the findings would have any immediate impact on the current school closure policy or its practical application. I detailed the explicit research bargain in full, the purposes of the research and the procedure to be performed, with all those involved right at the start (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I felt that the research subjects had a realistic understanding of my work and clearly appreciated that it would not impact or influence the current policy process as it had, or was, unfolding. Golden’s comments on this represent the sense I got from many of my interviewees:

Even about this process, I have had a few people say, too little too late. They felt this process, the work that you are doing, they would have liked it three years

ago. I imagine so, but and it is not pointing any fingers at you but it is just saying it is water under the bridge. It is a sense of resolution. What's happened has happened. (R. Golden, personal communication, March 17, 2011)

What was told to those being interviewed about the research? Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) state that, "there is also the danger that the information provided will influence the behaviour of the people under study in such a way as to invalidate the findings" (p.102). Participants were told that this research is an academic exercise, in hopes of better understanding how policy plays out at the community level. Aside from administrative officials at TVDSB, I had good success in recruiting interview subjects with this approach.

## **Analysis**

Data coding played an essential role in my research analysis. Interpretive technique coding allowed me to both organize the data and provided a means to introduce the interpretation of it. Given the nature of the research, codes were developed as part of the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). It was useful to commence with common reference points and to revisit them throughout the project. Initial codes and themes dealt with issues such as concepts of values, notions of community, citizen participation, and policy and its implementation. Codes developed throughout the work dealt with issues such as personal connectedness with the school, learning environment and size, and issues related to the practice being more consultative than participatory by its nature.



Given the sheer volume of data, I had planned on utilizing software assistance in collecting, sorting and analyzing the material. I explored the merits of ATLAS.ti and NVivo software to meet this end. However at the end of the day I sorted and coded the data without technological assistance. As I reread my interviews the nuance of the moment, the human element, helped to shape what was actually being said by the participants. This confirmed my understanding that I, as researcher, also served as a prime research instrument that was communal, attached and involved at a personal level. My presence during the interview process, through the act of actually being there, helped to shape the interview. I felt that by relying on a technological sort I would be doing the data a disservice. Additional methods of analysis that I employed included:

- consideration of both the narrative environment and the narrative occasion (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p.12). Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, offices, community settings and so forth. The settings influenced the subject in terms of their comfort level and the subsequent conversation. Observation and good field notes were kept on both the narrative environment and occasion, and were continually referred to during the analytical classification.
- developing and employing appropriate policy and participant focused typologies and taxonomies (Brewer, 2000, p. 14). As the research progressed, a further definition of matters surrounding critical policy analysis especially in terms of what constitutes a "policy value" and a school community emerged and proved useful in the data analysis. In the act of separating narration for analysis, explicit awareness was exercised and care was taken.

- utilizing an analytical bracketing process which facilitated the shifting back and forth between the *how's* and *what's* of the narrative realities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 29). This necessitated being consciously aware and alert to themes that emerged throughout the work from unexpected sources. It also required a degree of flexibility as the adoption and modification of themes took place as the work progressed.
- keeping a critical attitude towards the data (Brewer, 2000, p. 127). Given the potentially highly political and emotional aspects of the work, as well as the general nature of the research problem and the issue of school closures in general, the unpacking of power relationships (which became a common theme for many participants as they spoke of their lack of power and feelings that something was being “done to them”) was an essential element in understanding how policy in practice was perceived to have operated.
- maintaining an awareness of the pitfalls of memory (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 67). On my part digital recording of conversations (with permission) assisted in ensuring that key messages are accurately portrayed in the research. Initially I assumed that pitfalls of memory could also be experienced by the participants, and in these cases triangulation would help to ensure a degree of accuracy. This did not appear as an issue. There was a powerful incentive to remember. In addition, interviews occurred in a timely fashion soon after actual events, and in some instances as the events were actually unfolding. This recording of events as they were occurring may, in part, have contributed to the challenge I experienced in my endeavour to access TVDSB administration.

In order to better understand the complexities behind this issue, prior to commencing my interviews, it was necessary to undertake a critical review of pertinent policy documents. I felt that this review would first be necessary to provide me with a contextual framework. The following chapter unpacks these documents against the backdrop of a neoliberal perspective in an attempt to make their underlying “policy values” transparent.

## Chapter Four – Review of Pertinent Policy

*I mean I think it is critical to point out and emphasize the fact that the Accommodation Review Process itself is a child to the government and the Ministry of Education. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)*

In order to understand the context of school closures, we need to start by analysing the policies that both created the conditions for closures and established the terms and conditions under which the closures would occur. The groundwork for the current school closures environment can be traced back to the Harris government, with the introduction in 1997 of *Bill 160, The Education Quality Improvement Act*, and *Bill 104, The Fewer School Boards Act*. I show in this chapter how these acts weaken the ability of local communities to make decisions about local schools in a manner that advanced their community interests, what Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 286) describe as the “deconstruction” period of neoliberalism. This period has then been followed by focused neoliberal reconstruction. It can best be characterized as a period where decision-making power once local was significantly centralized in the hands of the province, and the dominant yardstick measuring all education decisions was more and more a fiscal one alone. In terms of the issue of school closure, a significant milestone of this reconstruction phase was the introduction by the province in 2006 of the *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines*. These guidelines will, in turn, be unpacked as they are central to understanding the current context.

As stated a key focus of this research is to help further the understanding of the impact of values in the design of public policy. The relationship between means and ends

and, in particular, the correlation between neoliberal values and educational impacts is the central issue in question. In unpacking the policy relationship, especially between provincial and local school boards, it is important to note that school boards are creatures of the province. Section 93 of the *Constitution Act of 1867* gives specific educational powers to the provinces to dispense education as they see fit: “In and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education” (Canada, 1867). The processes of implementation reflect this relationship between the province and the local school boards. Given the sub-ordinate relationship that school boards have to the province, understanding the degree of autonomy school boards have in policy development is essential when considering their ability to exercise agency. Are boards policy-makers or policy-takers? While the locus of control rests with the province, the actual implementation of the school closure policy is given to the school boards.

### **Governmentality**

Foucault (1991) encourages us to think beyond power as a hierarchical exercise, widening our understanding of power to include forms of social control in disciplinary institutions, in this case the power relationship between the Ministry of Education and local school boards. In the context of my study, governmentality is concerned with the political rationale used to justify public decision-making.

Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) describes governmentality in its application to Ontario educational policy as a form of technological control, as a means used by the provincial government to control and regulate. “It is therefore, similar to ruling from a distance or remote-control, by which school boards as an agency of the government execute their

functions, [...] help[ing] the government to attain its educational agenda” (p. 6). Through the process, she argues, of placing school boards in the role of “policy front man” school boards, and not the province, bear much of the public consternation, when it comes to unpopular policy practices such as the closing of a school. Trustee B, a long serving trustee with the TVDSB, shared the following story regarding this assumption that local school boards seem to exist at times as a political buffer for the provincial government. When asked for insight into the degree of autonomy that school boards feel free to exercise B responded,

I once asked a Conservative Member of Parliament, I didn’t know why they still have trustees, why they didn’t just run the schools from Toronto. He said we needed someone to close schools. He actually said that to me. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

John Thorpe, a retired TVDSB Business Superintendent, in his recount of provincial policy changes to education, cited a strong inter-relationship between the provincial ministry of education and local school boards when describing the structure of power operating between these two entities:

The second change of substance that has affected how education operates was the decision to remove the local funding component of public education from the local tax payers, while obviously the local tax payers pay it and continue to pay, the cost of education, they do it indirectly and the provincial government is responsible for virtually 100% of board budgets, which means that the opportunity to prioritize locally has been diminished, which has an effect that we

will be talking about later, on how school boards operate. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

In its official communications the Province suggests that school closures and student accommodation reviews are decisions made exclusively by local boards. A Ministry of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a) circular, presented in a Q & A format, clearly states that the decision on a school's future feasibility is the sole responsibility of the local school board.

**Question: Who decides whether schools close?**

The responsibility is completely within the school board's jurisdiction to make decisions about pupils' accommodation, including school closures. (p. 1)

The same circular addresses the issue of the importance of local involvement in closure deliberations, yet remains silent on to what degree that involvement will influence the final decision.

Community members are encouraged to communicate their ideas and concerns to their board in order to have a say in local processes and issues. It is important for the health of local democracy that school boards work with communities. (p. 1)

Fredua-Kwarteng (2005, p.6) contends that the Ontario Ministry of Education developed and structured guidelines for closures in a manner that allowed school boards the appearance of autonomously managing the closure process, making it possible for the province to regulate education at a distance, thus suiting its own political agenda. Further, she contends that while the intent of these guidelines appear focused on reducing the negative impacts of school closings on communities, they do little in actually

stemming the practices that some school boards have used to dominate the discussion on school closure decisions.

Later in this chapter, I unpack the Ministry of Education's current accommodation review guidelines (2009b). The continuation of provincial authoritative latitude in policy delivery, as noted by Fredua-Kwarteng, remains. For example, while the current guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b) cite the need to consult the community in the decision-making process it is mute on the degree, the intensity, and the depth of that consultation, as well as any mechanism or even the need for the local school board to consider the community input once gathered. The provincial government has chosen to produce *guidelines* for the accommodation review process, not a set of inflexible procedures. The parental educational advocacy group, People for Education (2009), provides a critical review of the Ministry of Education's approach in this case. The organization notes that while the Ministry gives the appearance of leaving decisions such as school closures to local school boards, by virtue of the funding formula it limits the ability of school boards to act.

### **Funding formula: *Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act***

In 1997 Ontario's Harris government introduced *Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act*. A crucial aspect of this act was the end of the ability of local school boards to levy education taxes themselves, with the province assuming this role. In 1998, a province wide funding formula was established creating a standard per-pupil allocation grant for all school boards. Critics of the formula stated that this change, while publicly touted by policy-makers as a means to greater educational equity, actually exacerbated a situation of inequity. "Special funding to compensate for social and demographic factors



that increase education costs (\$185 million) is less than half the amount recommended by the government's own Expert Panel (\$400 million)" (Mackenzie, 1998, p. 4).

Championing of the funding formula by the province introduced a paradigm game-changer in terms of determining the future viability of an educational service or a school; it could now be argued that the critical factor in terms of influencing decision-making was purely fiscal and little else really mattered.

Within this new policy paradigm, debate over the conditions for determining whether a school should close was stymied. It is now "a business decision." Kerr (2006) states that in the late 1990s in Ontario, the Harris government, through removing the ability of local school boards to directly levy education taxes, created a set of conditions introducing marketization principles. "With centralization of power to the Ministry [of Education] ... the relative autonomy and flexibility of school boards to respond to the specificities of local context is severely compromised" (p. 59). Centralization of the power to raise revenue can be deemed as a major contributor to impeding the ability of local communities to act in an autonomous manner when deciding local educational matters. In the case of the Caradoc South school community, many Melbourne residents hold the view that the decision to close the local school was facilitated by the fiscal parameters established by the funding formula. This view is illustrated in the following comment:

It's the funding formula; it is a provincial government problem. They're looking at a school in Toronto and say look at this, this works. We'll screw the little country hicks out here in the boondocks, families aren't pumping out six kids and no immigrants are moving here to keep the population up. The baby boom is all

over, people are having one or two kids max, not three or four. Cut us loose or fork over. (P. Zavitz, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

As a game changer, the funding formula transformed educational decision-making into a simple numeric equation. In this case, it can be argued that, by default, school boards became true policy-takers, their actions limited and channelled by a provincial directive that values the big over the small (a per chance for the economies of scale approach), and challenges the existence of rural and smaller neighbourhood schools, as demonstrated by the following statement on this situation by Thorpe.

Well the key reason, there are two fundamental undertakings to the whole question of accommodation review. The first is the per pupil funding from the province means that budgets of school boards are what they are based on enrolment and without regards for, for example the numbers of schools that are operated by a Board. If you have 10,000 students, you have 10,000 times the per pupil grant elementary and secondary total as your budget more or less, whether you chose to run 50 schools or 75 schools to educate those 10 000 students. It does affect your budget. It doesn't affect your income. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

Mackenzie's (1998) critique of the funding formula at the time of its introduction foretold the limitations that this numerically-oriented policy instrument would bring. He observed that "faced with substantial differences in operating costs the government chose not to investigate the reasons for the differences. Instead, it simply set an arbitrary norm and ignored those differences" (p. 19). Mackenzie stated that this approach would impact

more than operating costs, it would also create similar challenges to capital funding: “Capital funding will be available only to boards that have either used or disposed of all space in excess of the formula allocation per student, thus driving even boards in expanding areas to close schools in older areas” (p. 19). The challenges inherent in this approach to future capital funding exacerbated the pressure on maintaining rural schools, as these schools tend to be smaller, older, and easier to justify closing. In a recent review of the impact of the funding formula on a school board’s capital program, People for Education (2009) posit that the funding formula continues to be the significant contributing factor to school closures.

People for Education (2009) also contend that the funding formula is out-dated today given that its basic operating premise, the standardized per-capita allocation that each student brings to a school board, has not changed since first introduced. This allocation was originally based on the average size of schools at the time of introduction, and funding was provided for students based on the average number of students and a set allowance per square foot (p. 3). People for Education maintain that today the formula is relatively unchanged, with the exception that principals and school secretaries are now basically funded on a per school basis, while all other educational aspects are funded on a per student basis whether classroom teachers, librarians, building maintenance or operations. As such, school boards receive maintenance funding on a set number of square feet per student, and those boards that have more available square feet than their prescribed student allocation have an unfunded maintenance issue labelled as empty space. In addition other school space, “non-classroom space,” such as technology rooms,

computer labs, and community kitchens, is also likely to be classified as empty space (p.4).

It can be argued that a focus on “chasing the numbers,” pursuing formulaic compliance, has reduced school boards to the role of simple policy-takers. But is this the case? How receptive were, and are, school boards and their administration to this approach? Is there an element of sympathetic compliance on the part of school boards to the education approach created by the funding formula? Are school boards fellow travellers with the province in advancing this approach? To what extent does compliance make the school boards’ role “easier” and more straight-forward? Does compliance then allow school boards to narrow their focus on what is contained in their institutional silo, and not look beyond the institutional walls, making their job less complex?

Compliance can potentially narrow the definition of the role and responsibility of school boards, especially in terms of the interplay between school and community. Thorpe’s reflection on this point provides an illustration.

I feel that the government is ensuring that education dollars are being spent on education. And so long as the government is funding education 100%, he who pays the piper calls the proper tune. The only significant thing that is being lost through this process was the capacity of tax dollars in the education system being used to fund community priorities that were supplemental to or additional to education. If education can’t do it, then municipalities have to do it. The classic example of the massive screw up that’s happened as a result of 1998 change of rules is swimming pools in Toronto.

Because of the way tax dollars worked, Toronto decided historically that it would put swimming pools in schools. Makes perfect sense. As soon as you have an education formula that covers 100% the cost of education, that doesn't include swimming, then you've got a problem. And for the Board to be expected to fund swimming pools, is unrealistic and unreasonable and has been from the start. It has taken 13 years to resolve that issue in Toronto and it is not fully resolved yet. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The adherence to a strict definition of what constitutes education, through the diligent application of the funding formula, can reduce the footprint of education in the community to the point where today a school may exist in a community, but not really be part of that community. If school boards and their officials had a choice outside of the current parameters established by the funding formula, would they act differently?

[T]he reality is, if you made more pupil spaces that are counted as pupil spaces, than are funded, then you are penalized by the government, rather than funded new pupil spaces, *appropriately so, in my view* (author's emphasis). And if you run school buildings for purposes other than education, you are not funded for them so the Board has no capacity or resources to allocate to uses to buildings other than for funding educational buildings. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The funding formula directly impacts many aspects of the school - size, location, rural nature, and so forth. In terms of making pedagogic decisions on what school design best advances learning, the formula appears to have pre-empted that debate. TVDSB

Trustee A, reflecting on how the funding formula influences educational decision-making and school size at the local level states, “I don’t know what the ideal size is strictly on pedagogical grounds, but you know, so much of what we look at, as the trustees, it is so intricately interconnected with funding that it is hard to separate that out” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). Currently in Ontario the allocation ratios for educational resources based on formula targets mean that an elementary school requires an enrolment of 769 students to secure a full-time librarian and 578 students are required for a full-time support worker (People for Education, 2009, p. 5). Lang (2003) states that the numeric benchmarking approach taken by the Ontario Ministry of Education in the construction of the funding formula is fraught with pitfalls as it is based on the lowest observable actual cost. “If some schools or school boards somewhere in the province could provide a program or service at certain unit costs, the formula was constructed to presume that all schools and school boards could adequately provide the programs or services at that rate” (p.35). Lang further describes the shortfalls of this policy approach as a moment where “the adequacy of funding becomes confused with the equity of funding” (p. 35).

The confusion between equity and adequacy has been advanced by critics of the funding formula as a significant contributing factor to the demise of rural schools in Ontario.

The funding formula is driving boards to establish larger schools in order to provide appropriate breadth of program. Some boards have, for example, set targets for school sizes of 450 students for elementary schools, and 1200 for secondary schools. These numbers are based primarily on ensuring there are

sufficient students in each school to generate funding for a range of staff. In this way boards ensure that schools are “viable.” But these targets for school sizes are often based more on funding than on research. (People for Education, 2009, p. 4)

The drive to reach intractable formulaic targets has caused school boards to move towards a management by the numbers approach across their systems as a whole and to shy away from any thought to more situational tactics. This point is demonstrated by Trustee A’s reflections on this provincial standard. “[T]here should be a differential funding formula for rural schools, but given that there is no differential funding formula, then I do think the factors are the same frankly” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). Educational advocates postulate that the consequences of a rural school closure can have broader community impacts.

But in other cases, closing schools has an impact beyond the simple loss of the building. In small towns and rural areas, closing the local school can affect the viability of the community as a whole. Even the threat of closure can result in a further loss of students as parents are reluctant to enrol their children in a school that may soon be closed. School closings can also result in very long bus rides for some students. (People for Education, 2009, p. 3)

A new funding paradigm should be considered, given that the consequences of the current funding model, a model whose introduction was purported to promote equity, is in fact causing undue social and community challenges. Candy Thomas, the Muncey-Delaware Band educational representative and an opponent to the decision of close the Caradoc South school, advances the need for a funding approach sensitive to a local community perspective supporting smaller rural schools.

[M]aybe they should put the money in the smaller schools. You know, provide more things, cut the taxes from the high up in the government, whatever. You put the money where it is really needed. I mean sure they need funding, everybody needs security but if we don't bring our children up, how are they going to provide later on? How are they going to learn responsibility? How are they going to ensure that they got a fair chance? (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

The negative potential of the funding formula is seen to extend beyond rural communities. In larger centres, especially in terms of smaller neighbourhood schools, school closures are credited with having the same harmful impact as in rural areas. People for Education (2009), in their review of school closures, come to the following conclusion: "In urban areas, despite the closer proximity of schools, there are instances where closing a school may mean the loss of a potential hub for the community" (p. 3). Further to this point, People for Education's review speaks to the issue of school size. "Research also shows that students in disadvantaged communities are significantly more successful in both smaller elementary and secondary schools" (p.6). Schmidt et al. (2007) contend that there is a growing body of research, in Canada and the U.S, demonstrating that smaller schools do a better job of educational attainment through a cohesive sense of community (p. 60). People for Education (2009) maintain that extensive international research (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009) shows much the same when it come to educational attainment (p. 4). The province, through a continued adherence to the existing funding formula, discounts these research findings maintaining an educational system which appears to be driven more by fiscal imperatives than pedagogical ones.



***Bill 104, The Fewer School Board Act***

The Ontario legislature passed *Bill 104, the Fewer School Board Act* in 1997. One outcome of the act was the reduction of the number of local school boards from 168 to 72. In terms of the policy review of school closures, the amalgamation of school boards was a contributing factor of some significance. It brought together different board cultures and values into larger bodies. Thorpe, as a board insider at the time of the amalgamation oversaw the creation of the TVDSB from four area school boards. He observed that “the whole question of amalgamation of school boards, had an effect because it meant that entities that had previously prioritized certain areas were no longer able to do so because they became part of a larger entity” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). Tam’s (1996) perspective on the creation of larger entities in a pursuit of a quest for economies of scale is that it is counter-productive in furthering citizen democracy. “[C]entralization ignores the need for citizens to develop civic consciousness through participation in collective policy decisions; for the sake of apparent short-term efficiencies centralized systems assure citizens that they can leave all the important decisions to the centre” (p. 244). In terms of the TVDSB amalgamation, specifically in connection to the Caradoc South case, community members view post-amalgamation decision-making with suspicion. Their sense is that they are no longer participants in the process, but now are recipients of decisions made by others.

I remember when they amalgamated the boards. It just might be my impression, Middlesex was in the black and the London Board was operating in the red. And they amalgamated everything. And that was what kind of ticked us off. We had a

nice little school and they amalgamated, and all of the sudden they amalgamated and they started cutting everything. I remember there was a little bit of chatter about that. (R. Hathaway, personal communication, March 19, 2011)

A sense of alienation is prevalent in the Melbourne community in regards to their relationship with the TVDSB. In large measure this alienation can be traced back to the amalgamation of the area school boards. Typical comments on this action include: “Once government gets further away from you they don’t listen anymore and this is the same thing with school boards” (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2010); “I think there should be more local input [in TVDSB decision-making] (Lions Club focus group, personal communication, May 24, 2011); “It [TVDSB] is too centralized” (Lions Club focus group, May 24, 2011); and, “It’s [TVDSB] so big and so powerful it can do whatever it wants” (P. Zavitz, personal communication, March 5, 2011). There is widespread opinion in the Melbourne community that they have little ability to influence the school board. The community feels that their views as citizens, and the role of their elected representatives, have been diluted within the larger board entity to the point where their opinion is now inconsequential.

We had a couple of guys out here (trustees) they’d put their hand up for anything. They go to all the meeting and get a cheque and that’s just a game. And when you get a situation like a school closing and you go to your trustee and he says I can’t do anything, then what’s the point in having trustees? I don’t have a problem with municipal government, because I could make my councillor’s life a living hell if I choose to. He’s got nowhere to hide, but not trustees in a school

board, in such a large area. You think I'm going to find X<sup>1</sup> on a Sunday morning and I'm going to rip a strip off him at Tim Horton's? That's going to be pretty hard to do. I don't think I'm going to be chasing X around on a Sunday morning. (P. Zavitz, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

### ***Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines***

In Canada school boards exist wholly at the discretion of their respective provincial governments. With the promulgation of Bills 160 and 104 in Ontario, the province increased its ability to modify and configure school boards as it sees fit, in terms of size, funding, operational mandate, resource allocation and so forth. With no constitutional grounds to appeal, school boards are very much “creatures of the province.” Given the absolute authority the province has over school boards actions and activities, the province chose to present school boards with *guidelines* when it comes to the issues of school closures, not directives or standards. The introduction to the accommodation review guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006) reads more as a suggested course of action than as an absolute, stating that its purpose is to provide direction for accommodation reviews.

The purpose of the *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* (previously referred to as school closure guidelines) is to provide direction to school boards regarding public accommodation reviews undertaken to determine the future of a school or group of schools. (p. 1)

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<sup>1</sup> A specific Trustee is named here, which I have chosen not to reveal.

Further, the language of the guidelines appear as a vehicle whose purpose is to ensure a fuller, participatory, community focused process in the deliberation on a school's continued viability.

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

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

The continuation of a province-wide funding formula and the failure to reinstate the ability of local school boards to levy property taxes have greatly restricted the ability of boards to act in a manner inconsistent with provincial policy directions. The school boards' financial wherewithal to act unilaterally does not exist. This situation is noted by Fredua-Kwarteng (2005), who contends that the province makes use of school boards to help regulate the citizenry to its own end. Paradoxically, the accommodation review guidelines unequivocally state that the responsibility for school closures resides within the mandate of local school boards: "School boards in Ontario are responsible for conducting public accommodation reviews to determine the future of a particular school

or schools” (Ontario, 2006, p. 2). Further, the guidelines establish a very specific *School Valuation Framework* (Ontario, 2006, p. 2) based on four variables, value to the student, the community, the school board and the local economy. These variables are to be employed when determining the future of a local school. The detailed components of the framework are presented below.

### **Value to the Student**

- quality of the learning environment at the school;
- student outcomes at the school;
- range of course or program offerings;
- range of extracurricular activities and extent of student participation;
- adequacy of the school’s physical space to support student learning;
- adequacy of the school’s grounds for healthy physical activity and extracurricular activities;
- accessibility of the school for students with disabilities;
- safety of the school;
- proximity of the school to students/length of bus ride to school.

### **Value to the School Board**

- student outcomes at the school;
- range of program or course offerings;
- availability of specialized teaching spaces;
- condition and location of school;
- value of the school if it is the only school within the community;
- fiscal and operational factors (e.g., enrolment vs. available space, cost to operate the school, cost of transportation, availability of surplus space in adjacent schools, cost to upgrade the facility so that it can meet student learning objectives).

### **Value to the Community**

- facility for community use;
- range of program offerings at the school that serve both students and community members (e.g., adult ESL);
- school grounds as green space and/or available for recreational use;
- school as a partner in other government initiatives in the community;
- value of the school if it is the only school within the community.

### **Value to the Local Economy**

- school as a local employer;
- availability of cooperative education;
- availability of training opportunities or partnerships with business;
- attracts or retains families in the community;
- value of the school if it is the only school within the community.

*Figure.3* School Valuation Framework. Adapted from: “Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines” by Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, pp. 2-3

The provincial guidelines also establish criteria for the transparent dissemination of public information and public access to information regarding an accommodation review in progress. One criterion states that a school board needs to ensure that all relevant information is posted “in a prominent location on the school board’s website or making it available in print upon request” (p. 3). While this criterion appears to provide transparent and relatively seamless access to the process-in-action, the lack of proactive communication on TVDSB’s part was identified as prominent theme, a key concern; in terms of the community members’ views of policy-in-practice (see Chapter Seven). As the onus for accessing information rested with the participants, it appears that the TVDSB took a passive role in information dissemination. Interviewees stated that they had no knowledge that information regarding the accommodation review existed, or that they had the ability to access it when they so desired. This type of approach, perhaps best described as passive-aggressive, to policy implementation is referred to in Stout’s (2010) observation that for many institutions, involvement is citizen engagement of a more ritualistic rather than substantive nature. David Van Dijk, a Melbourne resident, when asked to describe TVDSB’s communication with the community stated, “Nothing. No mail, no mailings, no handouts. There was nothing in the restaurant which is like the

[community] portal, like the hub” (personal communication, March 18, 2011). Given that two of the four criteria outlined in the provincial accommodation review guidelines are designed to address concerns of both the community and the local economy the lack of direct community communication signals a potentially serious procedural shortcoming.

In 2009 the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a series of revisions to the *Accommodation Review Guidelines*. Ostensibly the revisions were described by memorandum to the Ontario Directors of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b) as a means to “strengthen” the process given the “hundreds of comments [made] directly and through the media” (p. 1). Specific reference to the media in this memorandum provides noteworthy insight into the rationale behind the revised guidelines. The revisions, on closer examination, appear to be more of a politic nature, aimed at presenting a less controversial image to the process, than aimed at enhancing consultative practice. Examples of the revised guidelines include:

- “The reduction from 60 days to 30 days for the minimum period between the announcement of an ARC and the first of four public meetings.” While this revision appears to be aimed at aiding the expediency and timeliness of the process, it provides a contrary result to what I heard from community ARC participants (see Chapter Eight) that the process moves too quickly for them and they do not have time to fully review and consider all the information provided. However, one outcome of a shorter timeline is a reduction in the time for opponents of the accommodation review to organize. A shorter timeline also lessens the amount of time when the process is in action, and is therefore of less interest to the media, as it will give opponents less time to organize against a closure.

- “The addition of a reference to a board’s long-term enrolment and capital planning, including the potential for partnerships.” This revision appears to aid the transparency of the process, providing fuller information. It also provides further justification for the process, the need to be more fiscally efficient described in terms of declining enrolment, addressing schools not being used to their capacity, and the like.
- “The introduction of a Terms of Reference designed to clarify the mandate of the ARC; the parameters and Reference Criteria that will guide the development and recommendation of accommodation options; the roles and responsibilities of ARC members; and the ARC process.” This revision appears to simply address a stated need to provide greater clarity of the process. What it also does it ensures that all participants understand that the final decision on a school future rests solely with the school board, as contained in the terms of reference, and that ARC recommendations are non-binding by nature. (Ontario, 2009, p. 2)

The remaining amendments to the original guidelines deal with minor process issues and not with any substantive issues of consultative practice or an increased role for community decision-making.

### **TVDSB Board Accommodation Review Policy: Policy-maker, policy-taker, or policy-faker?**

Giroux (2004) describes contemporary administrative practice in education as one guided by neoliberal hegemony, “an ideology and politics buoyed by the spirit of a market fundamentalism that subordinates the art of democratic politics to the rapacious laws of the market” (p. xxii). Giroux’s description serves to describe school board



officials who operate within the fixed mindset as policy-takers. Similar to Gate's metaphor of being trapped in a monkey-box, officials seem to see no option but to continue to make their decisions based on an intractable faith in neoliberal philosophy, as they believe that not only is this the best choice, it is the only choice available (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

Critics of school board practices (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Kearns et al., 2009 ; Kishner et al., 2010) have advanced the position that in terms of school closure, procedures may create the appearance of community consultation when, in fact, the process acts as a democratic formality. Closures may be framed (Schmidt et al., 2007) as improving the quality of education while they are really decisions motivated by institutional imperatives sans community considerations. In this manner, administrators can be seen as policy-fakers.

Michaluk's (2007) legal advice to school board administrators is clearly designed to appeal to the policy-fakers. He focuses on the procedural necessity of each board establishing its own set of accommodation review standards. The language in which he chooses to describe these standards demonstrates his view about the significance of them as an administrative necessity driven more by a need to comply with the province than a desire to engage in sincere public consultation:

For school closure decisions and other restructuring decisions to which the Guidelines do apply, boards must meet **some basic** [author's emphasis] administrative requirements in order to establish a decision-making framework.

(...) Boards are also required to follow a public consultation process each time a school or group of schools is to be closed or restructured. (p.10)

Michaluk demonstrates the necessity to have a policy that will provide the appearance of community consultation by ensuring that “some basic administrative requirements” are met.

In terms of the TVDSB accommodation review policy, elements of both policy-taker and policy-faker are present. The preamble to the present policy (TVDSB, 2009) reveals both a predilection to fiscal matters and a seeming lack of consideration for community considerations.

It is the policy of the Board to review student accommodation within approved program standards in accordance with the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines of the Ministry of Education (revised 2009 June 26), and within the Thames Valley District School Board Pupil Accommodation Planning Guiding Principles:

1. Accommodation planning will look at how best to meet the learning needs of the students **within the resources available** [author’s emphasis] to the Board.
2. In all situations involving pupil accommodation planning, attention will be given to improving program excellence, enhancing program opportunities, and addressing school renewal requirements. (p. 1)

Bias towards fiscal fidelity is evident within the first guiding principle. Future decision-making is structured around the term, “within the resources available.” From this

statement it is clear that TVDSB is a policy-taker compliantly labouring within the provincial funding formula.

Regarding the second guiding principle, the absence of consideration of any other actors in the review process other than the institution itself exhibits a defined preference for a decision-making approach that advances the issues of the board first and seemingly foremost. By not referencing parents, community or the local economy as an aspect of this key guiding principle, any future process that purports to engage in community engagement should be deemed as suspect. In this matter the board can be seen as a policy-faker.

Within the TVDSB policy the apparent intractable adherence to the market as the key decision-making criteria, as well as the explicit need to repeatedly reference the Ministry of Education as source of policy origin is evidence the school board is acting in this case as both policy-taker and policy-faker. Stein (2001) identified a preoccupation with the market as part of a “cult of efficiency” as those situations where, “[there is] more and more public talk about efficiency, accountability and choice and less and less about equity and justice” (p. 9). The existence of an accommodation review process as an entity, in itself, presents to the community and to parental participants the possibility that a decision can be made regarding the future of community school through a due process that takes their issues under consideration. The actual TVDSB policy suggests that this notion can in reality be seen as highly improbable. Upon examination of its guiding principles TVDSB’s position on the accommodation review process can be described as being outside “the spirit” of true policy consultation; in other words it is acting as policy-faker. The following excerpt from the current TVDSB *Pupil Accommodation Review*

*Guideline* (TVDSB, 2009) supports the contention that this policy's mandate is pre-disposed to value economic matters over all else. The following sections are excerpted from the policy, with the relevant areas bolded.

#### 1.1 Purpose

These pupil accommodation review and facility organization procedures have been developed to provide the framework for school organizational plans and resulting boundary adjustments, and to conduct pupil accommodation reviews for schools or groups of schools **within the context of fiscal accountability**

[author's emphasis] to support student learning. (p. 2)

#### 1.4 Introduction

1.4.1 The primary goal of these procedures is to ensure that any recommendation concerning pupil accommodation is based upon a process which assesses the value of schools based on the Ministry of Education's Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (Revised June 2009). The Board of Trustees recognizes the need to utilize public facilities to maximize the programming opportunities for the maximum number of students, **while exercising fiscal responsibility**

[author's emphasis].

1.4.2 The TVDSB also **recognizes that economic constraints related to the operation** [author's emphasis] of its schools require the Board of Trustees to examine the feasibility of modifying facilities, the construction of new facilities, altering attendance boundaries, the use of time, alternate calendar schedules, and the continuing operation of small school units or schools with large areas of vacant space.

1.4.3 In addition, the Board affirms that these procedures comply with **the Ministry direction on grants** [author's emphasis] for school operation and new pupil places. These procedures reflect the policies of the Ministry of Education related to Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (Education Act paragraph 26, subsection 8 (1) and Regulations). (p. 3)

Thorpe, in his capacity as Executive Superintendent at TVDSB when its accommodation review policy was crafted, acted as a principal architect of the policy, and as such his views on the impetus behind the process carry considerable weight.

In order to ensure that there was a consistency of approach to these matters across the province, the government set in place very clear guidelines for how boards would make business in the area. Having said that, yes, I, along with colleagues, was responsible for in 2005, 6, and 7 for the development of the Thames Valley District School Board's capital plan and so was involved indirectly in all of the ARCs that have been created and continue to operate in the Board since 2007 and in particular in the last 18 months I have been directly involved in two accommodation reviews as the executive member to assist the superintendents in dealing with the workloads they had relative to the ARCs so I had both grass roots and original involvement in what the process was to be and how it was to unfold, working relationships with the ARCs in their early days and immediately direct responsibility for two current ARCs. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

It is Thorpe's opinion that, in terms of public understanding, the consultative aspect of the policy may have been misleading in its design.

I think there has been a slight disconnect in the process that was probably unavoidable in that the communities feel that if they provided input through the process, they would want the trustees to accept that input, as opposed to simply considering that input in their deliberations. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

During my research it became apparent that the communities involved in the process feel misled, betrayed, and manipulated (see further details in Chapters Seven and Eight) when it came to the public consultation process. These sentiments are best exhibited in Betty Fletcher's reflections on the Caradoc South ARC public participation process:

Well it made us feel like second class citizens. And it made us feel as if nobody was listening. And I'll tell you honestly, we think they had it all decided in advance. It sounds kind of cynical. All this bullshit about public involvement and giving us a chance to speak, it didn't mean anything. (personal communication, March 8, 2011)

From the community participants' perspective, one of the most sensitive aspects of TVDSB accommodation review policy concerns the area of communication and public presentation, in terms of both design and delivery. The specific reference to public consultation in the policy raises expectation, and through its lacklustre delivery on the school board's part contributes to this feeling of contention. In terms of design, the policy (TVDSB, 2009) calls for community consultation in a manner that appears to be designed to be both inclusive and to seek understanding of the broad community implications of a potential closure. For example,

(f) During the public consultation meetings the ARC shall seek input and community feedback to assist it in determining:

i) the value of each school to the students, community, the TVDSB and the local economy; (p. 9)

The policy then acts to constrict the impact of public participation through defining the sole focus of the input to matters of the school alone, and not broader associated issues;

ii) (and) option(s) for accommodating students who would be affected by a school closure.

This particular section of the policy, and the manner in which it is presented immediately following a section inviting open participation with the apparent narrowing of the context of that participation, gives the appearance of control, or the very least directive guidance, to the consultation process. Calling the process ‘consultative’ can be, as previously noted by Thorpe, seen as misleading in terms of the participants’ definition of what constitutes consultation.

Further, the procedural aspects of the policy (TVDSB, 2009) pertaining to how participants deliver their presentation are very constrictive by design, adding to the participants’ general feeling of alienation. These procedural elements include:

- The restriction of participants or groups to only one presentation regardless of the length or number of stages of the ARC process
- Prior to making a presentation a completed “ARC Public Consultation Form” must be completed and submitted for content review at least eight days prior to the presentation. It must also be date stamped.

- The ARC Chair and Executive Member will review all requests for input and determine how many presentations can be accommodated at the meeting
- Presenters representing individual points of view have five minutes maximum, and those representing groups have ten minutes maximum to present.

For a public consultation process these procedures are quite restrictive. The municipal representative on the Churchill ARC, Bud Polhill, a long-time member of London City Council, who served as both chair and member on several civic committees that have solicited public input, described the process as “a little different than normal processes” (personal communication, April 27, 2011). His comment was made in reference to the strict procedural nature of the presentation process. Candy Thomas’s observation of the exacting time limits assigned to each presenter, given the importance that many of those who presented felt towards the local school, is a fair representation of how others interviewed felt towards this issue.

I just felt that five minutes is not long enough. If I am giving a toast at a wedding, five minutes is plenty. But if I am talking about lives of 500 children, five minutes is not enough. (personal communications, April 29, 2011)

In considering TVDSB’s role as either policy-taker or policy-faker, it is important to consider why it chose this course of action when designing its public participation protocols. One explanation may be found in the work of Doern and Prince (1989) in their analysis of Ottawa school closures in the 1980’s. They concluded that community support of school closure decision processes seemed highest if groups was involved in the formal mechanisms of policy review and planning from the beginning (p. 456). Alternatively, they found that if the formal mechanism for involvement were absent then



neighbourhood groups frequently organized outside the process and were more politically assertive. This explanation approaches Stout's (2010) description of policy makers who appear to be promoting consultation, but in reality have really undertaken the tokenistic approach of placation.

Perhaps a more realistic explanation as to why TVDSB undertook any open public consultation in the accommodation review process at all is because it had to.

Once an accommodation review has been initiated, the ARC must ensure that a wide range of school and community groups are consulted. These groups may include the school(s)' councils, parents, guardians, students, teachers, the local community, and other interested parties. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. 4)

As part of the provincial guidelines, school boards are obligated to ensure that a consultation process is part of their own policy and that consultation takes place. A school board's ability to create a policy in line with the provincial guidelines, and follow that policy with surgical exactedness is all that is needed to ensure that decisions on school closures will not be overturned. The provincial government, in *the Administrative Review of Accommodation Review process* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006b), clearly places the emphasis on those appealing a school closure decision to demonstrate how the process was not followed in their application for appeal:

Submit a copy of the board's accommodation review policy highlighting how the accommodation review process was not compliant with the school board's accommodation review policy (p. 1)

Not following proper policy procedure is the sole grounds for appeal. Opponents to the Caradoc South school closure successfully petitioned to have its ARC process undergo an appeal. No changes in the final school board recommendations were found by the appeal's appointed reviewer, Dave Cooke. His rationale for upholding the TVDSB position was, "While I believe the process and policy can be improved, I have concluded that the board did follow its Accommodation Review Policy" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 1). As the process was followed, the outcome remained unchallengeable. One member of the ARC community described Cooke's review as not surprising being axiomatic to the accommodation review process itself.

How was the appeal? It was a process. He actually came to meet with us, Dave Cooke. He asked us questions. He sort of listened but he didn't listen. We had proof that there were things that were said that were basically lies. He listened with one ear. (R. McDougall, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

Michaluk, (2007) in his legal advice to board administrators offers the following recommendation on the importance of having a well thought-out policy and then closely adhering to it:

It is important to appreciate that the review will not inquire into the wisdom of the closure decision. That is a matter for the trustees to determine. Rather, the review is designed to ensure that the board's closure and restructuring policy was followed in a fair, transparent and accessible manner. (p. 11)

Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) in her review of school closure decisions in Ontario looked at several court cases surrounding this issue and concluded that, "the courts are

unconcerned with why a school board arrived at the decision to close down a school; otherwise that would amount to interfering in the administrative authority of the board” (p.13). What the courts are interested in, she states, is “the integrity of the procedure”. Hines (1999) in his advice to board trustees on this issue offered, “Compliance with board policies is a relatively technical, straightforward matter” (p. 31). He further cautions patience on the part of board officials when involved in a closure process:

[T]his effort may sometimes try the patience of staff and trustees alike. However, they should console themselves with the recognition of what their time and efforts are purchasing: good will in the community and, in the event it's needed later, "litigation insurance." (p. 31)

On May10, 2011, I attended a public meeting at TVDSB where public presentations were being made for two separate ARC processes, one of which concerned the Churchill ARC. At the commencement of the public participation portion of the meeting the school board Chair made, as she described them, “a few brief comments.” As an audience member, listening to her comments I felt that they did little to instil a sense of procedural openness. In fact, as she spoke I felt a sense of distancing between the audience and the Board trustees and staff. Her opening comments set the tone for the evening: “We have already been through 20 processes like this, and it has been challenging, but we still welcome input.” There was a significant disconnect between her next comment and the actions that followed. She stated that, “This will be a very long evening, but I assure you that you have our full attention.” In fact I noticed that after each presenter finished, not one trustee asked a question or commented on the

presentation they just heard. They sat perfectly still. Sheryl Roth (2011) in her newspaper column commented on this meeting stating disappointment with the degree of attentiveness of the staff in attendance. “[A]s each speaker came forward, the attention span of the superintendents became shorter and shorter.” (p. 13) She went on to add that instead of providing the presenters with their attention, staff appeared to be reading and sending e-mails, writing thank-you notes, reading a book, and so forth. Policy dictates a public presentation meeting, which did occur as a physical meeting; however, the board’s earnestness about the meeting appeared lacking. Their actions corresponded well within Arnstein’s (1969) definition of tokenism, one of the lowest rungs on the ladder of citizen participation.

Observing the degree to which the TVDSB enacted control over this moment of public participation was quite telling. The Chair made it her duty to ensure that all participants understood the time parameters of their presentation: “five minutes for individuals, ten minutes for groups, with a one minute warning before time is up.” As she admonished them to stay within the time parameters I felt the institutional power divide widen between the listeners and the presenters. It did not seem like a meeting where members of the public brought forward concerns to their public organizations as interested citizens. It felt as if the public presenters were cast in the role of supplicant, hoping to be heard. The TVDSB Director, Bill Tucker, broadened the uninviting atmosphere by reminding the audience that students were in attendance and that they needed to, as adults, act as role models. Also like a principal in a school, he stated that he was responsible for safety of Education Centre and would act accordingly. As I sat in the audience I personally felt like the riot act was being read to us. This was no longer a

public consultation. We were reduced to the role of “not-so-welcomed guests” who could be asked to leave at any time. As I looked around the full gallery waiting to hear the presentations, the audience appeared to have taken on a very sombre mood.

Communication control in the ARC process appears to be reserved for more than public consultation, information-in; control also seems to be part of the information-out aspect of the process. As stated, the provincial guideline sets a minimum standard for informing the community about the accommodation review process, that of mounting the information on the board’s website and having information available upon request. In terms of its public communication strategy TVDSB’s policy maintains this minimum standard (TVDSB, 2009, p. 11), the sole exception being notices of meetings sent home as handouts to students (p.12). The board is quite explicit in the fiscal thriftiness of its communication approach, “Other methods of notification may be considered at no cost to the TVDSB.” While other methods of information may be approved, no budget for these methods will be made available, effectively limiting additional communication.

Ontario school boards do, indeed, have no option but to enact provincial policy. When it comes to their operations, school boards are in this sense policy-takers. However the spirit behind the local enactment of policy and how it is translated into practice is the contributing factor to the genuineness of the delivery of the policy. In this instance the TVDSB can be seen to be acting as a policy-faker. In the next chapter, issues of board responsibility regarding the situation of policy delivery are explored, as well as the degree that school boards, who appear to be solely policy-takers, may indeed be acting as policy-makers. Is there movement within the provincial framework for policy-making to occur? In addressing this question in the next chapter, the issue of individual school

board agency is examined. Does, or can, board leadership (in this instance the TVDSB) shape the response and delivery of the policy directives that have come from the province? Chapter Five builds on the work of this chapter exploring in further detail a key question of this study: How do the values of the decision-makers influence and shape the policy agenda and its delivery?

## **Chapter Five: Perspectives on the school board: Viewpoints and values**

*“Ultimately the decision [on school closures] is an educational one.” (Bill Tucker in an address to Middlesex County Council, reported in St. Thomas Times Herald, August 26, 2009)*

Apple (2006) has noted that today the business model approach dominates many public institutions, especially in the educational sector. This adoption has caused a fundamental re-think in how educational administrators operate, bringing a different set of perspectives and values to their role. Administrative focus is now on efficient decision-making and what is called a “new managerialism” (Apple, 2010; Campbell, 2010; Harvey, 2005). The current focus creates a single-minded, narrower approach to issues and challenges, implying one correct way to respond. Peck and Tickell (2002), in commenting on this current neoliberal hegemonic influence, observe the almost religious zeal that proponents exhibit leading to the view that those who oppose the new managerialism are, “nonbelievers [and as thus they are] typically dismissed as apostate defenders of outmoded institutions and suspiciously collectivist social rights” (p. 381).

The following chapter examines the managerial approach taken by TVDSB in terms of the issue of school closure. It unpacks both how the school board sees itself and how others view it in this context. Further, the school board’s latitude for action, and its own institutional sense of agency, as it relates to this issue are also examined.

### **The economic argument from the school board's standpoint**

In their review of school closures by the Ottawa School Board in the 1980s Doern and Prince (1989) conclude that, left to their own decision making devices, community groups are averse to closing schools and seek alternative solutions. Doern and Prince note that the school review study process when community led, “was doomed to failure as a closure strategy” (p.463). Committees, when comprised of a majority of community members, tended to recommend alternative approaches to the issues rather than a school's closure. Other factors superseded the economic. Doern and Prince note that these results were deemed to be unacceptable by “the ardent pro-closure trustees” and ultimately led to a redesign of the procedure for reviewing schools. In other words because the process did not reach the decision desired by the institutional leadership, the institutional leadership changed the process.

Similar to the situation in the Ottawa School Board twenty years previously, the TVDSB leadership dealing with issues of school size and operational feasibility is approaching their task from a self-pronounced rational-technical framework. Thorpe (personal communication, May 18, 2011) describes this approach as one where “[administration] can most effectively and efficiently address the educational needs of their students.” Thorpe's view on what comprises the framework is important and significant, given that at the time the current TVDSB accommodation review policy was developed he was serving as the Board's Executive Superintendent and in that role he was extremely influential in defining school policy. He details the process of determining school facility viability as a choice between infrastructure and program, wherein the decision about what constitutes the best program is best left to the institutional decision-



makers. In this sense TVDSB is acting as a policy-maker when administering the accommodation review process. The administration's tendency is to favour a neo-liberal mindset, operating from the market efficiency model, as its decision-making paradigm. This tendency funnels the process into a single approach, where only one outcome is seen as rationally possible, what Stein (2001) has termed "a cult of efficiency." This chapter examines what appears to be a critical element of that approach, a preferred program bias towards the large over the small school, and the centralized over the geographically dispersed facility. How this bias structures the institutional approach to issues of school closures is explored also.

The preferred approach to addressing declining enrolment has been expressed by TVDSB policy-makers as simply a reduction in the number of facilities. Accepted economic theory, articulated in terms of economies of scale, demands this tactic. Further, students are seen in this market oriented model as customers. And as customers they must be provided with services albeit at the lowest cost, thus ensuring an efficient market place. Thorpe clearly demonstrates this institutional penchant through his narrative outlining the logic behind TVDSB's approach to the accommodation review process:

Thames Valley District School Board has predicted for a decade that their predictions have been note-worthily accurate. By the time the lowest enrolment is reached, compared to 1990, they will have a reduction of 15% in the numbers of students served. In my view, no organization can absorb a 15% reduction in clientele without some, whether proportionate or not, decline in the number of facilities that operates to serve those clients. So two things: money and numbers of kids have coalesced to create a situation where it is essential, critical, and

unavoidable of the Board's review of the numbers of schools they operate.  
(personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The choice of language used by Thorpe is quite telling in this instance and bears examination, specifically the term "clients" in describing students. It denotes an economic relationship between school and student, better suited for the market square than the schoolyard. It also denotes the degree in which the rational decision model dominates the Board's thinking. The rational-technical individual operates within a limited focus on what makes the best economic sense around decisions of the day. In a neoliberal context, it is the duty of the good manager to ensure that sound fiscal practice prevails.

That is the job of the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy's role is to attempt to assist in this case, its political masters to adopt the solution which is in the view of the administration, is the most efficient, the most effective and the most consistent thing in this position to accomplish the most desired results. So when administration makes a recommendation it is based on its best review and analysis of any information it has available to it. It is as objective as it is possible to be and it proposes a solution that is as efficient and as effective as possible at accomplishing the necessary outcome. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 18, 2011)

While the authority for a school closure decision emanates from the province, as does the operational funding for each board, the actual decision ultimately rests with the local school board. Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) in her review on this subject establishes that

it is virtually impossible within the current scenario for a community to legally reverse a board's position.

Indeed, the *Education Act Section 171* (Brown, 2001) states that a board may determine the number and kind of schools to be established and maintained and the attendance area for each school and close schools in accordance with the policies established by the board from guidelines issued by the ministry. (p. 16)

It can be argued that the province has positioned this issue in such a manner that local school boards have little choice but to assume the role of policy-takers and close schools (see Chapter Four), yet the ultimate decision still rests with the local school board. What motivates and guides that decision at the local level is the central values question.

When I asked Thorpe the question, "Who are the political masters of this process, the local trustees or the province?" not only did he answer that the decision was a local one, his answer demonstrated that beyond the economic rationale for decision-making other considerations, like type of school facility and size, were considered to be important criteria.

Oh the trustees, absolutely. The province is not telling the school boards to close schools. The province is telling school boards, in my view, appropriately, that there is a standard of expectation for student outcome which is funded on a per capita basis, consistent across the province. How the trustees determine how they are going to use those funds in the interest of accomplishing those goals is absolutely up to the trustees. What is self-evident, at least I believe it is self-evident, is, if you are experiencing a 15% decline in sources of revenue and your only source of revenue is per capita for clients, failure to address overcapacity is

irresponsible and leads to a disproportionate amount of resources being committed to infrastructure as opposed to program. Kids benefit from program. They benefit from modern, up to date facilities. They don't benefit from schools that are kept open on a shoe string because people would prefer to keep them open as opposed to close them. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

When considering Thorpe's response to the question, two themes become evident through his choice of language. Keevers et al. (2008) description of neo-liberal discourse being masked in the language of semantic virtue (p. 462) best illustrates the first theme. In this case with the use of the terms "self-evident" and "irresponsible" to describe how decisions to close schools provide the most benefits to all, Thorpe is displaying that sense of virtue on the part of TVDSB stance. Contrasting programs for kids over infrastructure adds to the virtuous position. The other theme, the move to ensure a more logical rationale option is evident in the administrative preference for new and larger resources. This is evident in the description of the alternative to the preferred choice of the TVDSB, the logical option. In this case the maintaining of the status quo is described as being of a "shoe string" nature. Thorpe by implication is stating that by not advocating for a new model of larger regional facilities, the Board would be acting in an irresponsible manner, perhaps even potentially damaging to students' educational future.

### **Fiscal stewardship and efficiency**

Thorpe's position, that the administrative professionals know best, is best described as a managerial approach. Keevers et al. (2008) noted that the practice of managerialism is closely linked to current neo-liberal discourse (p. 464). Further

Keevers et al. describe managerialism as being at a “more micro pragmatic level [relying on] neo-liberal discourse (to) provide the macro level ‘theoretical fuel for restructuring.’” Director of Education Bill Tucker in a presentation to the City of London’s Community and Protective Services Committee (CPSC), demonstrated good managerial practice, in terms of ensuring sound budgetary efficiency, when he detailed the rationale for the proposed closing of Churchill elementary school.

I know the neighbourhood [Churchill] well, and the programs are better consolidating from four schools into three. We will pass on the benefits to the taxpayer. There are 690 empty desks in that neighbourhood. We need to look at the big picture, and realize the savings in teachers, heating, and cleaning costs.  
(CPSC meeting, May 10, 2010)

As a good manager Tucker exhibited, in this statement, prudent fiscal stewardship. At the CPSC meeting, issues of fiscal stewardship were presented as the principal rationale for school closures and consolidation. This preference was further illustrated at the meeting in the exchange immediately preceding the above comment. London deputy mayor Tom Gosnell remarked that closures and consolidation do not really result in staff savings, and in rural areas and parts of the city result in greater busing costs. Tucker immediately responded, “Incorrect! We do save staff costs when we close schools.” The immediacy of, and passion displayed in Tucker’s response left no question that as Director of Education he was insuring that all present understood that the TVDSB acted with the model of fiscal efficiency at the forefront.

The majority of community members I interviewed were outspoken critics of the veracity and the weight given to the economic efficiency argument. They advocated for a

model that had little, if any, reverence for economics. Their focus was on their community and the students living within that community and not on broader institutional fiscal imperatives. The following comment by Golden is representative of what was the dominant position on this subject.

And really, education is more than just what is effectively administered. It is a whole process. It is the learning; it is dealing with individuals, sometimes one-to-one, sometimes small groups. Some see small class sizes as inefficient, some see it as great opportunities for one-to-one learning and it is efficient in instilling the joy of education and learning and reading and sparking the imagination. That is what I think can really happen in small, not necessarily rural, but small schools. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

This stance was not unanimous. A minority of community interviewees did take a position more institutionally sympathetic than the one represented in Golden's comment. For example, Polhill, a London city councillor and member of the Churchill ARC commented that he saw the matter of school closure and consolidation as both an economic and educational quality issue, coming together as a question of adequate resourcing.

But I do think that there is a quality of education that they have to be very careful with, because like I said if you start stretching the resources so thin because you only have a certain budget that hurts the kids. (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

Tucker's (2010) concluding comments at the CPSC meeting, which took place one year prior to Polhill's participation on the ARC but at which Polhill was present, reiterated that closure decisions were made on fiscal priorities and fiscal accountabilities. He cited the need to maximize program and fiscal efficiencies.

### **Parental perspective, social costs**

Valencia's (1984) research on school closures in the U.S. highlighted the social costs of closures in terms of the elimination of previously positive parental affinity and involvement in the educational system once their child's school was closed. "The wide spread dissatisfaction with schooling, erosion of support for public schools, mistrust in school officials are, in some cases, exacerbated by school closures" (p. 19). He cautioned that policy-makers need to take the "social costs" of closures into account before making a decision. Angela Jacques, a member of the Churchill ARC, asked the following question from a parent's perspective: "How can you put a cost on education" (personal communication, May 16, 2011)? Her perspective of the role of the local school goes beyond economic and program considerations. When reflecting on the consequences of Churchill closing and consolidating with another school, Jacques presents a perspective that is focused on the social nature of the school.

They are mega-schools and I don't agree with that. Kids are going to get lost, and they are not going to know – they are going to know the kids in their own grade, in their class. But they are not going to feel safe. They can't feel safe in a big school like that. I mean, we have a wonderful safety questionnaire results at our

school because of the size of it, because the kids know they can go to whatever teacher they need for whatever they need. It is not based on grades. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

From a parental perspective, the interviewees stated time and again that the social impact of having a local school trumps economic consideration. Susan King, the Melbourne village librarian, shared the experience she had with local parents who spoke to her of the closing of the Caradoc South School. She stated that their stories were both visceral, given their personal history with the school, and communal, given their predilection for small over large communities.

Well, they were all very upset. I don't think there was anybody who wasn't upset about this, because a lot of them went to that school, too. We're talking generations here. And a lot of people, the big reason they moved here was because of a small community and a small school. They didn't want a big community, and a big school like White Oaks, where you have 2000 kids. They didn't want that. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Valencia's (1984) research concluded that the sense of community loss is a key contributor to the disconnect between parents and school officials. In the context of my research, the concept of community is defined not only by the location of the school but also equally important by the size of the school and its history.



### **Small versus large schools**

Schmidt et al.'s (2007) study found that there are negative social costs to adopting a system focused on large schools over the long term. Their study concluded that over time larger schools may be more fiscally inefficient. Students in larger schools face serious issues of alienation, leading to increased rates of drop-outs, unwanted pregnancies and crime (p. 61). The fundamental characteristic that sets smaller schools apart from larger schools was the benefit of a communal atmosphere in the school. This communal feeling, which also can be seen as a sense of intimacy on the students' part, recognizes an educational role beyond the delivery of program. Interviewees advocating for smaller schools give preference to this role.

By better education, in small schools everybody from the janitor through the principal and everybody in between knew the names of every child in that school within the first week. If they didn't already know them before they entered the door from living and being in the community. And can the same be said when the kids are shipped off the bigger schools when it becomes a factory education? Rather you might even think of the individual craftsmanship of a teacher working in a small group with kids. (Golden, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

While advocates of smaller schools state their case outside of the prevailing economic paradigm, they make use of the language of the market in advancing their argument, citing that while short-term savings may be realized by closing the school, it tends to lead to long term costs. Haroun approaches this debate from the position of an early childhood educator in the Churchill community.

[W]hat I am getting at is the [need for a] smaller school, the more individual, more one-on-one, more focused attention. It is more optimum when you look at it statistically, needs versus how to meet needs over time. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

In her argument, Haroun states “empty seats, from my perspective, are a good thing,” as it allows for a lower student teacher ratio. This position challenges the provincial funding formula as currently interpreted by the TVDSB, which views empty seats as a “bad thing” to be avoided at all costs. Haroun’s position was expressed by several other interviewees. Galbraith, for one, described the issue as a matter of communication.

Bigger isn’t better. Bigger definitely isn’t better. You can be in a classroom; I don’t know if you know who the kids are, where they come from, anything about them. It’s not the same communications. There is not the communications there used to be, the one on one communication with the teacher. (personal communication, March 1, 2011)

Both Galbraith and Haroun referenced a sense of alienation, and its potential impact, associated with larger school facilities. Valencia (1984) also demonstrated in his research that parental alienation can lead to a negative view of school officials. Zavitz’s reflection on what he perceived as a key contributing factor to the Caradoc South closing was analogous to many comments I heard during my research, “That was a major mistake by the province to allow the two boards [Middlesex County and London] to amalgamate” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). Alienation is seen to not only be happening

within the school, through the closing of the small community school and moving to larger facilities in another municipality, but also in a similar sense alienation has occurred with the smaller political institution of the local school board consolidating with its larger neighbouring school board.

During my research, I did find support among one group for the larger size and greater amenities argument as a rationale for school closure and consolidation. I conducted a focus group of seven former students of Caradoc South, aged 12 to 14. The participants generally acknowledged that the additional educational amenities were appreciated and increased the merit of their in-class experience:

Student A: Well at first I was a little excited and I was like, “More stuff, more books,” and I guess I have kind of just gotten used to it. Our class doesn’t have a Smartboard so it’s like just like how it used to be.

Student B: I personally find like we didn’t have much learning support at Caradoc South, compared to at Mt. Brydges now. Like I have a lot ... like I’m an A.D.D. and I have a lot more help now and stuff so there are a lot more teachers that help me instead of one teacher that does all these things and stuff. So that is definitely a really good part of this school.

Student C: There is also a lot of people and teachers that just come in your school or in your class to help you, rather than having one teacher. And sometimes we have a tutor for math and we have a teacher to help us in computers. So that’s good. (personal communication, April 28, 2011)

However in terms of social and cultural integration, these participants had a very different, and in many ways, a rather disturbing story to tell. This is covered in greater details in Chapters Six and Eight.

The requirement to address a perceived resourcing gap between the existing smaller and larger schools to better meet the needs of the students was a recognized goal by community members. They provided an alternative model to the closure-consolidation approach, as advanced by board officials, for closing that gap. A community-centric approach was recommended where the student stayed in place and the staff moved from school to school. Haroun stated that from her perspective as an early childhood educator there are distinct advantages to having younger students in a smaller environment (not just small class sizes) that need to be considered around school size. “That is my stand coming from the EC [early childhood] perspective; full day learning is hard on the child. It is hard to meet the needs of eight children, which is our ratio here. So right now outside the door we have 16 children in the room with two teachers” (personal communication, May 11, 2011). Her view, which I again found to be quite similar to that expressed by many community participants, is that institutional resources should be organized in a manner that supports students in a smaller environment.

There are ways to do that and support children in a smaller environment. Having them share resources and have the staff move rather than the children. I mean, they already do that and I know of teachers that spend half a day in one school and a half a day in another and we are not talking about a half hour commute. We are talking about a five minute commute, ten minutes at the most. So to me that

totally destroys the argument of the bigger school. That is my answer to that. (D. Haroun, personal communication, May 11, 2011)

Given the current funding formula and Thorpe's "shoe-string" analogy, Haroun's vision would most probably be a challenge to implement. Haroun herself recognizes that her focus does not take operational budget issues into account. "How that affects finance is really not in my ballpark." She values other imperatives which challenge the current educational paradigm.

### **School size and design**

To better understand the TVDSB's current pedagogical paradigm requires an examination of its preferred school design. My review of the accommodation review process, and how TVDSB decisions are structured during that process, requires an understanding of this paradigm, and how school design preferences by school board administration may be acting as an influencing force on the accommodation review process. Are closure-consolidation decisions strictly made given the restraints dictated by the funding formula, or are other goals in play? To better understand the design issue and its influences I put the question to Thorpe.

*This just comes up in my research and my conversations with others to date. Is there an ideal size to an elementary school – in terms of resources, having the educational resources, the critical mass to ensure that it accomplishes its mission?*

Sure. In my view, and I may be two or three years out to date on this, and if I am, I am sorry for that, but that is just life. If one were designing a school size based on maximum current resource input from the government, I believe that one would land somewhere around 450 students. And for example, one thing that had always been a hallmark in my dealing with schools and school systems, it is always better to have two classes at a grade level, than one. It allows for teacher interaction, it allows for opportunity for teachers to move between classes where there may be more compatible teaching styles and learning styles, generally speaking, a school with two grade levels is easier to manage than one with one. A second point, generally speaking, where possible, it is desirable to have a sufficient student body and staff body to justify a vice principal, in an elementary school – the opportunity for professional dialogue, the opportunity for someone to be regularly in charge when it is necessary for the principal to be out of the building, a level of resource support, the level of library support, the level of special education support, all of those things are probably best accomplished with a population of approximately 450. But kids don't come in bunches of 450 and we are not talking about designing a school system from scratch, what we are talking about is adapting a school system that was formally four systems and attempting to group schools as conveniently as possible, given that all of the variables and constraints of existing buildings and transportation and all of those things. So, when the Board builds new schools, a similar process of consolidation and amalgamation of existing schools, it is striving to hit that average, but it is, even then, an average and not a target that has to be out in all cases and there has

to be schools larger than and smaller than 450 where circumstances justify.

(personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Reflecting on Thorpe's comments, it comes to mind that perhaps for TVDSB administration the accommodation review process may be serving them as both an end and a means. It is an end, as it helps to satisfy what can be described as a budgetary requirement driven by the constraints of the current funding formula. It can also be seen as a means, a vehicle that aids in the re-alignment of the educational infrastructure to meet a pedagogical vision of what constitutes a "good" school. In this vision size does matter, as size dictates the ability to meet certain institutional targets. This target, as illustrated by Thorpe's comments, includes teacher interaction, professional dialogue, and in-building levels of support in resources, libraries and special education

Keevers et al. (2008) describe the preference of educational officials for the construction of the school as a formalized workplace as "a central tenet of managerialism" (p. 464). They argue that the managerialist commitment maintains that, "the public, private and community sectors can all be managed in the same way" weakening participation of the community at the grassroots level. The school design outlined by Thorpe can be viewed as a highly professional, manager driven model. This model is inwardly focused, with little consideration for location and school-community interaction.

Thorpe's contention that the quality of education is advanced when school size is sufficient to maintain a certain degree of professional interaction and program resourcing was antithetical to the position taken from community respondents. The school design model promoted by community interviewees was predominantly community-centric with

a definite preference for a smaller size. It was generally expressed as a quality issue, quality being viewed as enhanced when there is an opportunity for greater personalized attention.

I think the quality of education is sometimes in a smaller school because it's not one-on-one but the ratio between students and teacher is lower so they get more concentration on problems if there are students that need extra help; the chances are that they are going get that extra help. (P. Marshal, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Van Dijk's personal history formed his position relating to size and educational quality:

And I fell through the cracks because I had what they called reverse vision. Now, they realize I was dyslexic, so I was one of those ones that always had my hand up and needed answers and because the class grew so big, I was one of the ones that didn't get those answers. One teacher noticed this and I had help. If it wasn't for the recognition of one teacher, and my mom and dad getting involved, then I would have fallen through the cracks. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

The argument that larger schools enable greater educational opportunities was rejected by the majority of those I interviewed. This standpoint reflected the communities' cultural perspectives. Fletcher demonstrates this position by recounting her experience attending the first Christmas concert of the consolidated school after the closing of Caradoc South.

And then, this is just what really stinked. They push a button, beautiful curtains open, they push another button and a great big screen comes down, and of course



there is another advantage, they have a full time music teacher. And over here, each teacher had to do their own music because we didn't have a full time music teacher. But over there, here she is at the very front directing like an orchestra leader.

Oh yes, but the curtains came down, and the song is Frosty the Snowman and it says "and two eyes made out of coal." C-O-L-E. And I felt like laughing, and I thought, "All their damn fancy equipment and they can't even spell," (personal communication, March 8, 2011)

She recounted this story to me during the Lions Club Pancake Supper at the Melbourne Legion in a crowded room where we sat at a table surrounded by several local residents. Our fellow diners were all listening intently to the story and every one of them at the table either through body language or vocally agreed with her tale. One statement made in agreement particularly stands out: "They took our allocation to that school to get the fancy equipment."

Differing views on what constitutes a standard for a school facility was a prevalent theme in the research. A wide gap exists between the positions of board officials, as stated by Thorpe, and the community regarding the measure of a school's physical adequacy. At one level, the disconnect translates into a lack of understanding by the community of the school board's vision for facilities and what they hope to accomplish through realization of this vision. One participant of the Melbourne Lions Club focus group puzzled through the issue of the Caradoc South's facility standards by

comparing the standards used in reviewing the facility's adequacy to his own home's adequacy:

The thing that hurts me is, it (Caradoc South School) is not up to standards, they say. Now I am the first to agree, our kids that are bused away will have some things that will be better. They will have better programs, but how many of us live in a home that is up to standards? (Lions focus group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

Still to what degree is this lack of understanding by the community promulgated by the TVDSB's process? How the community is (or is not) informed about the board's vision of what constitutes an ideal facility, a 'good' school in terms of its size and design, is fundamentally a process issue. Were adequate time, care and attention given to this issue to help build the community's understanding of its pedagogical importance? Another comment from a different Lions Club focus group participant illustrates how this lack of understanding creates confusion and acts to alienate the community from the school board:

I also think, they said it [preferred size of an elementary school] is 400-500 and by the first year [of the Caradoc South closure-consolidation] they should have two portables or something like that. I went to that ARC and they expected to have three portables for the overflow. And that is just ...why in the heck would you do that when you are building a new school and that is all part of the formula. (Lions focus group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

Alienation appears as a legacy of the accommodation review process in the Melbourne community. While school size and design standards are not predominantly a rural issue they are critically important in rural communities as schools are seen to have importance beyond the educational function alone. The TVDSB, by not taking the time to adequately communicate its rationale for a preference for a larger school, demonstrates a distinct shortcoming of the managerial approach. The egocentric nature implicit in this approach leads its practitioners to believe that because they are “in charge” there is no need for them to explain their action.

### **Rural schools**

Kearns et al. (2009) assert that, “One expression of bureaucratic power is the argument in support of school closure relating to resources and outcomes,” and as such, “the generally small size of rural schools makes them inherently vulnerable” (p. 132). Kearns et al.’s observation resonates in the case of TVDSB where the target size for an ideal elementary school is set at an enrolment of approximately 450. As shown in Chapter Four’s policy review however, two of the four broad criteria that the province has set out in its accommodation review guidelines focus on the value of the school to the community and to the local economy. The preamble and introduction of the TVDSB’s accommodation review policy reveal a predilection for fiscal matters, which establishes a benchmark for the remainder of the policy. In terms of consideration of matters impacting the community and the local economy, TVDSB’s policy does not appear to be crafted with this end in mind.

A finding from the Kearns et al. (2009) research into the reorganization of the New Zealand educational system found that 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” (p. 132). In a presentation to the City of London, as part of an effort to secure the city’s support of a province-wide moratorium on school closures, Doug Reycraft, Mayor of the municipality of South Middlesex and representing the CSA, made a similar observation. “If you lose a school in a rural community, it will have a profound impact on the economic and social fabric of the community” (CPSC meeting, May 10, 2010). For members of rural communities location appears to supersede both school size and design. The following exchange with Candy Thomas, educational co-ordinator for the Muncey-Delaware Band whose reserve is located adjacent to the Melbourne community, during the time of the Caradoc South ARC, illustrates this point. Thomas was an outspoken advocate for keeping the school open, and a supporter of the Band children attending it en-masse as part of a sustainability strategy.

*Does the size of the school count, do you think? Does it matter?*

No, I don’t think so. Being an educator myself, no.

*So big isn’t better? Small isn’t better?*

No. I just think if you have the right faculty to run the school and the supports it doesn’t matter what the size is but located at home would be the best – their [the students] home.

(personal communication, April 24, 2011)

### **Development of the ARC process: objective-logical decision-making**

Schmidt et al. (2007) present an alternative design to determine what weight to assign the decision-making variables when considering closing a school. Their study contends that if all cost variables are accounted for, aside from the short term budgetary considerations, then fewer small schools and fewer community schools would close. “[I]t is ethically incumbent upon school boards to take into account all the cost variables mentioned –social as well as monetary- including possible unintended costs such as the increase of busing and administrative costs” (p. 61). Thorpe maintains that the provincial guidelines standardize the approach and dictate the process. “[I]n order to ensure that there was a consistency in approach to these matters across the province, the government set in place very clear guidelines for how boards would make business in the area” (personal communication, May 17, 2011). In Chapter Four I began the examination of how TVDSB’s interpretation of the provincial guidelines shapes their accommodation review policy in a specific direction. In terms of the ability of a board to influence the provincial directives, long-time TVDSB Trustee B, while acknowledging set parameters, advances the belief that school boards have a degree of discretion on agency when implementing those directives. The final outcome of a decision should not be ascribed completely to the province.

Well, I think there is, at the end of the day I think more important than policies are practicalities in terms of school boards having so much funding to manage, you know so many buildings for so many students and so at the end of the day, a lot of what happens is driven by funding. You know, being able to provide programs within the budget and also making sure that decisions being made about

schools that there is appropriate consultation and a public process. So I can't blame the province for anything. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

Institutional agency is defined by Trustee B as the ability of the school board to direct provincial policy and guidelines to meet their own organizational goals either outside of or tangential to those represented in the original policy statement. In this instance agency is defined as furthering the institutional position of the board. Fredua-Kwarteng(2005) offers her insight into how this definition of agency might be translated into action. "Having acknowledged that school closings have negative economic and social ramifications on communities or neighbourhoods, why should school boards close down schools? Perhaps the appropriate response is that school boards have the political power to close schools in order to achieve their economic goals" (p. 10). Reflections by TVDSB Trustee A on the school board's initial round of accommodation reviews provide support for this assertion:

[T]here were issues there that were pretty plain to see in terms of the amount of investment that would be required to maintain the facility condition, like a new roof, new boilers, new sewage system, that would be required in a school to keep it open. So we were looking at bigger things than just the number of students. We were looking at bricks and mortar and crumbling facility stock and that was really driving a lot of the decision making and so the community may have had a perspective but in many cases the perspective may have been this school is really valuable and therefore we want the Board to spend \$6 million dollars to fix up this building because we do recognize it needs a new, you know it basically needs to be rebuilt, but it is so valuable to our community and that is a valuable

perspective and I don't want to diminish that perspective at all but there is also, from a Board perspective you are looking at system-wide issues and you are looking at distribution of resources in a way that is fair and equitable. And so those are in some ways, in some ways ... you know the community perspective is important but there is also the system-wide perspective that balances against it.

(personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Trustee A's contemplation of the decision-making process surrounding the accommodation review process supports Fredua-Kwarteng(2005) contention that economic matters significantly influence closure decisions (p. 11).

Concern and regard for community perspectives over the course of the review is touted by decision-makers as an important part of the process. Trustee A asserted in the interview that the majority of the "bricks and mortar" issues were now dealt with in terms of the accommodation review process as a whole and that current (2010-11 school year) and future ARCs would be focused more on enrolment and program issues than economic infrastructure considerations. "We are not looking at that [building condition] anymore. We are now looking at a scenario where to keep a school that may be considered for closure" (personal communication, April 29, 2011). The Caradoc South ARC was undertaken in the earlier round of process when building conditions mattered more, while the Churchill ARC would be considered in the current round. Both schools closed, although the review committee recommendations for both were to keep them open.

It was evident during the interview with Trustee A that the community perspective has great potential in influencing the review process, “[I]n this round, in these ARCs the community perspective will be even more important than it was before because there are not these other factors that have to be weighed against the community perspective” (personal communication, April 29, 2011). How will the perspective of the school board administration with its preference for larger and fewer schools regard the advancement of this community perspective? Hampton (2009), in his review of how institutions influence citizen engagement strategies to meet their own ends, warns of the dangers of a paternalistic model developing around this practice. He labels this phenomenon democratic elitism. Democratic elitism supports a community consultative practice in which institutions promote approaches designed “to strategically manage public reaction to a (desired) development” (p. 11).

In addition, Hampton (2009) states that “decision making requires the comprehension of complex technical information” (p. 11) in a democratic elitist model, leading to a process requiring expert advice to extensively guide it and help shape the final recommendation. Has this expert advice triumphed over the expression of TVDSB elected officials sense of agency as stated by Trustees A and B? Thorpe’s comments alludes to an environment where educational officials understand best the educational and pedagogical complexities that form the foundation of each decision, much more so than either the community or the trustees. In the current TVDSB accommodation review process while the appointed ARC committee makes a recommendation for action to be considered by the board trustees, so, too, does the board administration. In almost all cases the administrative recommendations are considered as presented, over the



recommendations of the appointed ARC (the committee that actually engaged in the public review process!). This practice, with its aura of paternalism, was referenced by London city councillor, Bill Armstrong, when he spoke of why he would not participate in the Churchill ARC when requested to do so, even though the Churchill school existed within his ward boundaries.

The school board is asking people to get involved in a process where the board, the administration, has already made a decision. There is no appeal process once the decision is made, that's it. I can't participate in a process where the decision is made in advance. I don't think this process is the right process, it should be changed, take a step back, have the community input and then make the decision. (CPSC meeting, May 10, 2010)

The review process gives the appearance of being designed to ensure that paramount consideration is given to the administration's technical assessment of a school's viability. A finding of Doern and Prince's (1989) review of Ottawa school closures focused on "the importance of educational philosophies or belief systems in school closure decision-making" (p. 453). They found that in term of school closure policies in the 1980s "a board's philosophy largely determines how it deals with declining enrolments, finances and community pressures." At that time, prior to the establishment of clear provincial accommodation guidelines, school boards displayed considerable agency in determining the viability of local schools. Doern and Prince, asserted that it was not the financial situation of the board or the number of students attending the school that was the determining factor in keeping a school open, but rather the philosophical stance of board trustees, "Those boards which made a political

commitment to maintain small schools, assuming that the quality of education was in fact maintained, or even increased, kept schools open. Many times this was done by increasing taxes” (p. 453). The technical assessment of TVDSB’s administration can be seen as a preferred philosophical position that favours large schools over small schools. The current process where administration presents parallel recommendations to the trustees, outside of the ARC, ensures that its philosophical preference plays the dominant role in the final decision.

### **Agency**

In assessing how school boards currently exercise their individual agency when faced with the question of school closure, it is beneficial to again turn to the work of Doern and Prince (1989). In their examination of the subject, they cite a study conducted by Burns et al. (1984). Burns work examined the school closure policies of 24 school boards in Northern Ontario and also surveyed 34 actual closure situations. The study found “[a] lack of imagination that boards appear to show in responding to declining enrolment and financial restraints. The clearest and most consistent finding of this study is that school boards tend quite quickly to close schools when faced with declining enrolment” (Doern & Prince, 1989, p. 452). Doern and Prince concluded that most school boards saw closures as a *fait accompli*, “a fact of life,” and accepted that “closures are beyond their control”.

When presented with the option for more community input and flexibility in response to the accommodation review process, Tucker’s response was akin to the one described by Doern and Prince (1989) in their study, as the closures are beyond our

control. Tucker referred to the logistical challenges of the TVDSB, “we are the fourth or fifth largest board in the province, with 1500 empty desks, and thousands of empty square feet that needs to be cleaned and heated” (CPSC meeting, May 10, 2010). His explanation emphasised that economic imperatives were driving the review process. Further to this answer he added the need to “optimize school support and optimize taxpayer dollars” when coming to the decision of the continued operating viability of a school. Wilma deRond, Director of Education for the London and District Catholic School Board (LDCSB), at the same meeting echoed Tucker’s view on additional community input by adding that “the board [LDCSB] needs the ability to manage.” The abrupt manner of her answer left no confusion that this was principally an issue of her board exercising its own agency. Her school board would not tolerate “interference” in their decision-making autonomy. In terms of the TVDSB, to what degree is the accommodation review process driven by an intractable provincial policy and to what degree is the process driven by a desire to realign the current school system and its facilities to a model reflecting the values of the current administration?

The following illustrates recent examples of how Ontario school boards, in situations comparable to the TVDSB in terms of declining enrolment and the realities of the provincial funding formula, approached application of the provincial accommodation review guidelines in a different manner. In 2011 the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) administration recommended closing no schools in an ARC of the Jane-Finch area “even though one, Shoreham Public School, is almost half empty” and the remaining four schools under review had seen enrolment decline by “nearly 500 students in six years” (Hammer, 2011). Ostensibly the rationale for maintaining all five schools in

the ARC was linked to a potential new development of up to 10,000 housing units in the adjacent York University area. The argument that a community school should not be closed pending possible future development in the area was one TVDSB directly rejected in the case of the Churchill ARC. The process that led to the TDSB decision was much different from the TVDSB process I encountered in my review; where, in one instance, a public meeting erupted and, “opponents were so unruly last January that they refused to form discussion groups at the meeting of the Accommodation Review Committee of staff and citizens set up to consider the issue. The meeting ground to a halt” (Brown, 2011, p. GT1)

The decision by TDSB was not without controversy at the trustee level. This was evident on the evening of the vote to support the staff recommendation to keep all schools in the Jane-Finch ARC open and operating. Trustee Stephanie Payne, a supporter of no closures framed the argument to keep all schools open as an expression of support for the community and “cautioned her colleagues against ignoring community wishes” (Hammer, 2011 p. A14). She stated at the meeting, “You are going to have a war on your hands if you do anything other than what the committee recommended.” An opponent of this approach, Trustee Irene Atkinson, summed up her opposition in a response more typical to that given in the same scenario in other jurisdictions, “We are bereft of space and desperately need money.”

In this case staff recommended, and supported the ARC recommendation, that all schools in the Jane-Finch area remain open. While not directly stated as a rationale for the decision, it bears mentioning that the Jane-Finch neighbourhood is a socially-economically challenged community which may have been a factor in this decision.

Also, the community mobilized in a significant manner to keep all their local schools opened. Finally, the governance culture of the TDSB appears to be such that trustees would and could engage in an open debate of the worth of a school beyond fiscal imperatives, although fiscal imperatives did form part of the debate.

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) introduced in 2011 a board policy on facility partnerships which also provides an interesting example of how different boards exercise their sense of individual agency in regards to the issue of school closure. In late 2010 the Ontario Ministry of Education released the *Facility Partnership Guideline* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). The purpose of this guideline is, “to encourage school boards to work with their community partners in order to share facilities to the benefit of boards, students and the community, and to optimize the use of public assets owned by school boards” (p. 1). The guidelines are rather prescriptive in terms of both which organizations can share facilities with schools and when schools are eligible. The eligibility criteria raise questions about the practical utility of these guidelines in terms of rural schools. Still, the fiscal aspects of this approach are unique as they now allow local school boards the ability to assign partnership revenues (rent) to maintaining the facility in a manner that does not penalize them (in terms of the ‘empty space’ equation) as was the case previously under the educational funding formula. In the case of HWDSB it was stated that its new policy, following the provincial guidelines, might shift the outcome of the ARC review for as many as five secondary and two elementary schools by 2013, potentially keeping all of them open (Pecoskie, 2011). The HWDSB board chair described the new policy as a vehicle giving the board more

flexibility in how schools are used, and opportunities to partner with the community, thus recognizing that “schools are community hubs and this is allowing us to rent out space.”

### **In closing**

The institutional perspective, as it pertains to the accommodation review process, does appear to have a directive influence on how the process unfolds. The school board, exercising its own sense of agency, assumes the role of policy-maker during the conduct of the actual review. Agency, in this case, is formed by the institutional values. These values, as we see in the following chapter, can be quite different from those of school communities.

## **Chapter Six: The Role of School and Community – the Values**

### **Proposition**

*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 have contact with other local people. Community spirit was built through the school and for many the school was the heart of their community. (Kearns et al., 2009, p.138, observations on school closures in rural New Zealand)*

This chapter focuses on reaching a better understanding of the role of the school and the community through the lived-experience of community residents. It provides an examination of community values and how these values are seen against institutional actions. In the course of my research, while interviewing community members, unexpected themes emerged. Three of the most pervasive are a sense of participants' personal connectedness with the school, profound emotional grieving at its loss, and the school having an iconic place in the community being three of the most pervasive of these themes. Participants shared a concept of school that went beyond the concept of school as hub; the school was represented as an essential element of the community's DNA. These themes were consistent in both case communities and no urban-rural dichotomy was evident. However, in the rural community the additional issue of busing was of particular importance. Busing students was seen as antithetical to parental values, especially given that one reason they chose to live in a rural setting was because of the

smaller community school. Many respondents evinced a strong emotional reaction as they described how it felt to watch the local children board a bus to travel to a different community. It came across as a shattering sense of defeat and loss of community.

### **Personal connectedness**

The theme of a sense of personal connectedness with the local school was prevalent amongst almost all of the participants interviewed, regardless of their relationship with the school whether they were parents, students, community members, and so forth. It can be seen as an almost visceral attachment, and it was demonstrated in many different ways in terms of how individuals reacted when the continued operation of the local school was challenged.

The intergenerational influence that the local school played in the community provides part of the rationale for this strength of connectedness. Kaylin Carruthers, a recent secondary school student graduate, who attended Caradoc South for her entire elementary schooling described this influence: “My parents were really concerned when I was in grade 6 about it would be closed, it was a big part of Melbourne” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). Family continuity with the local school was a big factor in this sense of connectedness. “My dad’s aunt was a principal there at the school; his dad went there too, at least three generations.” This connectedness was recalled with great fondness, as illustrated by Rob Hathaway reflecting on his Caradoc South experience:



I really liked it, the small class sizes, and a lot of one-on-one. We stayed in the community. That was in the 70's, I started in '68. If you got into trouble at school the principal's office wasn't the thing that deterred you, the thing was the principal knew your mom and dad personally. You didn't get away with nothing. It just might actually beat you home. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

This phenomenon has been noted by others who have studied this issue in the past. Valencia's (1984) work of the impact of U.S. school closures in the early 1980s found that in terms of on-going parental involvement, once their child moved to a new school participation dropped significantly. "[R]esults indicated that parental involvement across 10 different activity categories (e.g., participating in parent teacher associations, parent-teacher conferences, school board meetings, field trips) was higher in frequency in the pre-closure schools compared to the receiving schools and across the 10 categories, there was a 29% decline in participation frequency" (p. 19).

Connectedness with the local school was amplified during the accommodation review process, not just for community members but for education officials as well. The degree and the tenor of community response, in terms of its work to attempt to keep the local school operational, did not escape the attention of Board officials. As recounted in the previous chapter, this sense of connectedness can be identified as a key factor in the TDSB's decision to keep all the schools open in the Jane-Finch community. In terms of TVDSB, recognition of this connectedness is recounted in the following recollection by Trustee B of the Churchill ARC process. It appeared to have little influence on the board's decision.

*Speaking of community engagement, have you been surprised by the emotional attachments that people seem to have with the schools – the degree of it you see in the process?*

No. I think it is a good thing. It is a reminder of, you know I don't get letters from parents or e-mails saying, "By the way, Mr. Trustee, I just wanted to let you know, we have a wonderful school system and I am so happy with my teacher this year and I am so happy I am doing this for my kids." That doesn't happen. But that does happen in an ARC. And when you close Churchill, I have heard from many parents that talk about what a wonderful principal we had there and how caring the staff was and I heard about a lot of programs that were going on behind the scenes in terms of reaching out to the kids who were vulnerable in terms of poverty on other issues. So to me it is heart warming. It is unfortunate that you need an ARC to hear it but these things sometimes go that it is a positive thing. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

Jacques, as president of the Churchill School Council and ARC member, spoke at a TVDSB meeting, on the attachment that local residents had with the school: "It's more than a school, it's a family" (TVDSB Meeting, May 10, 2011). At the presentation she gave an impassioned appeal citing the economic challenges parents would face in terms of a new school, and pleaded with trustees to consider keeping the school open, "to take a long hard look at our school before closing it." Her strong passion and emotions were evident as I listened to her from the audience; she had a challenging time maintaining herself and not breaking down and losing personal control. As noted in the previous

chapter, not one TVDSB trustee asked her a question or acknowledged her presentation when she finished. They sat silent and stone-faced.

### **Awareness**

Can school board officials, trustees and administration actually hear what community members are saying; are their values so different that they do not hear the message? Given a rational-technical standpoint, is the message emanating from community members incomprehensible due to its more visceral nature? Trustee B confesses that he does believe there are “situations where the die is cast” (personal communication, April 29, 2011), where the evidence dictates the decision. In these cases B states that trustees almost automatically follow a rational-technical model, one in which the facts speak for themselves. B hypothesized on the conditions in which trustees might consider an alternative outcome to one recommended by the board administration. B’s speculation speaks to the real hold that the rational model has on institutional decision-making.

And I think if there are parents or community members that come up with creative ideas and say, “If the administration has this plan but here is this plan and it will deal with the administrative issues and financial issues and here is how we can support it.” I think it, community input, is very valuable. But some of it is more effective in some situations than others. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

In this case both administration preference and the financial issues (which are not necessarily the same as explored in the previous chapter) need to be satisfied prior to an alternative outcome being considered. Trustee B maintains that there are challenges in the accommodation review process dealing with community issues but they should still be considered as part of the process. “I think on balance, you need the community input and it is valuable even though there is a downside to expectations” (personal communication, April 29, 2011).

TVDSB’s practice of minimal communication activity during an ARC process lessens community awareness that the process is occurring, and can be seen as a contributing factor to the type and degree of public input. TVDSB follows the minimal provincial communication guidelines: they post information on their website, and send a notice home with students of the schools under review. TVDSB’s own policy specifically prohibits additional board resources to be expended on this function. Trustee A justifies this practice, stating since TVDSB targets communications to parents it is reaching those most concerned with the issue. In A’s explanation the act of education appears as a transactional expression between board officials and parents.

I am not sure that a communication budget would address the process issues because the community member, despite the very nature of the ARC, the community member is going to be a parent of a child who attends the school. Those are the people who have the most interest in the outcome of the ARC and that is never going to change. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

There is a disconnect between what school board officials believe is occurring at the community level as demonstrated in this comment from Trustee A, “The people who don’t have kids in the school tend to be quite complacent about issues around the school until the last minute” and the true depth of concern communities have, which is the focus for the remainder of this chapter.

### **Grieving**

A prevailing theme from those interviewed was the sense of loss they were experiencing related to the closing of the community school. They were, in fact, grieving, not just for themselves, but for their community and the impact of the closure on others.

It caused so much heart ache. Now if you advertise the house, how far are you from the nearest school? We are afraid that your children may have to get on a bus at 6:30 in the morning. The guy down the road won’t let him go on the bus to Glencoe to kindergarten, he drives him. He says it is too much to let his child on a bus for that long drive at that age. (J. Galbraith, personal communication, March 1, 2011)

Many stages of grieving were evident, not just loss. Another stage of grieving, acceptance was noted in this reply by Hathaway on the closure of the Caradoc South school.

I don't think they really think about it a whole lot. My daughter thinks it too bad that it's gone. Everybody has pretty much accepted it now. That's part of growing pains in a way. I got thinking about this the other day. (personal communication, March 19, 2011)

And also anger, not only at the actual act of the school closing, but also at the process surrounding it, recounted here by the Melbourne village librarian:

I don't know a lot about it. I know there were petitions, I know there were meetings. And the parents that came here felt very frustrated because it was the impression that I got was that it was basically a done deal. You could protest, you could sign petitions, you could do what you want but we're going ahead with this. So I felt the parents were very frustrated. (S. King, personal communication, March 17, 2011)

But, on the whole, loss was the primary form of grieving expressed. The sense of loss went far beyond a transactional expression between school and parents. The grieving was over a sense of community lost.

What role for the school aside from education? They were very involved in sports. They competed with track and field with other schools. The gym could be used for other events, not just for school; originally the gym was used as a display area for the fair, before the fair building was built. We didn't have the big agricultural hall at the beginning. At one point we even had tents on the school property to put displays in. See we have two churches in the village but the school was the centre, not everyone goes to church. Anybody that had students

going to school, parents, great grandparents, siblings they went to school whether it was a Christmas pageant or a science fair. It was, as I said, the centre. (J. Galbraith, personal communication, March 1, 2011)

### **Impact on the community**

The impact of a school on a community, beyond the educational role, intensifies the sense of loss once the school is closed. Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) contends that, “in many impoverished small communities or neighbourhoods, the school is part and parcel of the community’s core institutions. Therefore, closing down a school would affect the life of those communities” (p. 9). Her research draws upon earlier work conducted by Burger (1983), who studied why some communities more vigorously protest a school closure than others. Burger concluded that in those cases the loss of the school represented the loss of a tie that binds together and defines a community (as cited in Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, p. 10). Jacques’ observation, when asked to imagine the Churchill neighbourhood post school closure, supports Fredua-Kwarteng thesis.

I think it depends on what the final outcome is. If we are to go to Prince Charles and not be bused, we will have a heck of a time selling our house. If we go to Lord Nelson and we are not bused, we will have a heck of a time selling our house. The area around the school is just going to be awful. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Jacques foresaw a devastating impact on the future viability of the community. She further states when pondering the future possibilities, “it is just going to be a free-for-all.”

This belief that the presence of the school creates a sense of belonging in some communities, a tie that binds, is reflected in Van Dijk’s observation of day-to-day life in Melbourne prior to the school closing. Then the community took a collective responsibility for the local children. This sense of collective responsibility bound them together.

[J]ust the kids themselves going to school, they walk by a myriad of homes that where the people in those homes see the kids, know the kids, know them by name, know where they belong. They know strangers in town so if anyone pulls up in a car asking questions, I guarantee there will be somebody pulling out here, “Okay Billy or Johnny or Suzie, it’s time for you to keep going.” There is that protection. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

What makes Van Dijk’s comment particularly poignant is that this perspective comes from an individual who has no children himself, yet who views the relationship between school, children and community as an extension of a social contract, and not as a transactional relationship between parents and school board.

The impact on community of school closure was acknowledged to a greater degree in the rural case than the urban one I examined, perhaps in part because Caradoc South had closed within the last year and the decision on Churchill’s closing was still pending at the time of my interviews. The rural case provided a greater sense that the



school was central to the definition of community, and its physical existence had a great impact in determining the future of the community. The existence of a school was seen as a determining factor for future growth and settlement in the rural community as represented by this observation from Van Dijk: “We have a pair of neighbours who are selling their home in a magnificent part of this community and are going to move to another small town so their child doesn’t have to be bused. And this was their dream home” (personal communication, March 18, 2011). James Johnson, a long-time resident of Melbourne, who lives across the street from Caradoc South, provided further insight on the future of the rural community without a school:

When you lose your school it not just the kids going to school, your community is never the same, never had the ball teams like you used to, all these rural communities had that and so on, but you also are going to have less younger people stay in the town, because there is no school there. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Many voices during the interview process echoed the same sense of loss and shared their sense of the consequences because of it.

A great loss to the community. No reason for families to move here. Even this year at Halloween not a lot of kids were out. They went elsewhere. (K. Carruthers, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

Now we don’t even have a school here. We just come home to sleep. We don’t even go to watch the kids in their concert or something like that. (Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

Melbourne will turn into a bedroom town, if it hasn't already. Young people who don't have ties to the community, they won't move here. (P. Zavitz, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

There was an immediate and far reaching impact on the rural community with the school closing. Carruthers' observation regarding the diminished number of local children on the street during Halloween represents just one aspect of this. King noted a drop in usage of the village library by local children.

I would say that the attendance here and the participation here, initially it went up because they were coming here to get their projects and get all their information because they couldn't get it at school. But now I am finding that they are going to Glencoe and Strathroy. (King, personal communication, March 17, 2011)

In part the decrease in library usage can be attributed to a change in the children's schedule. The library has traditionally been open on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and now with the need to bus to the "new" school "they [the students] don't get home until close to supper time. So I feel it has an impact on the library as well" (King, personal communication, March 17, 2011). The school closure is having impact on how the rural community is currently viewed and used; it is now reduced to being "a bedroom." Golden posits its future settlement patterns:

[W]hen families see they are closing rural schools, families think, oh well why am I settling with a young family in a rural situation where I know there are

going to be buses to Mt. Brydges, Strathroy or Glencoe? Why not live in Mt. Brydges, Strathroy or Glencoe? (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

### **Impact on the parents**

In terms of the consequences of school closures the impact on parents was a ubiquitous theme, common to both the rural and the urban case communities. Valencia (1984) noted general parental impact in terms of the cost of additional time and costs expended: “Generally, closures may not be worth the added costs to parents of additional student time and parental costs in transportation to the receiving schools” (p. 12).

Impacts on parents, aside from time consumption, were expressed by informants in terms of emotional stress, economic consequences, life style changes, and concern for their children. For example, Jacques’ issue centred on the fact that her two daughters currently at Churchill would be split up and sent to different schools upon closing, as one of her daughters is a special needs student.

It is going to be, it is going to take a lot of work because we, much as I am not going to enjoy it, Brian and I are going to have to try and find the positives so that B. can go to school happily and feel good about this change, even though we don’t and our children are getting split up because the Board’s interpretation of K. is that those [special needs schools] are system schools and their words were, “They can be plopped anywhere in Spec. Ed,” so they are not going to be going to the same school. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Haroun, from her vantage point as community childcare operator, recounts the significant parental impact of the impending Churchill closure, including scheduling. She is finding that many parents are facing unexpected challenges given that full-day kindergarten is not universally provided, before and after care is not a constant in every school that offers full day kindergarten, and school holidays prove a challenge.

Parents can't play it that way when they are planning for their jobs and knowing what their care arrangements are for the children, so it is hard to know what next year will look like and the year after, if Churchill school closed, the year after.

(personal communication, May 11, 2011)

When the school is local, as a community childcare centre, transportation was not such a significant issue and arrangements could be made. That is not the situation when the school is not local.

And so those parents are in a panic because they enrolled the children in school and still needed care-giving in the morning and afternoon, and they were coming back to us, "Can you take them?" We would have loved to but the issue is transportation. (D. Haroun, personal communication, May 11, 2011)

The outcome Haroun observes is that more and more parents are choosing unlicensed childcare, adding to parental concern and stress. In addition to the childcare issue, in the rural community the issue of busing adds complexity to parental impact. While busing will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter, it should be noted here that parental anxiety in terms of the length of the bus trip on younger children was a

common concern. King recounts one aspect of this concern as observed through her role at the Melbourne Library:

A lot of the kids came to my story-time so I kept in touch with the parents and they popped in and they said they are having a tough time with the little ones.

Because it is too long a day for them with the all-day learning, and here even if it was all day learning you can take your child and drop them off. And even if they were bused, from the local area, it was still only a 15 minutes bus ride, or 10 minute. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Negative parental impacts regarding busing were not just expressed in terms of care issues related to younger children. Changes in lifestyle and family patterns were also expressed as a concern. McDougall, who has children in grades 3 and 7 taking a bus to the new school in another community, commented:

Child on the bus! Now they're on for an hour, an hour one way. I'm not really crazy about it and there are 65 kids on the bus, and that is another issue. It's ridiculous. They don't like the bus, and by the time they get home from the bus they are so wound up its hard to settle them down, and the weather, I had to deal with issues I never considered before, bus delays, cancellations, and if one of my kids is sick now I can't call a neighbour to go pick her up. It's not as simple as it once was. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

Parental feedback concerning busing was not unanimously negative. A respondent from the student focus group recounts how her parents saw busing to the neighbouring community as a positive. In her case both her parents work in London and

the new school is closer to the city. “And they figure it is just an easier way to get to London to these appointments and stuff; they just kind of look at it as a positive thing” (personal communication, April 28, 2011). The remainder of the student focus group participants responded to the question about how their parents felt about the school closing with the opposite sentiment: “They didn’t like it,” “They didn’t like the ideas of a bigger school,” and “My parents were mad.”

Trustee B, when posed with the question about the impact of school closures on parents and family life, interestingly responded that the parents have the obligation to remain calm and positive about the change. B equated a closure and the impact on family as similar to a divorce. Trustee B stated that in divorce, “If parents are angry and anxious and communicate that to the kids, the kids get angry and anxious” (personal communication, April 29, 2011). In the case of a closure B advises that it is the parents’ role to tell their children that, “the sun is going to be up tomorrow, you are going to have new friends and some old friends, the world goes on.” Finally, B spoke of the resilience of children and how they can handle transition well, especially with the assistance of the schools, parents, and the community. From my research I found that both parents and the community-at-large have a significant challenge presenting a positive face to students as they themselves struggle with their own personal grief and sense of loss. The issue of student transition to new school, and how students experience that transition, is considered in Chapter Eight.

### **Impact as a community asset**

Community interviewees recounted the personal emotional attachment they felt towards their local school. McDougall, when asked to describe the general feeling in the Melbourne community when it was announced that the school was actually closing, responded, “How do you think the community feels? Lost!” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). In terms of a community asset the school was seen as a generator of hope, a continuance of the community through the daily presence of young children. McDougall describes it thusly: “Before even the retired people would keep an eye out for the kids. They missed seeing the kids walk around. We take our kids now to other communities so they can play with their other friends.” The loss stated by McDougall can best be described as a loss of hope, hope for future community vitality.

This sense of community vitality was also evident in the urban Churchill school community. Kohut-Gowan, from her vantage point as a public health nurse, saw the school as a rallying point for the community, where community building extends beyond the school yard into the neighbourhood.

The people that do... that I know through the school and that live in the community – the parents in the breakfast program – they support each other very well, within the community too. So they definitely look out for each other. Those are not necessarily in the school, like the staff. But the parents outside look out for each other too and like the parents’ kids. Sometimes the kids might walk to the school with each other. The community definitely helps out each other also. (personal communication, May 19, 2011)

She expressed concern about the future of the neighbourhood once this rallying-point was closed, given that no other community asset existed to help fill the void.

In my interview with Galbraith she expressed deep and genuine concern that the loss of the Cardoc South school would erode the sense of Melbourne as community. Her concern focused on both the annual fall fair and Grade 8 graduation. In both instances her family sponsors student awards. For the fall fair it's an award for Grade 7 and 8 students who produce the best poster depicting local history.

It must have been 15 years that my husband and I have sponsored a school entry in the portion of Melbourne fair. This year we are wondering, in limbo, how is it [ the school closure] going to affect? Are we going to have more or less? The school entries are to Echo and Mt. Brydges [The two schools where the former Caradoc South students now attend]. They always had the grade 7 and 8 posters. How are they going to separate a Melbourne student from a Glencoe or Mt. Brydges student? (personal communication, March 1, 2011)

The Galbraith family also sponsors a history award for Grade 8 graduation, along with many community groups that sponsor a variety of other awards. As she expressed her concern about how the award ceremony will be conducted in future, her real concern, the future of the community, became evident.

Then there are student graduation awards. Is there going to be a dividing line? Is it going to be the whole school board? I'd like to keep it in Melbourne but I don't know how? Is it segregation? The trophies they had for grade 8 graduating students, are actually sitting in a box at the Legion. All the plaques that were on



display [in the school] are in boxes at the Legion. (personal communication, March 1, 2011)

Not having a way for the community to celebrate itself, and its continuance, through recognition of its children at graduation, was emotionally devastating. I observed how this feeling was shared by the community when I attended the annual Lions Club Pancake Supper at the local Legion. Ringing the perimeter of the Legion Hall, tables were set up displaying all the Caradoc South plaques and trophies. Throughout the evening I witnessed many community members viewing the award memorabilia and recounting their personal memories associated with them. It reminded me of a funeral wake. On one level there were many fond memories shared that evening, but on another deeper level I got the impression that many people were saying good-bye, and struggling with personal loss at the same time.

It is evident from the interviewees that their considered opinion is that the local school's impact on community cannot be measured within a strictly rational decision-making model. It is much more than a place where education occurs. Even those community individuals who do not currently have, nor ever had, children in school tend to hold this view. This is seen in Marshall's comment when she was specifically questioned about the possibility of a divergent approach to decision-making between the community and the school board;

*What about institutional values versus community values? Do you see any challenges there? Are they aligned in your sense?*

But I am not convinced always that the community values and the strength of the community are as important as the benefits to the institution. I really think, because at the end of the day when decisions are made for amalgamations, for anything like that, it is the bottom line. And I really don't think that people in their communities factor that strongly into the decision. It's all financial based. I might be biased but that is how I think the decisions are made. I can see both sides of the argument having worked in finance and it is a tough call. I wouldn't want to make it. But if I had been in the situation of the family I would be fighting. Even if it was proven to me that financially it was more important to the TVDSB to close it, financially, than to keep it open, I would have been fighting for the community and the families in the community to keep the schools open. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

### **Larger versus smaller schools**

As previously noted, from the TVDSB perspective there is preference for an elementary school size of approximately 450 students. Trustee B posits that this is the appropriate size necessary to meet diverse program needs and meet administrative requirements:

I think we, the Thames Valley Board, over the years has taken the position that there is a magic number with elementary somewhere around 400 and it is based on critical mass of staff to make sure you have somebody who can play the piano and somebody who can play floor hockey. And to have a diversity of programs,

to have a school play, cover French, so I think for administrative reasons schools need to be a certain size. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

Trustee B also acknowledges that the issue of size is a situational phenomenon, and it takes on different situational dimensions given the variances of time, place and local culture. “If you are in New York City, you want to make all your elementary schools with 500 kids. It may be a good thing to get smaller. If you tell people in Caradoc you are going to have a school with 500 kids, it is a monstrosity.” Should school boards recognize those cultural variances within their own boundaries, or do fiscal imperatives require “sameness” throughout the jurisdiction? Or, as introduced in Chapter Five, are there other issues-at-play, a TVDSB administrative penchant towards a standardized school facility model? B acknowledges that parental choice would most likely not match current board practice.

Now having said that, if you ask the average parents with kids between kindergarten and grade 3 if they would rather have their kids go to a school with 50 kids or 500 they would all pick 50 because they all feel safer in smaller numbers and there is going to be worse supervision but there is a challenge in running meaningful programs and diverse opportunities, so there is magic in that number. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

School size was a recurrent theme throughout the research. It was referenced repeatedly with the themes of parental choice, learning environment and keeping schools local. Regarding TVDSB’s stance that larger schools are required to allow for greater programming and opportunities, (in part driven by the provincial funding formula as

acknowledged in the preceding chapter) the following section demonstrates that most respondents reject this position. They take a contrary stance to the Board's which is best represented by this comment from Trustee B: "[T]here is also an economic reality that you can't create 400 one-room school houses. And also, education has changed on how it was delivered in those days" (personal communication, April 29, 2011).

Carruthers imparts a contrary position to Trustee B's in her recount of her recent school experience at Caradoc South:

I liked the size of Caradoc South, in kindergarten I knew everyone. Everything was positive and good, everyone knew everyone, and there was not really any bullying. Once you get to grade 9 it's more important to access a larger library and all that stuff, but it's not that important in younger ages. Our gym was a decent size, but we were not able to have other basketball teams play at our gym, we played at theirs. We used to have fun fairs; these ended when I was in grade 7. I always did crafts and stuff during the fall fair, posters and other things. For grade 8 graduating I got the Math and English awards and in grade 7 I got the Howard McLean Reward for leadership. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

As an eighteen year old, former student of the school Carruthers' reflections on her experience at Caradoc South is notable for its similarities to the observations of other attendees of the school from previous generations. Place was more important than diverse programming and resources. A smaller size gave a sense of belonging, security and comfort.

The argument for a smaller sized school was not just heard in the rural case community. It was also a persistent theme among Churchill respondents. Jacques, both a graduate of Churchill and a parent with two daughters at the school, made similar comments:

I mean, I know as much that 200 [current Churchill student enrolment] is not going to go very far [financially], but they are going to get the basics, and then you end up with teachers like that, that fill in the voids. And I just, I can't see a bigger school benefitting anybody, I really can't. It is like going to a shopping mall, you just wander aimlessly in the aisles and you don't know anybody and, yeah I don't know, I don't know how to explain a big school but it doesn't ... I don't like the looks of it. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

In this comment she makes a parallel argument to that from the Caradoc South case. A small school promotes a sense of belonging through being known, which is deemed more important than diversified programming.

In both cases, the communities regard small as a respected lifestyle choice. They see closure of the local school as a rejection of that choice. Golden described this sense of rejection thusly: “[I]t is another slap to the face of the rural community; and another instance that they are just not being taken seriously, the positive things that it values” (personal communication, March 17, 2011.) His comment speaks to a vision of education that seems to be antithetical to the current TVDSB philosophy.

## **Parental choice**

The parental educational choice, in this instance, refers almost exclusively to schools that are local, small and familiar. Parental choice focuses on issues of location and attachment to community, and not on curriculum, except in their rejection of the argument that a school needs to be closed and consolidated in order to enhance and expand curriculum opportunities for students. Small and local appeared to be valued because it provides spaces that are attributed to providing a greater degree of safety than larger schools. They are also seen to be providing students with less anxiety and trauma than what would be the case in larger institutions. The ability to exercise choice has long-term community implications. Settlement patterns in communities are shaped by the perceived ability to access a local school. This point is demonstrated in the following comment from a participant in the Melbourne Lions Club Focus Group, “I know of two or three people that mentioned that they bought a home here [Melbourne] because it had a school. Nobody is enthused about a little wee kid riding a school bus” (personal communication, May 24, 2011). Busing is seen as a negative, as it is credited with increasing rather than reducing student anxiety and trauma.

The predilection to a school located in close proximity to home and community is played out in many ways when the closing of a local school appears to be forthcoming. Haroun’s role as an early childcare operator offers a unique perspective. When on the topic of parental choice, she shared that, “We have parents that have said we will go to either a French immersion or a Catholic school rather than send them to this public school [the alternative to a closed Churchill]” (personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Haroun sees the elimination of the local option as a reduction of choice, not choice in terms of educational program, or belief systems, but choice in terms of place.

If parents are choosing French immersion because they feel that is what they would like their child to have, or if they want to have a Catholic school, I have absolutely no problem with that. We have always dealt with children from that perspective. But if parents are doing it simply to avoid an elementary school then that means they have reduced their choice. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

Even when parents choose to stay with the public system, in Haroun's opinion, it still results in a reduction in choice. For example, the transferring of students to a school in another neighbourhood limits before and after school care.

I think you will see an awful lot more children being babysat by uncles, aunts, grandparents, neighbours, because parents can't get home in time for when the children get off school. And so you are looking at a high risk for an involvement with Children's Aid, high risk. Because the schools are not catching up fast enough with extending the rest of the day, covering from 6:00 - 6:30 in the morning until 6:00 at night. You are running high risk of violence or bullying in neighbourhoods, you are looking at parents less connection to the school, less community knowing what is going on in their children's' lives, getting their homework done, getting proper nutrition which affects their learning, because of commute, both of the children and of the parents. And the time element. (Haroun, personal communication, May 11, 2011)

## **Learning environment and school size**

Doern and Prince's (1989) review of the school closure issue in Ottawa in the early 1980's advanced the concept that the educational philosophies of school board trustees played a key role in their support for or against maintaining schools with smaller enrolment. Schmidt et al.'s (2007) study on the correlation between school size and student achievement concluded that students do better in smaller environments. When the focus group of former Caradoc South students was asked to comment on their former school with a student body numbering approximately 90 students, compared to their present one numbering approximately 450 students, the respondents overwhelmingly condemned their current situation. For one respondent it was simply an issue of the size itself because, "There are too many people in the class." Another respondent delved into the issue of cultural differences. From her response it was apparent that she was trying to deal with an alien environment for which she had no frame of reference.

I was going to say, I personally, I don't find it ... I find it a lot louder and stuff. I don't know if it is just because of the school or that class that we are in but I know at South, I am not used to people shouting out and stuff. I personally, I am pretty well behaved and when I came to this school, like I thought we misbehave every once in a while but when we came to this school I thought that was like the good version and now there are people all around me and I just can't focus. It's a lot different and bigger and I don't even know some of the kids' names that I am graduating with this year. It's different. (personal communication, April 28, 2011)



A third focus group respondent's reply supported Schmidt et al.'s (2007) assertion about class size having an impact on learning environments:

And I thought it's harder to learn because last year we had a smaller class and we would get more attention. You have a lot more people around you always trying to ask questions and you don't really get to learn anything.

A fourth respondent offered the only response that was positive, in part, towards their current school. While she made positive comment about new classroom material, the issue of size was still seen as contentious.

It is better and it is worse. It is worse because there are a lot more people so you don't get as much help as you need to. And it is better because they have more high tech stuff that you can use to help you.

The students were interviewed after completing two-thirds of a school year in their new environment, giving them ample time to acclimatize to their new surroundings. This passage of time makes their reflections more noteworthy, as they were well settled into the routine of their current school, yet memories of their previous one were still recent enough to make sound comparisons. As senior elementary students, all respondents were in either grade 7 or 8; they had many years' experience in the former, much smaller school. This experience created an indelible frame of reference for them in terms of what they perceive the educational experience should be. Obviously their new school does not meet the standards of this frame of reference.

## **Role of the School**

Kearns et al. (2009) contend that an important role of the school in a community is building and sustaining the community it is located within. The participant response they received from their study of school closure impacts in New Zealand parallels the participant response received in this research. One comment in particular that they note bears repetition. “There are plenty of communities without schools, but there are no schools without communities” (p.131). The following section addresses the question: what is the role of a school? When it comes to the answer, the geography of South-Western Ontario and rural New Zealand seems very similar.

Kearns et al. (2009) contend that, “Schools are central in the production and reproduction of communities and the social cohesion of neighbourhoods” (p. 132). A similar contention is held by Trustee A: “Well I am a firm believer that the role of a school is to create community. It’s to inculcate a sense of belonging and citizenship and a feeling that we are all in this together among the students who all attend to school” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). A’s opinion, that schools have an important role in community does not align with the trustee’s public record in terms of supporting the maintenance of local community schools. Thorpe, commenting on the future of small schools, focused his response as an issue of financial necessity. “The question is a fairly simple one: how can the anticipated student population best be served into the future? And if there is an opportunity for students to be educated in fewer, better facilities, then the board should act on that basis” (personal communication, May 17, 2011). On closer examination, his response actually speaks to the school board administration’s preference for its particular vision on how education should be delivered. The preference advanced

by TVDSB officials appears to be prevalent in the thinking of trustees, as demonstrated by the following comment from Trustee A (which seems all the more remarkable, as this stance appears to be contrary to the trustee's stated belief that there is a role for the school to construct community):

I would never be in favour of closing a school for financial reasons only. It has to be program based. It absolutely has to be program based. I do think that there is a point when the viability of a school is called into question. You do have to ask on a quality of education basis, are we doing the right thing by these kids when we have, you know, split grades, triple grades? When there are such small numbers of students that there is a small number of staff in the school, there is no teacher-librarian, there is no gym teacher, and there is no music teacher? I do see a rationale from a program perspective for closing a school but I would never make an argument on a financial ground only to close a school. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

In fairness, Thorpe's position can be attributed to his professional belief that the model he is promoting provides a fairer and more equitable educational environment. When reflecting upon the role of education in the broader society he shares this vision of education, although again it is tempered by what he sees as the constraints of fiscal realities:

I am a strong supporter of the public school system. I believe that there are a few investments that our society needs that are more important than public education. And so my vision is for an appropriate educational opportunity to be afforded to

all children in the province of Ontario. The perspective of location or wealth, and than obviously mean more than words, means we have to shepherd the resources that they have available to us carefully and use the money wisely in the promotion of the best possible quality of education that can be afforded by the society that supports that system. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

When the question about the role of a school was put to community members and parents, their answers centered on issues other than program. For Jacques, in an urban environment, safety was as important as learning: “To protect, to teach your child to the best of that child’s ability and make sure they are safe” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). She equated safety to the school being local, in the neighbourhood. For Thomas, who attempted to negotiate an agreement which would see the Muncey-Delaware First Nation children at the Caradoc South school, the role of the school is about building community, “Taking our children out of London and bringing them home... trying to get development of our language into the Melbourne school” (personal communication, April 29, 2011). Zavitz described the role of the school as “a drawing point for kids to come to town” and as “the back bone of the community” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). He went so far as to say that “It [the school] was Melbourne.” For Haroun, the role of school is to act as the community hub, “To service a community around it; it provides the educational needs to make community, to become a hub of various types of learning in the community it serves” (personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Polhill has made a reputation on London city council as a fiscal conservative. He appeared to support the financial argument as the determining factor in Churchill’s future

operating viability. However, in recognizing that there is a greater role for the school outside of educational programming, he takes a different position:

Well, I understand where they [TVDSB administration] are coming from. They are coming from a point that says that you can have four schools but you only have enough money to accommodate three. So you can either have four run on a shoestring budget or three run on a reasonable budget. And that is what it is all about. It is like having four kids and only having enough money to feed three of them. Everybody goes hungry. And that to me makes a lot of sense. The way they are presenting it, and I don't disagree with it, but a school, in most cases, is like the heart of the community. You take the school away and the heart is gone. And in that particular case, the school is an anchor for Wilton Avenue, which is an area which has some issues to start with (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

Kearns et al. (2009) state the role that schools play in communities extends beyond educational programming: “[W]here the institutional fabric of neighbourhoods may be thin and fraying, schools can take on an added significance as community institutions” (p. 132). Polhill describes schools as “the heart of the community”.

The sentiment that the school acts as the heart of the community was expressed in different ways. Golden acknowledges this role when he describes the various community-school events he attended in Melbourne over the years: school plays and concerts, B.B.Q.s, graduation events and so forth, as “so much community building. Because they all are calling parents and parents and grandparents to come in and they

celebrate the milestones in the life of the student. And it calls in the whole community” (personal communication, March 17, 2011). Kearns et al. (2009) contend that these type of activities are vital in constructing a community’s social fabric, where the school then becomes, “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” (p. 132). McDougall’s sense of what constitutes the role of school in community aligns with Kearns et al.’s assertion, “In a community, it’s [the school] for the community; this is a close knit community” (personal communication, March 5, 2011).

There appears to be strong support for the school to be seen as a central element in the construction of a community’s social fabric; yet, this function is apparently not valued in the final decision regarding the school’s ongoing viability and usefulness. Why this role is apparently not valued is in part contained within Thorpe’s response to the question of the future of the playgrounds of both Caradoc South and Churchill schools. In both cases the only community playgrounds are those located on the schoolyard. In the case of Caradoc South, much of the equipment contained in the playground was purchased by local groups and service clubs. Thorpe’s response when asked about their future was, “Am I concerned about the park? Absolutely, I am concerned about the park. But the Board doesn’t get funded to run parks” (personal communication, May 17, 2011). The issue circles back to provincially mandated authority, issues of the funding formula, school board preference and TVDSB’s expression of its agency. Kearns et al. (2009), citing Basu (2004) describe considerations

of the role of school in the community as a struggle between two conflicting worldviews, a philosophical power struggle, when it comes to what is the role of school in community. “Arguably, therefore, school closures present a context in which to investigate the relationships between local social capital and bureaucratic power” (p.132).

### **School as local institution**

On the question of whether a school needs to be a local institution to accomplish the role of building and sustaining community, the answer varied given the vantage point of the respondent. Trustee A felt that being local was not an issue. Further, A felt that parents’ right of school choice should be limited, determinedly to strengthen communities by limiting mobility away from them.

Um, no. I would say not. No a school does not have to be local. I mean, I do ... I am, again, I am a very strong proponent of neighbourhood schools and I am not supportive of choices for schools, of letting parents sort of pick and choose where they want to send their kids to because I think we want all of our neighbourhood schools to be good schools and that there is real value in creating this sense of community among people ... among families in the local neighbourhood. But having said that, my own experience ... I also recognize that the school does not have to be right around the corner to have that strong sense of community and identity and also belonging that you would want students to feel. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Trustee A's view on this issue was formed from personal experience as a parent who chose to send her children to a specialized program. The ability to send your children to a specialized program is in itself an expression of choice. How can this expression of choice be deemed to be more acceptable than the choice of keeping a community school open?

Kohut-Gowan's outlook on the issue of whether schools need to be local is different from the trustee's. She sees the local school as a contributing factor to both building community, and to children's growing sense of social responsibility.

To an extent, yes. I think the school being within proximity of where the people live definitely helps. It connects them to the neighbourhood more than say if you had to travel to go to your school. Because growing up as a child, I think that that is where you really look for your influence is within your local neighbourhood.

(personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Further Kohut-Gowan argues it is a fundamental necessity to locate school in the community as it provides a positive influence in the child's sense of belonging. This sense of belonging has many positive consequences on a child's corresponding behaviour, "for them to be able to look at this school that is in their neighbourhood and to see that this school is well taken care of, that it is not okay to throw shopping carts all over the place and litter the place and graffiti them...there is a sense of what is acceptable" (personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Respondents felt that this belonging extended beyond the students, to apply to the parents. Thomas equates the act of belonging with greater parental involvement. "You



know it's about being more involved. The parents can be more involved in the community and in the kids' education" (personal communication, April 29, 2011). Haroun's view, from the perspective of an early childhood educator in an urban environment, on the correlation between the proximity of a school and the degree of parental involvement is of a similar nature to that expressed by Thomas, (a parent in a rural setting). "I think that when a school is not within the community, the connection with the families, knowing really what the children's needs are, what the families' needs are is lost because there is distance created. There is a lot less one-on-one" (Haroun, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Haroun offers additional reasons for a school being located locally aligned with Jacques' view on this issue (as earlier stated):

And the further you have to go from school, the more neighbourhood bullies you have to get past, and the more predators out there that you have to get past. So a smaller school in your region to me is a better option than a large school servicing five regions. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

Some respondents imagined the future of educational provision being the end of all local rural schools. This is not too hard to imagine. For example, currently some American jurisdictions are moving to go to a four day school week to reduce the costs associated with busing (Brokaw, 2011). Golden suggests an additional scenario. While his scenario can perhaps not be seen as immediately credible, the sentiment behind it does speak to the sense of disenfranchisement that interviewees displayed towards the TVDSB. Realistically Golden's vision of the future may be seen to be within the realm of possibility:

I am going to digress a little bit because within the United Church in the last 40 years and in the wider provinces, the whole issue of the residential school issue with native peoples, removing individuals from their families and shipping them off the schools many, many miles away, there is a part of me wondering with rising gas prices and the like, when is gas prices going to be too much of an issue and we just create residences in places like London and say everybody from the rural area has to go there; get dumped in there and go home on the weekends.  
(personal communication, March 17, 2011)

## **Busing**

In terms of my research, there was no greater values disconnect between institutional and community standpoints than on the issue of busing. When it came to this issue, parents displayed the strongest preference for schools being local. This preference was seen as a more important variable in their child's education than all arguments pertaining to better programming opportunities. Thorpe presented the TVDSB position, which is antithetical to that of the parents:

With all things, it is a question of balance. I don't believe that young children in particular should be riding the busses for any longer than is necessary to get them to schools where they can be appropriately educated. But by the same token, I don't believe that kids should be penalized by virtue of living in areas of lower population density. So what one has to do is decide where schools can and should best be places that allow students to receive appropriate quality education but as

close enough to where they live that the busing issues are not hurting someone.

(personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The economic argument tends not to sway parents, or in the case of Galbraith grandparents, about the necessity to bus children. In Galbraith's view the values disconnect is extremely evident. "Do they save money with all the busses on the road? A four year old getting on a bus at 6:30 in the morning, is that rational?" (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

The potential impact busing has on the child is an important theme to respondents. Jacques, although from an urban community where normally busing would not be experienced, saw it as an important matter in terms of the potential impacts of the local school closing given that one of her children is special needs.

I have a child with Down's syndrome and you can't make L. sit for an hour when she is tired or when her pills haven't kicked in. And to kick her off the bus because that is beyond her control in some respects is not fair and I feel so sorry for those parents because now it is the parents that need to get them to school.

That's not fair. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

As noted, a frequent criticism from rural interviewees dealt with the amalgamation of the Middlesex County Board of Education with the London Board, specifically given perceived cultural cleavages and understanding. This is illustrated in the following comment, and relates to the issue of busing and the appropriateness of institutional size:

I was just thinking that we have all got brain-washed. It has changed from all little townships only now it is a big school, but it is the same process. Now we have South Middlesex because we had to get bigger to get more efficient. So we will get as big as St. Thomas, but they had to get as big as London to get more efficient, but they had to get as big as Toronto to get more efficient. It is all a load of crap! We haven't saved a nickel, do you think? Have you? You were the Township of Caradoc and now you are Strathroy. Do you think you have saved a nickel? (Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

The issue of busing amplifies this perceived sense of cultural cleavage. When the subject of busing in rural communities was put to Trustee A, an urban trustee, elected within the City of London boundaries, the trustee did confess that travel time is an important factor that should be part of the evaluation, when considering the closing of a school, but A was unaware of what that travel time limit should be.

Well, our Board has the policy on the amount of time that an elementary student should stay on a bus and I think that that is a very important consideration that has to be taken into account when looking at how to accommodate students and whether schools should be closed and what are the implications of closing a school in terms of transporting a student to the next ... the nearest school. I don't know ... in terms of the time I don't want to say ... I am not sure. I don't know what I would say, what I would think the maximum time that a kid should be transported on a bus. I know that it varies widely across the province. I know that there are some Boards in Northern Ontario that have routinely students travel

much longer on a bus than students travel in our Board. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

The current TVDSB policy states that student travel time should not exceed one hour each way (TVDSB, 2011c). This policy is universally applied, regardless of the age of the student, from age 3 to age 19. The younger the child the more prevalent was the noted parental resistance to busing. My interviews revealed that in the rural community busing has produced some interesting and unintended outcomes. One individual likened it to babysitting:

My kids, they actually enjoy the bus – the socialization, the fighting, and the stuff on the bus there. But it is really early to get on. The sooner they get on, the sooner I can go to work. The sooner they get home, the sooner I can get back to work. It is actually like a babysitting thing. (Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

When the discussion on busing came up with the Caradoc South student focus group, the unanimous consensus was that “It’s horrible” (personal communication, April 28, 2011). None of the participants felt positive about their experience, and found the trip, “crowded,” “loud,” and “long.” The focus group participants felt that busing caused them all to have headaches from time to time, and it had an impact on their sleep. One participant claimed that busing caused her a feeling of anxiety that she previously did not have:

I wake up at basically the same time. This year I am like freaking out and stuff because I am on the bus and if I miss the bus, I can’t get to school because I

don't have anyone home here during the morning so yeah if I miss the bus I am kind of screwed.

Other respondents stated that busing caused them to alter their personal routine, mostly by waking up earlier. The average travel time was stated as being two hours. One interviewee lamented how “the days seem to be shorter at Caradoc South” and now every day is much longer and much harder to get through.

In term of lifestyle choices, busing appears to have had an impact on the participants in many ways outside of the classroom. For many, both parents and students, the addition of the bus ride to the school day has taken a once favourable impression of school and turned it into a negative one. The impact on students' educational performance, once busing has been introduced into their day, has never been thoroughly studied. The assumption is that busing has a negligible consequence, with little or no impact on a student's well-being. Student time on the bus, which in the case of former Caradoc South students is seen to be two hours per day on average, is taken for granted. It is not assigned any social or economic worth, as it is not seen to have any attributed value. As such it is not an important variable considered in the decision to keep the local school open.

### **School as community**

Kearns et al. (2009) found in their examination of rural New Zealand schools that a prevailing factor in community cohesiveness could be attributed to the social dynamics which abound at rural schools (p. 136). As discussed, the community in which Caradoc

South was situated experienced a sense of positive social cohesion through the school's location there. In the course of my interviews it became apparent that this sense of school as important catalyst in the building of community was just not a rural phenomenon. Jacques recounted, through her role on the Churchill school council, how working with the school and especially school staff, during the Christmas holiday period helped to foster a sense of community.

We had a big turkey dinner for the school because they [the staff] figured it might be the only dinner some of these kids were going to have, and the teachers out of their own pocket bought each of these kids a pair of pyjamas, a toothbrush, a toothpaste, and some other item, whether it be deodorant or a little toy or... depending on age. Each teacher did that – I mean you don't get that at a big school. It reminds me of a little country school, I guess. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

In the case of Churchill the school was not just the focal point in determining community; it took on a specific role and function in the creation and maintenance of community. Kohut-Gowan in recounting her initial experience with the school principal recounts the role of school as community builder, and the important part the school plays in the community:

When we went there in 2008, the principal, he took us around the neighbourhood and he took us through the neighbourhood and he knew many of the families and he said it had taken him about two years to develop a trusting relationship with them which he said is so important because he can't help them if they can't trust you, so he said a lot of time he had to go to someone's household or someone had

to go there and it was just above and beyond, they would help them financially, not just emotionally. Just the support is unbelievable. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Without the role the school, and its staff, plays in the community, one wonders what will become of the community surrounding Churchill in future. Will the sense of intimacy and personal connectedness be replicated within a larger institution? The following comment from Jacques provides further evidence of how staff helped to foster community, and how the community see and feel about this activity.

The principals... even just the teachers ... the principals themselves and the teachers, I mean they go way above and beyond. The other day, actually, the day after I presented to the Board, I watched our Vice Principal walk a little kid home from school. I mean, how many principals, vice-principals take the kids home from school. Right? Walking down the road, just like it's an everyday occurrence. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Schools in the urban settings are recognized to have the same positive role in defining community as those in the rural community. Board trustees appear to share this view. Trustee B when asked to share perceptions on whether rural schools played a more important role in community than urban schools stated that both were important in defining community.

I think they are similar. I think there are similar issues. I mean, I think it is not, obviously, you are in a small... if you are in a small community and you have one school that is in that community, you might have an even stronger attachment.



But having said that, you might live in the Bryon area and you might live next door to the school in Bryon. So even though you live in London, your neighbours, your ... hockey and soccer, everything is around that community, so some people don't ... may not see themselves living in the larger London community. So I think there are more similarities than differences. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

The role of schools in building and sustaining community in both urban and rural settings appears to be recognized. Why then are the decision-makers apparently so readily amenable to their closing? Is community-building not valued by them?

The value of the school in community-building was a key point of discussion at a meeting at the City of London, between the CSA, the two area school boards and a committee of city councillors (CPSC Meeting, May 10, 2010) during a discussion on the possibility of London's support for a provincial moratorium on school closures. Gord Hume, an elected city official at the time, stated at this meeting that while he believed closing school does impact neighbourhoods and communities, there is a need to "get the best bang for the buck, seek operational efficiencies, and... be respectful of the jurisdiction and obligations of school boards." While it can be argued that maintaining neighbourhood schools has a direct benefit on the health of the local community, municipal officials, at least in this situation, showed support for decisions that were couched in the language of fiscal imperatives, and jurisdictional authority. The outcome of this meeting was a rejection by the city committee to support the moratorium. At a subsequent meeting of the full city council, this position was reversed after a lengthy and protracted debate.

Community participants in both of the ARC processes I reviewed noted that they saw no acknowledgement from TVDSB officials that during the deliberations the notion of community was valued. This point is illustrated by the following comment from Thomas: “Um, I don’t know what their values are, because at a couple of meetings they talked about one thing and another meeting they talked about something else. I wasn’t sure what their values were” (personal communication, April 29, 2011). Alternatively other participants felt that the school board’s values were biased to concerns of only institutional importance, as demonstrated by this comment from McDougall, “What does the TVDSB value? Money they can get from the government. The bigger the schools the more money they can get for the government” (personal communication, March 5, 2011).

### **Beyond financial capital**

Economic rationality as a key decision variable in the accommodation review process was soundly rejected by the overwhelming majority of those interviewed. Bredo’s (2009) review of public choice undertakes to show how citizens’ rejection of the classic economic model is explained by neo-classic economists. They now say that their model is “a normative model of how people *should* (original emphasis) behave, not a descriptive model of how they actually behave” (p. 539). These same economists maintain that the public, when making choices contrary to their “best economic advantage,” are acting in a manner outside of what rational theory predicts should be

occurring. Van Dijk's position exemplifies choice outside of the expected normative model of economic behaviour:

This cost effective thing, what are they worried about? We never had kids and we are paying taxes for kids to go to school. Everybody is paying taxes for kids to go to school. So you are taking my money for kids to go to school, let them go to school where they want to go to school. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Valencia's (1984) study of school closures concludes that actual financial savings were sparse. "School closures in most cases mean only slight savings because 75-85% of a school budget is for personnel costs, which are usually only slightly affected, if at all by closures" (p. 11). The current measure of delivery in educational efficiency attributed to the provincial funding formula deals with the number of unfilled student spaces in the school system as a whole. Addressing the unfilled seat issue does not necessarily translate into direct economic savings, as school consolidations may require new construction, busing and an expansion of programming. Community critics of school closures place high value on maintaining community, but also reject economic efficiency arguments. "If you are going to close schools and destroy communities and say it is for savings, you better be prepared to show where are the savings. I don't see any savings" (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2011). There's a striking similarity to the Occupy Wall Street movement in these counter arguments, where the economic position is rejected for some other form or structure, hard to name but deeply longed for. Golden provides a different context in this rejection of economic rationality:

Is economy how we judge everything? Is that it? Is economy the sole guiding light for everything? I am still a proponent of the smaller schools... it may be cheaper [ to close schools] but what do you lose? I think when you get a greater concentration of people, there is also great opportunity for kids to get overlooked – just become numbers and get into trouble. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Kohut-Gowan's outsider perspective of the Churchill community provides valuable insight into the impact of issues of social capital beyond the financial. Her third party description provides a critical outlook, drawing attention to the inter-relatedness among school, community and positive social outcome. Her description identifies the positive merit of belonging.

No, it's not just the students, but the families and the community and that very strong relationship (from the school being local). So it's a shame if they close it and like I say that part of the neighbourhood is really going to lose out on that sense of being connected with them and that would just be a shame for those students. I feel bad for them because they [the school staff] are such a positive influence on that neighbourhood and that community. And I know it comes down to money in the end but when we went there, we focused on Newman's System Model of Holism and just looking at and understanding a group and a person in relationship to its totality – so it's relationship with its environment and how its main goal is to have an equilibrium and yes they are looking at it from the money standpoint but looking at it in the big picture is really going to be the best benefit from everybody involved. And obviously it is not when you get to know the

neighbourhood and that. So it is pretty sad. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

### **Belonging**

Bina Chokshi, with her husband the co-owner of one of the local variety stores in the Churchill community, recounts the role the school played in creating a sense of social inclusion for her and her family when they moved to the community. She and her family are newcomers to Canada originating from India, and moved to the neighbourhood five years ago. They currently have two children at Churchill, in grades two and seven. She firmly believes that it was the welcoming environment of the school that enabled them to immediately feel that they belonged in the community.

Because the kids have many close friendships with the teacher, right, and everything. Like if you go to the preschool, you go to right to the school and then all teachers say, “Hi” right away, like everybody knows you; all the teachers, from the principal to all the staff. In this school I know all of them, if I go there. I don’t know the teachers’ names, but they say “Hi R.,” to my son so they know each and every student’s name and they always say, “Hi, good morning.” So that is good, right?

*So even though you are not from here, it is just like you were from here?*

Yeah see we are Indian; we are only Indian family. All the rest are white people, right? All this school, just my two kids are Indian, otherwise white, yeah? Just my

both kids, that's it. But they never have problem. I also have no problem.

(personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Thomas recounts a similar example of social inclusion as a First Nation student attending Caradoc South in Melbourne.

I did like the school. It was small, you knew everybody's name. You got along with everybody. People called you by your name, you weren't just some kid, and I didn't have any problems, there were no racial problems, there was nothing. The teachers were really friendly; they were always there to help you. The principal was there. I remember I went to summer school, I didn't have to but I remember the principal saying, "If that is what you need to do to keep your grades up, that is excellent." So they were very supportive and everything that I did, I had a good time. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

I found that this sense of social inclusion also extended from the community into the school. Fletcher, 92, and until recently a regular kindergarten volunteer at Caradoc South, stated that the smaller size of the school contributed to greater social inclusion in terms of both school sporting teams and concerts.

Like, we'd have a basketball team and everybody would play. Now that's the difference too. Well, you belong to a big school, unless you are pretty good, you're not going to get to play, are you? But here, and it's the same with our Christmas concerts. (personal communication, March 8, 2011)

The smaller size meant that the whole student body participated in whatever occasion was being held at the school. Fletcher described that how each time she attended a school

event it felt like being at one large community gathering. Earlier in our interview, she related her experience attending the Christmas concert that year at the Mt. Brydges school where most Caradoc South children now attended, as a frustrating experience of social exclusion:

Well, over there and there are three kindergarten classes. And they all got little hats on. I didn't recognize any kid. It was just as if I didn't know any of them. It was stupid.

The focus group of former Caradoc South students affirmed Fletcher's contention that, in their case, there was a stronger sense of belonging in the former school. They spoke of a feeling of estrangement with their new school which can be attributed in part to a cultural disconnect between the values of their old environment and those of their new one. In their former setting belonging and the social consequences of belonging held a higher value than in their new school, where the size of the student body leads to competitiveness previously not experienced.

*And how many are in a club at the new school? (A show of hands) Well, I see about half of you. What's the difference?*

All: you have to try out at this school. You didn't have to try out last year. You just made it. You didn't have to compete against as many kids. There were just not enough. These coaches are playing to win more than at Caradoc. We just had fun; we lost most of the time. We just kind of played to win and stuff and we had fun all the time.

A: We don't know half the people on the team but it is a good way to meet people. But we were in the tournament and it was like, "we have to win, we have to win, we have to win, and we have to win."

B: Yeah at Caradoc South it was kind of different because the coaches didn't really care whether we won or we lost.

A: And we laughed.

All: Yeah we would have a blast. We would just laugh. And the other teams knew that we weren't any competition so they just kind of gave into us. They would give up more points. They wouldn't call fouls on us.

*So do you miss that then?*

C: Yeah, but you know it is good to have some competition. (personal communication, April 18, 2011)

For some subjects the sense of belonging was akin to a family-like emotional attachment. Jacques recounts that for her buying a house in the Churchill community and sending her daughters to the school was like a homecoming.

It is a very small school but I like that. Everybody knows everybody. I feel the kids are safe there. My youngest daughter has Down's so she was a runner, she doesn't run anymore but at one point in time that was our major concern, that if she took off, they know where she needs to be, because she is also non-verbal. So that was a big concern of ours. So that was why we liked being back in Churchill: it is a smaller school and actually we bought this house because it was in the



Churchill boundaries. So it is ... I like it there. Everyone is... it is more like a family atmosphere – as far as teachers go, principal – everybody knows everybody by their first name. All of the teachers know me and that was prior to me even becoming president of school council so it is just a nice, relaxed, comfortable atmosphere there that I really enjoy. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

### **School-community connection**

The benefits to the school through the connection between school and community, was also presented as a valuable consequence of school being in the community. Haroun and Kierstead (personal communication, May 11, 2011) cite several examples where both the school and their childcare facility benefited from being in the same community, within relatively close proximity to each other. Kierstead addressed an on-going relationship that had been in place for approximately 30 years, “through various principals” providing benefits to both parties, in addition to parents and students. Haroun expounded on this point, adding that there were times that Churchill’s potential enrolment for the upcoming kindergarten class was “soft” and the school administration called out to the centre for assistance.

[T]hey know that they were coming up short on their amount of classrooms, or children to fill their classroom space and they made an appeal to us to say, you know, “If you can take in more children there and send them to us that will help our enrolment.” So it has been a very interesting thing for those years and of

those particular years, Churchill very much acted like they needed us and we were their partner. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

The benefits from this type of working relationship were twofold. First it gave parents a place, very close to the school where their children could attend. At this place, they felt that their children were safe before and after school. Second, the Churchill community has traditionally had an above average number of children with special needs. By helping to “boost” kindergarten enrolment Haroun and Kierstead were able on many occasions to assist in securing the numbers for a second class. This benefited local families and students by securing additional classroom resources.

They would prefer to have two kindergarten classrooms there because you can spread the children with needs between two teachers, and you can have more EAs [educational assistants] in the classroom to support those children. If you have all of those children with multiple needs in one classroom that is a lot of challenges to meeting the needs of those children; it is more challenging. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

In this example, the working partnership between the local school and childcare facility benefited all concerned, particularly families and students. The importance of this connection was recognized by board officials interviewed, as demonstrated by the following exchange with Trustee B:

*How do you see the role of the community in terms of creating a learning environment for students? What is the role of the community in that?*

It plays a role. You know, our community is parent involvement, volunteers, donors for foundation to help students with special needs or community agencies working in partnership so I think community is essential. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

Valencia's (1984) research shows the very real challenge in a school board maintaining the parental-community connection, when the local school closes, as participation by parents in school activities significantly declines when closure occurs. The research conducted by Kearns et al. (2009) found a similar situation.

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. (p. 138)

### **School as an iconic symbol of community**

Kearns et al. (2009) cite Bondi (1987) in describing school as place. "Although conditioned by educational norms and overt governmental design, they are institutions of particular places and their communities are firmly attached to them" (p. 132). Schools take on an iconic presence in community, and the community defines itself, in part, through its presence. This iconic sense was evident in McDougall's description of the

Caradoc South school and its place in the Melbourne community. “Everybody will miss it; the school has been here for over 100 years” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). A comment by one of the student focus group participants best depicts the iconic nature that the Melbourne school provided to its former attendees:

I don't know exactly what was so awesome about South. It was probably all the awesome people in it, like knowing your secretary lives just down the street from you and knowing that you know where all the teachers live, you have their phone numbers and stuff. Or if it was the small like red brick mouldy school that you've been in or the un-air conditioned air or ... I don't know exactly what made it awesome, but it sucks that it had to happen [close] but I guess if I had to go back, I wouldn't change a thing. (personal communication, April 28, 2011)

When the school is seen as a defining element of a community, it can have a devastating impact on that community once the school is lost. Consider Kearns et al.'s (2009) finding on how schools construct community by their sheer existence in community. In this scenario the loss of the school can be particularly poignant. “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” (p. 132). Thomas comments on the impact to the community of experiencing the Melbourne school closure, yet having the facility's continued existence in the community as a physical entity. She observes that the school's empty existence hangs like a dark cloud over the community, exemplifying how what was once a positive icon now takes on negative connotations.

I think the sadness for the community as a whole is that the school is still there. If they (TVDSB) had such dire concern for the school they should have done something but they just kept the building there and the people still see the facility. I just think it is a bad taste in peoples' mouths and it just saddens them. Their old school still sits there and nobody does anything with it. If it was such a bad place or whatever, why has somebody not done something with it? I mean you can't change the result, but do something with the school because it is still there.

(personal communication, April 29, 2011)

### **In Closing**

The local school, as seen by the members of the communities I interviewed, was a part of the local DNA. Its reach went far beyond the classroom walls, and in a very real sense grounded and defined the community's sense of identity. In this role its purpose cannot be truly described using the language of the marketplace; it requires a much broader narrative.

How communities value the local school is antithetical to current neo-liberal practice. School is not seen as an institution where an economic transaction, the purchasing of an education, occurs. Rather the school is seen an expression of community, for some it is the community. In addition, the vision of TVDSB educational administration of what constitutes a "good" school is not the vision of the community members I interviewed. There is a significant cleavage between these two visions, which the accommodation review process does little to bridge. How the process contributes to, rather than lessens, this divide is explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven: Participants Views on Policy-in-Practice

*Unfortunately, this chicanery is not a unique example. Instead it is almost typical of what has been perpetrated in the name of high-sounding rhetoric like "grassroots participation." This sham lies at the heart of the deep-seated exasperation and hostility of the have-nots toward the power-holders. (Arnstein commenting on policy makers masking manipulative practices as citizen participation, 1969, p. 219)*

This chapter explores further how community members view the accommodation review policy in action. It addresses the question: How do people view the concrete and practical application of school closure policy in their communities? Hampton's (2009) description of narrative analysis provides a sound analytical yardstick I will use when examining this question. "[N]arrative policy analysis is useful when policy issues are uncertain, complex and polarised. The process begins with the identification of dominant narratives, which express uncertainty and complexity and non-stories and counter-stories, which are contrary to the dominant narrative" (p. 425). To start, the dominant narrative of the accommodation review policy needs to be traced back to its genesis. The Ontario Ministry of Education promulgated this policy as a vehicle where decisions on the operational future of a school could be "made with the full involvement of an informed local community" (Ontario, 2006, p. 1). This assertion forms the essence of the policy. Narratives emerging from interviewees relating to their involvement with this policy-in-practice hold particular importance when evaluating the degree to which the Ministry of Education's initial intent has been respected.

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation provides a critical lens focusing on the degree to which decision-makers engage local citizenry in policy and program

activities. This lens for assessing engagement strategies ranging from manipulation to citizen control represents a valued guide in the review of the participants' perspectives on how they saw the accommodation review policy operationalized by TVDSB. The participants' narratives which follow focuses on issues of communication challenges, overwhelming process issues, concerns about paternalistic institutional attitudes, and a sense that a process touted to promote community building actually acted as a catalyst to instil both institutional-community and intra-community confrontations. This chapter will also examine the veracity of Smith's (2010) assertion that the grassroots citizen participation approach advanced by Arnstein (1969) and others has been co-opted by a managerialistic approach which pays little more than lip service to community input.

### **Communication**

In terms of participant feedback concerning the accommodation review process, a theme that continually surfaced during the research dealt with issues related to communication: its type, confusion surrounding it, and inherent weaknesses. The TVDSB's accommodation review policy, as it relates to communication, follows the minimal standards set forth by the provincial guidelines: a newsletter home to parents of current students, posting on the Board's website, and answering direct questions once asked. These communication efforts by the Board can be seen as more passive than proactive by nature, are described as follows by Thorpe:

Well, there are two answers to that. The first is that which is required by the province through its process and obviously Boards are obliged and must and should adhere religiously to those expectations. I think in terms of objectivity and

fairness there is also a necessity that boards should direct two kinds of communication. One: Overt and direct –whereby there is a conscious effort made to communicate with the community and the parents of the schools that are involved in the study and that is done routinely through newsletters, through information home, through websites of schools, and then there is an obligation which is both ... which is shared by the Ministry requirement and the Board requirement that there be passive communication opportunities – by which I mean anybody who wishes can get access to information through efforts of their own, as opposed to being given information and largely through the website and it is, in my view, the Thames Valley Board does an excellent job of ensuring that everything is available, open, public, and timely. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The TVDSB focuses its accommodation review communication on the process itself and spends little effort on explaining the circumstances leading up to the process. Hume, a London city councillor, described TVDSB as doing “a poor job of communicating with communities regarding the benefits of school consultation” (CPSC meeting, May 10, 2010). Kearns et al. (2009) provide a critique on the level of educational officials’ communication in New Zealand and found a similar state of affairs, “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’” (p. 138). Kearns et al. also indicated that the rationale for not providing this information was not forthcoming and that practice



seemed to be mystifying given that, “Participants indicated that no one in the community had any desire to hold his or her child back from a better education” (p. 138).

Bina Chohshi, a parent with two children attending Churchill school, recalled only one communication from TVDSB related to the accommodation review process. It came home with one of her children (personal communication, May 16, 2011). Churchill ARC member Polhill stated that as far as he understood its communication was only to parents in the school. He believed it was sent through the home and school association.

Haroun, a childcare provider in the Churchill community, whose facility had coordinated efforts with the school for 30 years heard nothing directly from the TVDSB about the impending review.

I knew very little about it [the Churchill ARC]. Anything that I know, I’ve heard over the news, I’ve heard from parents whose children are in school; but nothing direct from the schools at all. So it is basically what you hear in the media, plus rumours. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

Further Haroun stated that local parents came to her for verification of the review process, and the best she could reply was “I don’t know.”

The TVDSB’s institutional communication relating to the accommodation review process can be viewed as a real procedural weakness, especially if a key goal of the process, as stated in the provincial guideline, is to engender a sense of inclusiveness with parents and community. What the communication effort has in fact achieved appears to be the opposite of this goal, a state of confusion. Chohshi’s comment on the utility of TVDSB’s communication approach was a typical response from other research

participants. “No, I don’t know a single thing what is happening. Just we know about the school is closing but after the school close I don’t know” (B. Chohshi, personal communication, May 16, 2011).

Thorpe acknowledged the weakness in TVDSB’s procedural communication approach. This weakness he attributed to a strategy that was not designed to connect directly with those community members who do not currently have children attending the school under review. He also acknowledged that TVDSB takes a passive role when it comes to the dissemination of ARC information, principally posting it on its website or posting an upcoming accommodation review on the sign in front of the school in question. While in relation to the provincial guidelines procedural requirements are met, it is questionable if the true spirit of creating an atmosphere of inclusive consultation is achieved.

*Now, the overt communication, the first of the two that you mentioned, beyond communication of parents at home, what about the community members who don’t have students in the school?*

Well, and that’s of course the largest proportion of the population of Ontario homes and I think something like 65% of the population in Ontario doesn’t have kids in school and that is obviously more difficult, but again public websites are available to all, not just to the parents. It is directly related to the school system. The Board also has made a part of its own policy taking out public advertisements in local media, alerting anyone who wishes to participate, the fact that processes are on the go, are being undertaken. The other thing that routinely

happens is that public signs that many and most schools have these days advertise the fact that accommodation reviews are being undertaken. That doesn't provide a great deal of information other than to those who may be immediately interested in pursuing more information. But then, you know I mean, I think genuine efforts are being made to communicate. It is not 100% successful but nor would it ever be. The Board welcomes and encourages input from all sources. (Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

Arnstein (1969) describes the merits of constructing an open collaborative communication system if the goal is to achieve valid citizen participation and argues that "Informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation" (p. 219). She cautions against communication that may appear to be open, but is in actuality supportive of a closed system. As a closed system, by design the communication then regulates and limits the direction and effect of the message.

However, too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information - from officials to citizens - with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in the policy process, individuals have little opportunity to influence the program designed "for their benefit." (p. 219)

Institutional communication was viewed by interviewees as a fundamental shortcoming, one of the key challenges in the accommodation review process. Kierstead stated that, "Communication and/or the lack thereof is probably the biggest problem"

(personal communication, May 11, 2011). He saw it as a problem not just because of the mediums that were chosen to disseminate the information, but also because of the style and type of information presented. Given the position of trust that both he and Haroun hold in the Churchill community many parents have come to them to fulfil the role of interpreters of the review process. Communication challenges were cited by Kierstaed and Haroun as one of the major issues that caused parents to ask for assistance. The vocabulary used by the school board was foreign and confusing to parents. “The jargon that all of this is put out with, the average parent, if they were to get a brochure on it, weren’t able to read it anyways” (Kierstaed, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Haroun elaborated on the confusion faced by parents, citing the challenge she and Kierstead had in assuming the role of information mediator when they themselves were excluded from the channels of communication.

We have a lot of parents come to us. “What does it mean? And what does this mean?” And there is a whole education piece that we try to do with them and if we don’t get the full communication ... if we are expected to educate these parents on what these things mean then it is really important that we have true information to put out there to parents, rather than half information because we don’t want to mislead them. (personal communication, May 11, 2011)

### **Overwhelming process**

A widely held position among the community participants interviewed was that the accommodation review process in and of itself was extremely overwhelming. This

sense of overwhelmingness was attributed to the highly formalized design of the process, its tight timelines, the institutional language that dominated it and the knowledge gap that existed between institutional and community players. These conditions combined to overpower community members serving on an ARC. Trustee A has served as a trustee since TVDSB's current accommodation review policy was adopted. In A's recounting of her experience as a recent ARC representative, she mentioned that the sense of frustration regarding information issues expressed by community members during the process, led her to view its procedural design in a new and different manner:

Well, there is the challenge of getting the information that the ARC feels it needs. The people who serve on an ARC as community representatives or school representatives, they are volunteers. And frankly, it is overwhelming, the amount of information that is provided to them in the first meetings of the ARC. It is an incredible amount of stuff to be able to process and to try to sort of make sense of and think, what does this mean? And then to be able to move forward with it and say, based on this information, here are the questions I have. Because, so I think that that is a huge challenge that the ARC members are put in a position that many of them may not be expecting. They are not sure what the role of an ARC member is. And then they are just inundated by this information from the school board and they are supposed to make sense of it and supposed to try to make some questions based on their interpretation of the information but I think that it is very difficult for ARC members, number one to kind of process the information that they are given, and number two try to figure out what is it that they need and then number three get that information from within the school

board or in many cases the urban ARCs, in the ones that I am more familiar with recently, there is information that they would like from the city. To try to access that kind of information, is also very challenging. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

The community members' frustration is evident in Trustee A's observation. As a school board trustee, A and the trustee's colleagues are ultimately responsible for the process design. The question then is: if these procedural shortcomings are known by policy-makers why does such a confusing and frustrating process still continue to operate, especially after four rounds of ARCs and over 20 accommodation reviews?

In his review of citizen engagement, Hampton (2009) promotes the need for policy practisers to give greater credence to local knowledge in their deliberations. He cautions against a process that relies too heavily on expert knowledge alone. Such knowledge is not situationally based and as such may not be attuned to how the decision will play out in unique local circumstances. Hampton argues that "Local knowledge provides useful information about the social system and cultural perspectives and physical environment in which policy is going to be developed and new perspectives on unexpected social and environmental impacts of a policy" (p. 238). He also notes that there is an attraction for some institutional decision-makers to shy away from the inclusion of local knowledge, for local knowledge can inform the process fruitfully and thus call expert knowledge into question. As Hampton explains, "Local knowledge incorporated into policy may temper expert knowledge by emphasising the uncertainty and indeterminacies of expert knowledge. This can create a more cautious approach to decision making. The inclusion of local knowledge also prevents political manipulation

of public opinion” (pp. 237-238). Reliance on institutional expert knowledge grants greater certainty to institutional members, allows control over the outcome, and reassures trustees that they are doing the right thing. The practice of relying on expert knowledge contributes to the construction of a tokenistic approach when it comes to the community engagement process.

The TVDSB accommodation review process, in terms of how it is delivered and how its agenda and timeline are constructed, is firmly under the auspices and control of the school board. Jacques, as a member of the Churchill ARC, described the “tread-milling” impact of the review process as a contributing factor to her inability to perform her role in a manner she felt she should have. “[T]hen it seemed like every month, you know you have a few days to do things, like go to the next school. So it doesn’t give you much time to dig out things” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). TVDSB’s approach to process design does not meet Arnstein’s (1969) test of citizen participation, in regards to good consultation practice. She states that if genuine citizen participation is to take place the process needs to be mutually constructed, mutually agreed to and subject to rigorous ongoing scrutiny and maintenance. “After the ground rules have been established through some form of give-and-take, they are not subject to unilateral change” (p.219).

Thorpe contends that the TVDSB administration sees the ARC process as it exists as being sound, except perhaps paradoxically given the feedback from trustees and community members, that its timelines are too long.

Well, the underpinnings of the process are good, I am sure. I think it takes too long start to finish and the desire was to ensure the greatest possible opportunity for input and I'd expect that, but I would shorten the timeline. I think that a process that, for example the two ARCs that I am involved with, was established early in 2010 and it will be June 14 and June 18 2011 that the trustees will make the decisions on those accommodation reviews. I think 18 months is too long.

(personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Thorpe dismisses procedural criticism, as he views a degree of normality in process deliberations that are designed to produce winners and losers. "I don't think it matters what the process was, there would be those who would be negative about it by virtue of the fact that they don't want the outcomes which are inevitably going to happen in some fashion or another to happen" (personal communication, May 16, 2011). So it is that the ARC process does not appear to be truly collaborative and open. Furthermore, given the following comment from Director of Education Tucker, there does appear to be a predetermined outcome emanating from TVDSB administration.

My job as an administrator for the system is to ensure that the board acts responsibly within the constraints of its fiscal responsibility for funds to do the best job it can for all kids system-wide and in an era of declining tax dollars and declining enrolment, that means doing it with fewer schools. (CPSC meeting, May 10, 2011)

Thorpe's position on the accommodation review process is antithetical in nature to deLeon's (1992) contention that public bodies need to move towards the



democratization of public policy by implementing a system of “policy sharing” (p. 127). This approach, also known as New Public Service (Denhardt, 2003), ensures that both institutional and community players have some sense of equality in determining policy outcomes. A move towards a New Public Service Model would require a profound paradigm shift from current TVDSB practice relating to the accommodation review process. New Public Service calls for decision-making, guided by local knowledge. deLeon (1992) notes that, “[t]he position holds that there are critical policy choices that should be made on information that goes beyond hard numbers and expert fact” (p. 127).

In the Caradoc South scenario it was the extended length of the accommodation review process that had an even more profound impact on the community. An initial review was launched in 2004, but was cancelled when the provincial government at that time announced a moratorium on rural school closures. Once the moratorium was lifted a new review was launched in 2007. In 2009, the community appealed the process outcome to the province, leading to an investigation which supported TVDSB’s recommendation to close the school. Golden’s take on the impact to the community from the lengthy and on-going process describes a deep sense of procedural frustration. “Then when the second one came around, people were still active within it but it just seemed like they were saying the same things over again. It was just like I gathered a sense of fatigue in the community. And, how long are you going to continue this struggle to keep the school?” (personal communication, March 17, 2011). Van Dijk’s comments, on this same subject compared the process to a type of struggle where the community adopted a constant siege mentality.

People were putting up signs. There was a sign up in the restaurant. We were doing what we could do in a democratic society without picking up arms. There were people leading groups. I am not sure who but I know there was a lot of involvement over this. This town didn't just lie down and take this. They were doing anything and everything they could. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)

The sense one gets from listening to community voices as they recount the renewed and on-going accommodation review process, was that TVDSB placed a target on the local school. TVDSB is seen as using the ARC as a procedural assault engine, and not as a vehicle of authentic community engagement.

### **Politicized process**

Always political, the accommodation review process also has become highly politicized in the TVDSB catchment area. Those I interviewed view the process in terms of winners and losers, often pitting neighbourhood against neighbourhood as representatives of each community vie to keep their local school open at the expense of the others. The review process has generated significant media attention, almost all of it sensationalizing and fuelling an “us versus them” mentality and infighting at municipal councils and amongst institutions. In fact, the process has done more to exacerbate a sense of alienation completely in contrast to its stated purpose in the provincial policy documents, a vehicle designed to build and promote local democratic decision-making (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2).

The genesis of the Churchill ARC provides an excellent case-in-point demonstrating how highly politicized the accommodation review process became. Provincial guidelines for the implementation of ARCs call for local municipal elected officials to sit as members. At one point a group of London City councillors publically refused to serve on any ARCs as the process was described as being more designed to justified decisions already made, than as a vehicle of community of decision-making (O'Brien, May 12, 2010). In the case of Churchill, when TVDSB approached the City of London for a representative, the ward councillor for the area where Churchill is located, Bill Armstrong, refused to participate, stating publicly that the committee was little more than "a rubber-stamp for the recommendation" (Maloney, 2010). At the same time, Armstrong called for an organized public campaign against the school closure stating that he would "form his own group to fight to keep it open." Armstrong's ideological opponent at council, Polhill joined the Churchill ARC, stating at the time, "it [is] a more effective way to help keep the school from closing."

When I asked Polhill about his decision to join the ARC, and the subsequent politics emanating from this decision, he acknowledged the challenges this created for the process:

*So there were politics involved in you joining the ARC?*

It got really political, really nasty and I believe he [Armstrong] was the one who had this other lady get on my case about the conflict because he didn't want me on there because I took the position that he should have taken because he was the ward councillor. I mean three of those schools are in his ward. Why wouldn't you

step up to the plate and say, “Look, let’s figure out how to do this”? But he didn’t and that’s, like I said, very political. And don’t criticize me because I am doing your job. (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

Trustee A, when questioned on this same point, conceded that involvement of municipal councillors in the process could be a weakness of design, as these individuals will likely feel compelled to support their local constituencies and support keeping the school open. “The most rational position for a municipal counsellor to take, I think, is to say, keep all the schools open because otherwise they are seen to be picking sides within their community” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). In fact, Polhill was a part of a unanimous recommendation (much to the surprise of many political “insiders”) from the Churchill ARC to keep all the schools under review open.

The ARC design can lead to process politicization in other areas as well. Ostensibly the process design calls for a review of a family of schools with the intention of closing one of them. The policy of the TVDSB is to recommend which school will be closed prior to the establishment of the ARC, and further to use the name of the recommended school to label the ARC in question. This has caused friction between communities and their ARC representatives. McDougall’s account of her ARC experience reveals a typical portrayal of how the Melbourne community saw this aspect of the process, and demonstrates as well the negative consequences of this practice.

[It] pitted schools against schools, communities against communities. They point out the school that’s going to get all the kids, not just the kids they get the money, so of course they aren’t going to argue your point whether they think it’s a good

point or not, they want your kids, they want your money, and they want to save their school. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

Other comments on this aspect of process include: “It pitted the people against the people” (Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 5, 2011); “it had trustees turning on other trustees” (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2011); and “they have people making decisions, or voting against someone to protect their [own] interest” (Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 5, 2011).

### **Lightning rods**

School board trustees became lightning rods for the feeling of community alienation with the ARC process. In Melbourne, several negative comments were made about many trustees given their role in the process. Fletcher’s comment referencing her impression of a trustee’s performance at a public ARC meeting, in particular, reflects this sentiment. “Yeah, he’s too arrogant. He thinks, ‘Well I’m on the school board so I’m the king,’ right? ‘And you’re going to listen to me.’ That’s the way he comes across to me. Really arrogant!” (personal communication, March 8, 2011)<sup>2</sup>

### **Betrayal**

deLeon (1994) defines the difference between participatory democracy - voting for the elected democratic representative -, and democratic policy development - citizen

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<sup>2</sup> I chose to not reveal the trustee referred to in this comment. The interviewees made several disparaging remarks about this individual with one of them adding “Yeah, I’d like to wrap that [name] right beside the head”. The tone and tenor of their remarks reflects the highly emotional impact this process had on them, still lingering several months after the end of the accommodation review.

engagement in creating and carrying out policy decisions as reflected in the degree to which citizens input has an impact on policy decisions. He goes on to suggest that “policy sharing implies that these citizens have some confidence that their individual and aggregated opinion on a specific subject (thus distinguishing it from voting on an ambiguous amalgam of issues in a general election) will be heard and considered within the policy councils” (p. 127). Community members who served on the ARCs I investigated commenced their committee work with the expectation that they were engaging in an exercise of policy sharing. By the end of the process, all those interviewed felt demoralized by their experience and democratically abandoned. Jacques’ comment on her feelings of disenfranchisement best reflects a general consensus from participants. “I would never serve on another ARC knowing what I know now, unless things changed. But if things were to stay the same, I would never serve on another ARC” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). When asked to elaborate, and to provide a rationale for her position, she responded that she felt “betrayed” by the school board and by the process.

### **Tokenism**

The sense of disenfranchisement with the ARC process can be attributed, in large measure, to the expectations of the participants, and of the community, about what they perceived their role would actually be in determining the final outcome of the process. Hampton (2009) distinguishes between public consultation and participation, noting that while both terms are often taken to mean the same thing they should, in actuality, be distinguished from one another as discrete functions (p. 236). Citing Arnstein (1969),

Hampton defines public participation as the practice wherein public preferences are taken into account in the final decision, which is a very different experience than consultation, where input can be heard without any commitment to its influence on the final decision. Ultimately, Hampton argues, “The question of whether public preferences are taken into account in a decision is dependent upon the commitment of decision makers” (p. 236).

Jacques’ account of her experience presenting at the final Churchill ARC information meeting at the TVDSB on May 10, 2011, one month prior to the definitive school board vote on the fate of the school, clearly demonstrates why a sense of disenfranchisement is so prevalent. At the same May meeting she discovered that the Churchill school principal was to be moved to another school in advance of closing Churchill, ostensibly to prepare the school for the future consolidation with Churchill.

*Tell me about the process, given that you went through the whole process with the group. First off, what are your impressions of the process? How did you feel about it?*

Right now, after what I found out this week, it is a sham.

*What did you find out this week?*

The next day, apparently at midnight, our principal got a phone call that he was to be going to Lord Nelson, which is one of the schools they want to split Churchill amongst; so that he is there for when basically, when the kids go there.

*You mean the next day is the day after your presentation at the school board?*

Yes, yes.

*Okay, so you feel because of that the process is a sham?*

Yeah, I mean, the Board doesn't vote until June the 14<sup>th</sup> or something [on the ARC outcomes]. The trustees don't vote until then, but the trustees approved moving him, so they have already voted. And mind you, they do that in an in-camera meeting, prior to the public meeting, I believe. So they did that before they even heard any of our comments first. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Beyond direct ARC participants, the authenticity of the process was questioned by others aware of the accommodation review. In the Churchill community, Kohut-Gowan, as a public health nurse working with the school, possessed the insider's perspective granted allied professionals. In her assessment of the process she expressed the opinion that the decision was indeed made in advance of the work of the review. "As far as the process, you know I always think in the back of their minds that their minds are already made up" (personal communication, May 18, 2011). Further, she believes that if the input was considered unfiltered and unencumbered by a pre-process decision, then the outcome may have been different.

And it is safe to say that they [school board officials] are not completely aware of what is going on in the other side of the door because they are not parents and teachers so they don't understand probably one hundred percent the effects of what is going to happen if they close it. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Thorpe describes this sense of procedural disenfranchisement as "a slight disconnect in the process" (personal communication, May 17, 2011). He views the ARC



process as a consultation and not a public participation exercise and suggests, “that [the disconnect] was probably unavoidable in that the communities feel that if they provided through the process input, they would want the trustees to accept that input, as opposed to consider that input in their deliberations.” Thorpe, taking a managerial stance, justifies this position by elaborating that all ARC processes are framed by well-defined parameters in advance. “There are schools that have to be closed in order to allow the administration to function efficiently and effectively.” These parameters (as detailed in Chapter Five) supersede community input and provide a predetermining yardstick used to regulate the degree of validity and acceptability of ARC recommendations.

And so there is in some instances I guess, a cynicism or a belief that the process isn’t open and doesn’t do what it was intended to do, whereas in fact if the desired outcome, which it is for many ARCs, is status quo, the Board can’t allow status quo to be the outcome. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The impression I received from interviewees was that they believed that there was a process only for the sake of having a process. One individual stated that the only rationale for the process was “to appease the local people, to say we heard you” (S. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2011). The process was viewed as a purely tokenistic undertaking on the Board’s behalf. Further, community members related how they eventually felt disrespected and abused by the ARC’s structure and delivery. This feeling is demonstrated through the following exchange between Emily Butler and Betty Fletcher describing their experience as community members in attendance during the review meetings:

*I am interested in getting your impressions on the review process. Were you a part of that at all?*

Fletcher: No, I tried. I sat there. I wasn't on the committee. I am too old, you know. But these young parents tried so hard. They worked their butts off. But we were not allowed. Remember that one night we had a meeting, the Board, the way the Board did it, the people who had to speak were up there, and then we were in the first row. It was so hard to hear. And the one man from the Board turned around and glared at us because we were talking to each other.

Butler: We were discussing what they were voting on up there at the front. And the ones that were supposed to be for us, they all turned and voted against us. Like, from the other schools.

*Please tell me more about that.*

Fletcher: Well it made us feel like second class citizens. And it made us feel as if nobody was listening. And I'll tell you honestly, we think they had it all planned in advance, it sounds kind of cynical. All this bullshit about the public and giving us a chance to speak; it didn't mean anything.

Butler: No, no. The ones that we had picked for the committee, they went in there to the Thames Valley School Board, and they got chopped down. Like, we were up in the gallery and saw everything. (B. Fletcher and E. Butler, personal communication, March 8, 2011)

Aside from the actual outcome of the review, the process itself was found to be troublesome and a source of alienation for community members. The Caradoc South ARC was described by one participant as “pretty slick,” where school board officials “said all the right things” (Lions Club Focus group, personal communication, May 24, 2011). The impression remains in the community that the process itself was an exercise designed to placate. Another individual during the same interview expounded on the point that the process itself, regardless of the actual outcome, was a source of consternation and disappointment. “Maybe there had to be no other way but closing. How they spoon fed it through us didn’t make us very happy.” Most respondents made similar reference to the sense of procedural tokenism. In particular, Golden’s reflection on the process bears repeating as it highlights the perception many community members expressed about TVDSB officials overtly gaming the procedure, striking a “smug” position from the outset: “The ones [ARC meetings] I attended, I got the feeling they were fairly cut and dry. Management knew what they were going to do. They’d smile, nod their head, ‘yes, yes, yes.’ Look like they were listening but I am not sure they really heard” (personal communication, March 17, 2011). Doug Reycraft, Mayor of S.W. Middlesex and a founding member of the Community School Alliance, focused his critique of the accommodation review process not on trustees, but rather on school board administrators. Through his observations he identifies a policy process designed to have little impact on the ability to influence decisions. “We live in a democracy, but it appears board administrations have become absolute powers in dealing with these kinds of decisions. The views of citizens have no bearings on the decision-making process, and that’s unacceptable” (O’Brien, 2008).

## **Consultation not participation**

Hampton (2009) while outlining a current development in policy circles, advocates a move away from more traditional methods of promoting community dialogue, those that minimize public involvement or relegate it to a public education function. He supports a more bottom up approach where the public actually sets the agenda (p. 236). He posits that there is a public craving for a more collaborative approach in setting policy and selecting policy outcomes. Currently, the TVDSB, in its accommodation review policy, takes the more traditional approach. Thorpe's description of the school board's approach demonstrates its adherence to the managerial model. "I think when people are asked their opinion broadly on any topic, their view is that opinion will necessarily carry the day. In this process, that is an unrealistic expectation" (personal communication, May 17, 2011). When questioned about the degree to which the TVDSB takes community perspectives into account during the ARC process, Thorpe did state that community input is an important element in terms of considering the course of action to be taken. However, his comments also reflected a definite bias by TVDSB towards a managerialist mindset. The ARC process is viewed as an opportunity to educate the public as to why the school board needs to take a certain action (especially given its fiscal imperatives).

Because there is no suggestion that bureaucracy automatically and necessarily has the only answer and there is no suggestion that they automatically and necessarily have the best answer. There is a genuine desire through the process of the accommodation reviews to seek, to listen, to assess, and to respond to community opinion. But the other side of the accommodation review coin is that it is an

opportunity for the board to communicate to the communities the necessity for taking some action relative to the variables under review. So it is a two way street and the hope is that through that process the board will listen and accommodate where possible, useful, helpful, positive suggestions from the communities that need still to the desired and necessary changes but that likewise the community will understand; review, study and understand the necessity that the Board has to deal with its tax dollars efficiently. (J. Thorpe, personal communication, May 17, 2011)

Trustee's B's comments on the process provide an interesting take on Thorpe's position. B states that an important role of the ARC process is to educate and enlighten local citizenry on the work of the school board, constructing a conduit of mutual understanding. She adds, "It also engages parents and community members as to the importance of their school and what the school feeds back to the community; some of the community input is invaluable" (personal communication, April 29, 2011).

The view advanced by Thorpe and Trustee B on the positive role that the process plays as both a vehicle of greater communication and a tool for building understanding is not the position taken by local community members interviewed in either case. There is a significant disconnect between the parties in terms of the sense of purpose of the process. Local citizenry view the intended outcome of the process as a means for them to express the best result for their community. And as such, they anticipate that their views will have a direct impact on the outcome. Paraphrasing Hampton's (2010) definition, it is not consultation that they are seeking, it is participation. The school board's stance that this process is valid because it is consultative, educational, and builds communication is not

accepted at the local level. It is too weak. Fletcher's comments are representative of the reaction by the local community when she states that the process "made us feel like second class citizens" (personal communication, March 8, 2011). Her response to my questions concerning the approach taken by the school board to the process is brutally emotional, and is emblematic of feelings throughout the local community: "It sounds kind of cynical, all this bullshit about public involvement and giving us a chance to speak. It didn't mean anything." The accommodation review process raised expectations in the community. Participants felt that their voices would not only be heard, their voices would help form the decision on the future of the local school. Instead, it is the process itself, as much as the outcome of closing the local school that has led to a profound sense of alienation and anger in local communities. This feeling of estrangement is confirmed in the following comment by Zavitz, as he recounts his impression of the Caradoc South ARC process.

If people are mad at the school board it's because of the process they went through, there wasn't no consultation, and they weren't honest. Tell us where the kids are going to come from. Lay it on the line that way, we have so many dollars to spend, every school is shrinking. This horseshit about coming out here and doing public meetings, your public opinion is important to us. No, it's not. They don't give a damn about public opinion, and that why I think people are mad, that's why I'm mad. I have no use for the school board because there is no accountability. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

While Zavitz cited a lack of procedural forthrightness on the school board's part as a principal cause of community alienation, others described their sense of procedural

alienation stemming from the perception that their work would have greater influence on the outcome. They saw a lack of serious consideration of their input. McDougall described this alienation stemming from a misinterpretation of the terms of reference of the ARC process right from the beginning. “I was under a false understanding before starting with ARC, that they might actually listen to ideas. Basically if you came up with a good enough idea or solution, they might actually look at it; I was wrong” (personal communication, March 5, 2011). In the case of the Caradoc South review, many interviewees made specific reference to the amount of work that the community undertook developing and presenting alternative and creative solutions in their effort to keep the local school open. Not seeing any of that work help form any part of the final decision reinforced the view that the process was democratically disingenuous, given that the outcome came to be seen as being already determined prior to the implementation of the review. This feeling is manifested in Golden’s reflection on the lack of consideration given community input. “A lot of people put a lot of time, effort and thought into what they were preparing for the board. And because it didn’t originate in the offices of the Board, there is the sense that it was worthless” (personal communication, March 17, 2011).

Polhill’s account of the Churchill ARC recommendations reveals a similar situation. This ARC developed a series of recommendations, a continuum of choices from best to least desirable, that represented the Churchill community’s desired outcome:

[W]e were there when it was presented to the school board and they will be making their decision and I ... there were a couple of recommendations and one was not to close the school. That was our first choice. And looking at them, at the

numbers and everything, that was kind of, I guess, a ... in compassion for the community that was one... that was the recommendation. Secondly was let's work with the city and see if we can come up with other uses that can help subsidise the cost of the school. Third one was if we close the school then all the kids go to one school; they don't split the kids up. (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

The approach taken by the Churchill ARC, the prioritization of recommendations, demonstrates considerable thought and effort on the committee's part in the attempt to find a solution that reflects the wishes of the community while respecting the school board's operational position. At its June 14, 2011 meeting the TVDSB supported the administrative recommendations in their totality regarding Churchill: closing the school, declaring it surplus and a candidate for sale, and splitting the Churchill students to two other elementary schools, Lord Nelson and Prince Charles (TVDSB, 2011a), ignoring entirely the recommendations of the ARC. The adherence by trustees to the administrative position as an absolute has been noted by others impacted by the ARC process. In a 2010 presentation to Middlesex Council, Reycraft drew specific attention to this issue, and this was reported in the local media, furthering the disconnect between the school board and the community.

Reycraft cited as an example Metcalfe Central School which is filled to more than 90 per cent of its capacity. An ARC recommended that the school remain open but as has been the case without exception, the recommendation of the administration came forward (to the trustees) as opposed to that of the ARC. The word of the administrators takes the day. (Whitehead, 2008)



Hampton (2009) describes a consultative process designed as vehicle to manage public education and relations as paternalistic (p. 236). Evidence that a process is paternalistic is apparent, he states, when “attempts might be made to justify such paternalism through an argument that decision making requires the comprehension of complex technical information.” The elitist managerialism displayed by TVDSB administration in this situation appears to meet Hampton’s definition.

### **Tightly controlled process**

Community members’ reflections on the ARC process described its nature as both stifling and limiting. In a process where a key purpose is defined as encouraging democratic discourse (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 3) the TVDSB’s procedural practice appeared to produce the opposite effect. Municipal politicians, accustomed to a more open policy process, remarked on restrictedness of the ARC practice: “Lucan Biddulph Mayor Tom McLaughlin said he served on an ARC and he wasn’t allowed to speak about matters outside the school issue” (Whitehead, 2008). As previously noted, Polhill, an elected official with the City of London for over 25 years, commenting on the regimented nature of the process not being what he was used to in municipal government, stated “It is a little different than normal processes” (personal communication, April 27, 2011). He elaborated by noting that the formalized nature of the review process resulted in very restrictive procedure.

Yeah it is more controlled, and you have to be on the agenda in order to speak.

You can’t just hold up your hand if you like to say something. You get called

forward ahead of time. They put it on the agenda and when it comes to the meeting, you get to speak, and in a certain order.

TVDSB's public presentation policy (see Chapter Four), with its five minute time limit per presentation, restriction on speaking more than once, and rigorous scheduling, does not create an encouraging environment for spontaneous public input, or through community dialogue.

Thomas' perception on the rigidity of the process holds a specific cultural significance. As a First Nation educator, the systemic inflexibility engendered feelings of past institutional domination making it particularly stressful. "So for me, that [the ARC process] was a horrible experience and some people in the [Muncey-Delaware] community thought it was like going back to a residential school, being dictated to" (personal communication, April 29, 2011). In this situation the ARC process acted as a source of social pain bringing back memories of racialized disenfranchisement and marginalization. The feeling of marginalization was prevalent among other participants of the Caradoc South ARC process, as well. MacDougall, as a community ARC representative, saw her participation as being highly inhibited by other members of the committee, specifically TVDSB participants.

It was a frustrating experience. It was geared to go in one direction and if you got off that direction you were corrected. If you tried to introduce new ideas, they were just shot down by other members of the committee and the board members and administration that were sitting on the committee. They say, you can't do this

and you can't do that. They tried to keep you on one path. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

The approach taken by the TVDSB, best described as a heavily guided method of review, worked in a manner contrary to good participation practice recommended by Hampton (2009). Hampton suggests a process design that “requires that a plurality of voices be listened to including those that are marginalised” to ensure that the “meta-narrative will become apparent” (p. 238). Further, he states that if the process is not designed to maximize openness in participation, and provide equal access to resources and information by all participants, it will create, “asymmetrical stories and hegemony.” TVDSB’s procedural rigidity creates this sense of a hegemonic agenda as demonstrated in McDougall’s account of an incident at the school board meeting where the final vote was taken on the future of the Caradoc-South school. On this occasion, the possibility of the local First Nation community sending their children en-masse to the school was raised, with the intention of then keeping the school open. McDougall contends that the information flow to trustees on this issue was tightly controlled by the board administration, giving the appearance that this situation was not an actual reality, and as such influencing the final outcome in the TVDSB’s favour.

Meetings at the Board offices, the administration has too much power over those trustees. Even if the trustees ask questions, we’re sitting there in public, but we are not allowed to say anything. The administration would ask questions, leave out facts, and sway them to what they want. One question, the night they made the decision about Caradoc-South, was about Muncey-Delaware. One trustee did ask the questions, some of the trustees were biased they did not want our school

to stay open; they wanted our kids to go to their schools, their grandchildren – that was another conflict of interest. The question that was asked about an agreement between the First Nation community sending their children to Caradac South and the administration said “no, that didn’t happen.” Mind you, we had people sitting in the audience from Muncey-Delaware. They knew it was all a lie but they couldn’t stand up. The administration has too much power. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

### **Naming the school in advance**

In the act of improving the review process, one of the procedural changes TVDSB brought forward (TVDSB, 2009) in 2009 was naming the ARC after the school that administration was recommending to be closed prior to the commencement of the public process. Thorpe justified this practice as a means to help focus the process (personal communication, May 17, 2011). This act of focusing is not an act universally recognized by all policy theorists as a recommended method of proceeding in the creation of a public dialogue. Smith (2010), in his review of citizen engagement advocates for procedural development that “would position the public servant as a neutral guardian of process” (p. 426). He contends that “healthy institutions [healthy being analogous with their operations being seen as both open and unrestricted] allow [for] democratic dialogue, not any pre-conceived view of what the content of public discussion, or its conclusions, ought to be” (p. 426).

Polhill described the practice of the TVDSB administration naming the school to be considered for closing in advance as instituting an unfair agenda setting on the review procedure, the impact of this practice bringing into question the integrity of the whole review.

The thing is, when you got a target on your back, the other schools don't have to defend their culture. They don't have to defend what they are doing because they are not targeted. So none of them were really talking about, "Well, come support my school." Because they kind of had a feeling that it wasn't going to be their school [to close] to begin with. They kept their heads down and didn't make suggestions. (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

The notion that by naming a school it puts "a target on its back" was expressed by others during my research. Trustee A, for one, made the same claim, in part given A's recent participation on an ARC. Further, in the interview about the trustee's recent experience, A discusses the need for a greater perception of neutrality when commencing the ARC process as a means to ensure a less prejudicial procedural environment.

It is a very difficult process. I think my experience has really been honed by my recent chairing of an ARC. [I]t really brought home to me just what an impossible situation we are putting communities into because on paper it sounds very reasonable. Like, let's acknowledge there is an issue in this community but bring the schools that are involved together and let's have a conversation to see if there are some options we can look at that can help address some of the accommodation issues we are facing. So that seems very reasonable but what happens is, I've heard the expressions that the school has a target on its back.

That the school that is sort of weak the administrative recommendation is to close or there is kind of a consensus around the table that that school should be closed. Anyway that school ends up feeling really ganged up on by the other schools so in some ways I feel that the only rational approach for a community member is to say, no school should close, because if they agree with the administrative recommendation that yeah you're right, there seems to be a lot of sense in that option to close that school, then they become implicated, they become ... they are seen as kind of the oppressor by the school that has the target on its back as the school that should be closed and so it is very divisive within communities and it is incredibly emotional and difficult. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Naming the school in advance does contribute to an overall feeling of a prejudicial environment in which the ARC operates. This practice also furthers the alienation and sense of mistrust that communities have towards the TVDSB.

**Foregone conclusion: “A done deal”**

Fredua-Kwarteng's (2005) review of Ontario school closures occurred simultaneously with the government of the day's introduction of its new accommodation review guidelines. At the time she contended that these guidelines may help to provide a public rationale for closure decisions leading to “a partial solution to the systemic problem of community alienation from school closure decisions” (p. 9). She maintains that historically a school's decision about continued operation was a subjective exercise. Doern and Prince's (1989) review of closure decision-making by the Ottawa school

board in the 1980's reached a similar conclusion. Fredua-Kwarteng (2005), in looking forward, predicted that the review guidelines could allow school boards the ability to guide the process in their favour as it was the boards that set the conditions for the review, established the context, and supplied the bulk of the information from which the final decision was formed. "The Boards may have to supply much of the information required for the valuation. This could allow boards to maintain their historic domination on school closure decisions by supplying information that would favour their closure decisions" (p. 9).

Current public perception is that there is a high degree of outcome predictability regarding the closure review process. This is predicated on the opinion that procedural design is unbalanced and skewed in favour of the school board, a position that is captured in the following media article on two closure decisions by TVDSB. The prevailing sense that the decision was made in advance of the public process is evident in the article. The community feeling of frustration and powerlessness is also evident.

Norwich Township Mayor Donald Dean was angered by Tuesday's decision to close the community's high school calling the process "frustrating". "(Trustees) have a government mandate that they have to get public input, but they just implement everything administration recommends," he said. That sentiment was echoed by a parent who fought the closing of Prince Andrew public school in Denfield, one of the schools to be reviewed by Cooke. "(The trustees) have the solutions decided before the public input, and it should be the other way around," said parent Hadley McLean. (Dubinski, 2008)

The same article related that TVDSB maintain that procedural correctness has been upheld, so the decision was sound. “Thames Valley Director of Education Bill Tucker said yesterday that he’s confident the board and trustees followed the ministry-directed process” (Dubinski, 2008).

Hampton (2009) states that for policy analysis and planning to be participatory it must be open to the incorporation of public preferences in its outcomes (p. 237). Otherwise institutions will rely on expert opinion to form decisions, and overlook the community. The consequence of not enforcing a participatory procedure is the potential for the community to see the policy process as an artificial enterprise, “a scam,” established to placate the community. The result of such a sentiment emerging is the probability that over the long-term there will a significant lessening of respect for, and adherence to the public institution, its role and its influence. This can, in turn, lead to a profound and damaging weakening of the social contract between community and institution. Van Dijk’s account of an incident during the Caradoc South ARC provides an example of how this cynical view of the democratic process has already played out in the Melbourne community.

I know there was a big meeting called. I was in the restaurant talking to Karen and she had asked me if I would sign a petition and I said yes, I would sign my name and I signed yours too [comment directed to Marshal who nods in agreement] and I told you I did. And I said, “Good luck with that, I hope it is works out.” And she said, “Oh, we’re convinced that their minds are already made up.” She said, “It’s just a formality. We have already been screwed over.” That was the general opinion in town. (personal communication, March 18, 2011)



Marshal's reflections on this same incident further illustrates the potential consequences inherent in this type of procedural perception, "the done deal mentality," and how it can lead to sense of participatory complacency. "The thing that really concerns me is that it is another situation that people feel, 'Well, why do we even bother fighting it because it is out of our control'" (personal communication, March 18, 2011).

Several interviewees, from both case study communities, used the term "done deal" in their description of the process. Although the interviews were independent of each other, and comments not shared from one interviewee to the next, there was a general consensus on this issue that the process was nothing more than a formality. Golden described it as "a sense of futility" in the Melbourne community, a feeling that, "[t]hey [TVDSB] are just going to do what they want to do, and nobody is going to be able to stop them" (personal communication, March 17, 2011). Galbraith's comment is most notable in its capturing of the overwhelming sense of frustration emanating from the process. "They met again and again and again. We said we don't know why we are still meeting; it's a done deal anyways, no matter how much we talk about it" (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

Arnstein (1969) describes the citizen participation process used by institutions that only consult, and do not follow through with other types of participation as "a sham" (p. 219). She labels this type of restrictive involvement as "window-dressing ritual", the purpose of which seems to be focused on counting the number of citizens who "participated in participation" more than securing valued community input. For institutions the legitimacy from following the correct process is the desired outcome they

seek. “And what power-holders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving ‘those people’” (p. 219).

### **Further reflections**

The following section is a selection of narrative reflections given by interviewees on their view of the accommodation review process. This collection reveals moments of deep introspection, it tells an emotional tale of the narrator and his/her viewpoint on the review process. Some subjects were incredibly personal in their storytelling, and there were moments of powerful emotion during the interview process. These narratives are very similar in nature to those documented by Kearns et al. (2009) in their study on the impact of school closures in rural New Zealand. In their study they noted that “closure and its threat generates not only tangible effects but also discernable affects that range from a sense of betrayal to feelings of grief” (p. 140). The local school is seen not as some distant institutional place apart from the community, which can be easily moved and duplicated elsewhere. It is seen here as an intimate part of the fabric of the community, and any process established that may have an influence on its on-going local existence and operation needs to consider, in both design and execution, that feeling of intimacy with the utmost seriousness.

*Any observations on this whole process you want to add?*

It was enlightening I could tell you that. When I signed up for it I didn't know exactly what was going on. I think it was .. I enjoyed it. They are good people there. They were really genuinely interested in their community from each school

group and you understood why we're defending your school. (...) [W]hen I suggested we support trying to get the city involved in the process and help subsidize, everybody supported that. And that would be nice if they could do that, but I think they can't. (B. Polhill, personal communication, April 27, 2011)

I think it is harder – I think the Churchill one is harder because there is no ... for the parents there is no net benefit. You know, you look at other schools, you are running a high vacancy rate and some other school will have to close and students are going to have to - potentially depending on the decision students – students are going to have to move to other schools so that is a more painful arc. So you know, I think some ARCs are more painful than others (Trustee B, personal communication, April 29, 2011)

In practice, it is very difficult to get the review operationalized. Because, well naturally, the people who have the strongest interest in the ARC are the parents of the school and so they are the ones that stand for those community representative positions. And then there is also the challenge that there is no funding so there is no ... through the ARC process there is no money to produce photocopies for the community reps to go out and distribute door-to-door fliers of anything else like that to raise awareness amongst community non-parents of the ARC process so it is very difficult for community members to get the word out because the school is used as a communications vehicle to send notices home to families whose children attend the school. But that is a very small part of the whole community – the families who parents... whose students attend the school. And then, you know, the media doesn't really pay attention to the ARCs, particularly during the ARC

process. So the media ... there are no stories in the local paper, typically. There are exceptions, but especially in London, like a major media market like London, there are no stories at all in the local paper until the very end of the process when it is far too late to ... you know, the opportunities for public input are long gone. (Trustee A, personal communication, May 18, 2011)

It is a very true analogy this process has been like dealing with the stages of grief. Very apt. There was tremendous anger through a lot of the process. A lot of people had to really control their anger to be productive. I think there is a feeling of a lot of resentment. I think most people have moved past the sense of denial. The school has been closed for a year now. It is hard to deny any longer knowing the school isn't going to close when it has. Portables are gone, Playground equipment is gone. They may just get somebody coming through a couple times a week, maybe once a day just to walk the school to make sure pipes aren't broken, things aren't happening that way. Grass cutting isn't quite the priority it once was. It is almost like they are waiting for complaints before they are cutting the playground; even if they may send somebody in once a month or once every two weeks to cut the grass. It is just a forlorn experience. (R. Golden, personal communication, March 17, 2011)

I think the Board really needs to sit back and see what they have actually done and I think that they have to accommodate people and let them share their experiences – good or bad – but they need to be heard and I don't think they really got to be heard. (C. Thomas, personal communication, April 29, 2011)

*So do you think we have learned anything from this?*

Well, it's just another ball in the bag for me about governing bodies and not to trust them and frustration that you can't seem to do anything about it. The Board of Education is always sort of been like a Mike Harris government to me. I can be quite forward in saying that a Mike Harris government had to lie on its back when having sex because it could only fuck up. I think the Board of Education in this case is pretty much the same. It is just like a box of snakes. The Board of Education has never really impressed me. It's just one of those things we have to tolerate and get pushed around by. (D. Van Dijk, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Its communism, we really don't have a say in anything. We don't have a say now that it's in Mt. Brydges. They're going to add a new gymnasium and three classrooms to Mt. Brydges School, and when it's done the Principal says they will have \$9M tied up in the school for 400 kids. And this one is sitting empty. Why does it cost \$9M to build a public school? That's horseshit. (P. Zavitz, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

I think you have to be strong, you have to have a voice, maybe you are a little laid back but you still have to stand up for yourself. You have to make people aware of sure there is good and bad in everything but when you are trying to save something in your community that is going to bring people together, you have to fight for it. So to keep communication open, keep the dialogue, don't close any ideas – every idea is a good idea. And for myself, I just think that being prepared,

trying to think of what the next step is going to be or what your opponent is going to give you. So you're well versed and skilled at trying to manoeuvre to get to the next level. (C. Thomas, personal communication, April 29, 2011)

Not really sure what to say. It is a process that is laid out. Everyone, when they start the process, it is, rules and responsibilities are laid out, a number of meetings, timelines. So I think it is a pretty transparent process in terms of what peoples' jobs are. It has its challenges. For example, right off the start there was challenges with calling the ARC the Churchill ARC because they were thinking the school was going to close. They were sure of it. It wasn't called ARC 13, or the Eastern ARC or something. So there were issues from the onset. (Trustee B, personal communication, April 29, 2011)

*Where there any unintended outcomes for you from the process?*

Our partnership and our relationship with the people of Melbourne. Our people [Muncey-Delaware First Nation] can go there now, you know, on a friendly basis, on a first name basis, say hello. Before it was just, you go into Melbourne, which is a small place. It was you going into Melbourne, do your thing and get out. But now you can sit there, you can talk to somebody at a coffee shop, you can say their name. You can say, you know, "How is everything going?" It may just be small talk, you know, baby steps, but at least it is something we never had before. Myself on a personal level I have always had that but as a community we never had that so it is just now broadening their circle of resources and friends. (C. Thomas, personal communication, April 29, 2011)

## Chapter Eight: Policy Design Considerations

*The community groups around the unthreatened schools were basically silent. Such groups did have the choice of actively supporting the non-closure groups, actively supporting closures or remaining silent. (Doern & Prince, 1989. p. 465)*

This chapter deals with policy design considerations, based on the position that the current accommodation review process, as conceived and delivered, is out-of-balance in terms of its stated intent as a vehicle dedicated to promoting democratic principles, and in terms of its provision as an agent advancing local citizen engagement. Issues of policy design address the core of my research questions: how the values of policy makers shape the actual policy and its delivery and how community view this policy as it is played out in their local communities. Policy, as an authentic democratic instrument, should present balanced resourcing for all parties to engage, and account for the social costs of and impacts on all concerned parties in its outcomes (Howlett et al, 2009).

### **Towards a more authentic democratic process**

Authentic democratic policy design (McDavid and Hawthorn, 2006) dictates contemplation of the intended policy effects at the commencement of the design process and uses the intended outcomes as both a formative design guide and as a process check to ensure that the outcomes remain true to the policy intents. The provincial accommodation review guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006) recommend that reviews should focus on “a group of schools within a school board’s planning area

rather than examine a single school” (p. 2). Seemingly the purpose of this policy provision can be seen as an attempt to instil a sense of procedural fairness in the review process, ensuring a more socially responsible than a guided outcome. The provincial guidelines elucidate the need to review a group of schools as a means “to facilitate the development of viable and practical solutions for student accommodation” (p. 2). In other words, this provision introduces the concept of procedural fairness in the review process. As shown in Chapter Seven, the naming of the ARC process after the school that the Board’s administration is recommending for closure prior to the commencement of the actual review process, had, at the very least, eroded the spirit of procedural fairness, by “placing a target” on the back of the identified school. Recommending a school to be closed prior to the ARC process being launched is an even greater challenge to the spirit of openness.

When questioned on this procedural particularity, Polhill made specific reference to the TVDSB practice of naming the ARC after the preferred school to be closed as anomalous when compared to his lengthy municipal experience.

*Now, you’ve been involved with municipal council for 23 years, so you are kind of used to working through policy review processes. How would you compare this experience to all that other experience you’ve had coming into it?*

Well, it’s a little different because, and I was concerned with it right from the start, because what it was, I meant we had four schools involved in the process, but the name of the process was The Churchill ARC .



*Yeah, again, the school boards practice is, at the beginning the school board names the school that they have preference to close. Right?*

Yeah, and it was their recommendation and that is what they name the process after. And that to me is wrong. It kind of puts a target on Churchill right off the bat because you are saying Churchill ARC. It is not an Argyle Regional ARC. It influences one school right off the bat and the name of the group and that really to me puts a target and says this is what we want to do. (personal communication, April 27, 2011)

The practice of identifying a school in advance sets the agenda and therefore establishes the process. It focuses attention on the school named in an unequal manner compared to the other schools that form the ARC. It also contravenes the policy intent of procedural openness. Jacques' account of her ARC experience illustrates the influence naming the school in advance has on ARC members.

We were the only school to speak, of the family of schools. So there were four schools. We were the only school to speak, to have anyone make any presentations, until the very last... the presentation of the ARC's recommendation. And because there was a possible name change involved, then the ARC's recommendation was to move all our children as a group to Prince Charles, so the very last meeting was the presentation of the ARC's recommendations to the community. And that's when Prince Charles' parents showed up because they didn't want the name change. And that is the only time

we heard from any parent from any other school. Because it is the Churchill ARC so it doesn't involve them. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Clearly, the practice of pre-identifying a school for closure seriously limits the impartiality of the accommodation review process, and puts in question the very democratic nature of this policy process. As it currently stands, this practice creates competition, pitting neighbourhood against neighbourhood. It does not promote any sense of community building. In fact, some interviewees, when reflecting on the Caradoc South process would have preferred no accommodation review at all, rather than the one they experienced, especially given the negative inter-community consequences that emanated from it.

X: They should have just come in and said, "Caradoc South School is closing. You have five years to do it and that's it." That is probably what they should have done. And there wouldn't have been all the meetings, all the hassles and everything else. Everyone would have grumbled about it but we've got no choice.

Y: And they wouldn't have pitted one community against another.

(Lions Club Focus Group, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

Keevers et al. (2009), in their review of school closure practice, describe the underlying philosophy driving a competitive model in the policy process as "the tacit adoption of the Thatcherite neo-liberalist mantra, 'there is no society, there are only individuals'" (p. 468). The consequence of the practice they describe is the creation of a system that does not focus on community well-being but rather one that "promotes competition and independence, constraining the core ethical and social justice orientation

of many community organisations.” Jacques, when asked what changes she would recommend to the accommodation review process, stated, “It would not be called a Churchill ARC” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). She further recommended that “it would be named after the family of schools,” so the discussion would be community focused.

Given the “high-conflictual nature” of school closure, Fredua-Kwarteng (2005, p. 17)) argues that school boards are “hooked” into continuing the practice of citizen engagement when exploring the issue. Engagement, she advances provides boards with “further legitimization” of the outcome. The denigration of process legitimating occurs when the public perceives that there is a lack of procedural neutrality. Engagement is then seen as a “sham,” and the community is left with an impression of the procedure that is one contrary to the one desired by the provincial policy framers; that is, community sees the process as undemocratic and authoritarian in design. The reaction to the information that the TVDSB approved the move of Churchill’s principal to one of the schools that Churchill students would be moved to (see Chapter Seven) on the same night that public presentations to keep Churchill open occurred and a month before the official vote on the fate of the school, provides an example to this point. Kohut-Gowan, one of the presenters that evening, was quite emotional when this detail was shared with her. “[Y]ou get that feeling that the decision has been made already, unfortunately. And then when the principal is moved already, you get that again. Especially if they did it that night!” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). She was quite upset and shaken by this possibility.

Campbell's (2010) research deals specifically with the emotional consequences for those participants in citizen engagement who felt that they had experienced out-of-hand rejection during the process and suggests that, "greater attention be paid to the emotions that are evoked within deliberative processes" (p. 333). He found that participants experienced "anxiety," "anger," and "resentment" when they felt disregarded. Campbell's assertion is supported by the emotional feedback shared by community members (see Chapter Six) during and after the accommodation review process. Golden described it as akin to the grieving process after a death in the family. The institutional actors in this case appear not to recognize (or value) the emotional nature of the ARC process, the role of school as community icon, and the profound psychic impact associated with seeing the demise of that icon. Campbell describes the need for a more empathetic approach by public managers as they work through the civic engagement process and states that "listening for and attending to emotions is essential to public planning, much as it is to building relations among friends" (p. 334). In terms of TVDSB's administrative approach, not only is there an apparent empathetic deficit towards the participants, the process seems designed to clearly identify winners and losers. Far from any sense of understanding, or even procedural neutrality, the process appears combative by nature, creating a process where institutional imperatives are at odds with community desires. It appears to be designed so that institutional imperatives always triumph.

This proclivity for advancing a preferred position by institutional decision-makers was also noted in the work of Doern and Prince (1989). Centred on the school closure debate in Ottawa in the early 1980s, their work preceded the current provincial

accommodation review guidelines. It is important to note how the Ottawa Board of Education acted in the absence of the parameters set by the current provincial guidelines. Doern and Prince found in their study that “the primary determinant in closing schools is the educational philosophy of trustees and board administrators” (p. 466) and in the case of the Ottawa Board this determinant was the “pro-closure philosophy of the senior board officials and some key trustees.” This predetermination lead to a far from neutral or non-aligned procedural position by the school board, and was both “program and financially motivated.” The preferred model at the time was developed before the process began and was seen by Doern and Prince (1989) as “[t]he decline of the community based philosophy of education” (p. 467).

Far from being a non-aligned position, the accommodation review process today, as practiced by the TVDSB also favours the administrative position in advance of the review occurring. The administration recommending a school for closing prior to the commencement of the review sets the agenda in advance in such a manner that it reaffirms their stance. The school board’s action is contrary to what can be seen as an intended outcome implied by the provincial guidelines, that of instilling in the review activity a sense of procedural neutrality. Using Hampton’s (2009) definition of what constitutes consultation and what constitutes participation, this practice can be seen at best as being merely consultative. Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) contends, in her examination of school boards’ public hearing practices, “citizens are called upon to comment on what officials had already constructed with no assurances that their inputs will have any weight in the final policy texts” (p. 18). Her assertion about current school board practices proves to be contrary to the dictates of classical policy design (Howlett et al.,

2009), which emphasises a neutral process over a guided process, one where policy participants can explore all potential options, and these options are all equally considered before the final decision is realized.

### **Building understanding**

Trustee A (personal communication, May 18, 2011) provides several interesting insights into the apparent current policy disconnect between the school board and the community. A's insights outline the need to build a better understanding amongst all involved parties and afford constructive suggestions to be used when contemplating issues of future accommodation review policy design. To start with, A states a need for a more formalized communication process prior to the commencement of the ARC process between the school board and the local municipality. The trustee's comments are focused specifically with the City of London in mind. Trustee A freely admits knowing the workings of the TVDSB best from an urban context. Trustee A feels that ARC members face contextual challenges and need to better understand the long-term vision of the municipality.

Because what I have found is the ARC members are just ... they are begging for some kind of vision – a big picture kind of vision –of what is the long-term vision for this community? So they want to know what the community has in mind. What does the school board have in mind? What do the local business associations have in mind?

This addition to the process would actually move it closer to the initial provincial guidelines, where two of the four criteria for consideration speak to the

value of the school in maintaining the community, and value of the school's importance to the local economy (Ontario, 2006, pp. 2-3). Neither of these criteria seems to play a role in the current TVDSB policy practice.

Further, Trustee A acknowledged the need for the TVDSB planner and the respective municipal planners to meet and share information and suggest that this information should be made available in its entirety to the ARC. From A's experience, chairing an ARC, what is missing from a planning perspective is the direct impact or the potential outcome of a closure on a community.

What we don't have is a mechanism to share the more ... this neighbourhood stuff. And so to me, what really has to start happening is there has to be more of that dialogue at the beginning of the ARC and it should begin with a joint presentation by the municipality and the school board about ... the school board can talk about here are the challenges and here is what we have been experiencing. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

At the commencement of the review, more open dialogue prior to a decision being taken, would significantly change the accommodation review process. Inclusion of this practice in the process would directly address two of the most significant concerns raised by community participants, the feeling that the review was too tightly controlled and scripted by the school board, and that the review itself was tokenistic in nature. It should be noted that Trustee A has come to this conclusion from the position as a trustee. From an "insider" perspective A sees the need for a different procedural model that calls for a greater emphasis on open communication and creative community solutions:

So the school board can talk about that and say here is our reality. The student numbers that we have been looking at year over year but then the municipality has to be there and say here is what we are thinking about in terms of delivering municipal services and here is what we are looking at in terms of locating new small businesses into this community and here is what are thinking about in terms of whatever else but that, to me, that would be a huge step forward and we have to start, we have to do that, we have to find a way to enable that information sharing. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Finally, Trustee A concludes that there is a need to find a different model of collaboration and coordination between the school board and the City of London to ensure that no party is making a decision from the position of information isolation.

The city might be working in isolation when they say they have decision for this neighbourhood, they have plans for this neighbourhood in terms of locating whatever in that neighbourhood – whatever kind of service. They know about the applications for small business permits, etc. and the school board doesn't. (personal communication, May 16, 2011)

A's stance is remarkably similar to the position taken by the Community School Alliance (CSA), the group of Ontario municipalities that banded together seeking greater input and dialogue around the actions of school boards when it comes to the issue of school closures. The challenge with a renewed process like that being advanced by Trustee A is the apparently intractable position taken by the school board's administration. Given Thorpe's previous comments on how review decisions are arrived



at, it is apparent that institutional imperatives are the prime consideration over all else. Tucker, TVDSB Director of Education, clearly rejected a similar approach to A's when presented with it by the CSA: "I don't like the alliance having a say into the decision rather than input into the decision" (CPSC Meeting, February 8, 2010).

### **Current communication protocols**

At the time of writing the author attended a meeting at the TVDSB offices on November 29, 2011, where further future ARCs were discussed. During the course of this meeting communication agreements between municipal governments within the jurisdiction of TVDSB and the school board were discussed. To date, agreements have been signed by TVDSB and the County governments of Oxford, Elgin and Middlesex. The ongoing negotiations about signing a similar agreement with the City of London was the focus of debate at this meeting.

Concern was expressed by some trustees at the meeting that signing an agreement of this nature could hinder the school board's ability to act. Tucker guaranteed to the trustees that within the current written agreements with the County governments "no language existed that hindered the ability of the Board to institute an ARC" when it so wished. His statement brings into question the true utility and current value of the existing communication protocols with municipal governments, and the intent behind their implementation and design.

### **Adversarial process**

Valencia (1984) concludes in his study of school closures that the review process takes on a “retrenchment policy-making” format where “conflict management decisions tend to result in clear winners and losers” (p. 12). It becomes an adversarial process. He cites a conclusion from a U.S. study conducted on this issue by Boyd and Wheaton (1983, p. 31) in furthering this point.

The politics of school closings is more a “divide and conquer” than a “plan and agree” process. The secret of school closings, [...] by some school officials, is concentrated cuts, judiciously targeted to minimize the likelihood of the formation of resistant coalitions. There always will be opposition to school closings, but if it is isolated it will have little effect. Because citizens in other neighbourhoods do not mind seeing someone else’s ox get gored, they will be unlikely to join forces with the losers unless they believe their neighbourhood school will be in jeopardy. (p.12)

Doern and Prince (1989) also noted during their observation of the process in Ottawa “a real and direct way community was pitted against community” (p. 464). They stated that the closures process created “a different kind of community politics,” more intense and visible than previously.

Jacques, recounting her experience in the Churchill ARC, confirms that even though Valencia’s research is almost three decades old and takes place in a different country, the current scenario appears remarkably similar in nature. First, the only knowledgeable source providing information to the ARC is school board staff. Jacques states that in her opinion staff’s loyalty rested with the school board and not the

committee or the process, “They [staff] were the ones that were closing, so they were just, they weren’t very helpful in trying to find ways to keep Churchill open” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). Jacques raised the issue of a new housing development be contemplated for the grounds of the former psychiatric hospital, near the Churchill school, and its potential future impact on school enrolment, the board planning staff came to the very next meeting and repudiated this possibility. “We tried to push the new development that was going on in the London Psychiatric area, but of course, then the Board showed up with someone, saying, ‘Oh no, no, you know,[...] chances are you aren’t going to get those numbers,’ so he just kyboshed everything that we tried.”

Jacques also stated that the school board brought an adversarial stance to the process, making her involvement meaningless. “So it was just ... it was a waste of time, it really was” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). In addition the structure of the ARC combined with the naming of the targeted school in advance of the process added to the adversarial atmosphere, in a divide and conquer manner. “It just seemed like two of us against twenty, and well it wasn’t twenty but two from each school and a business person and the two from the Board.”

Remarkably, given her experience, Jacques does not advocate for the elimination of the accommodation review process itself, but rather she concludes by recommending the creation of a less adversarial environment, based on a more participatory model: “The Ontario government mandates this but I think there needs to be some different rules around it, not just rules on time frames – rules on who has to participate more” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). In part this call for a new participation model could be in response to what she described as the “just the three same bodies all the time”

syndrome. This was a very different experience from the Caradoc South ARC, whereas shown, the community rallied in a significant manner for a long period of time in an attempt to maintain their local school. In the Churchill setting, Jacques described the forces in support of the school as, “myself, the other person on the ARC, and another mother from the school.” Jacques rationalized that this lack of organized involvement was due to a community succumbing to a sense of the victim syndrome; “the parents of the school figured its closing so why bother waste their time.” The East London community in which Churchill is part of, has had a long history of self-portrayal as “second class citizens” within the City of London, especially when it comes to access to and consideration for public services. This sense of social-economic inferiority was only reinforced by the lack of resources allocated to community ARC members. The need for a resourcing rebalancing, especially in terms to access to unfiltered information as demonstrated by Jacques and Trustee A’s comments, is especially necessary in those communities in which residents already face personal economic challenges.

### **Communication**

Communication and access to information has been identified as a key process resource under the provincial accommodation review guidelines.

The guidelines ensure that where a decision is taken by a school board regarding the future of a school, that decision is made with the full involvement of an informed local community and it is based on a broad range of criteria regarding

the quality of the learning experience for students. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 1)

The minimal provincial guidelines call for information to be sent home to parents with students of the schools under review, and for information to be posted on the school board's website. TVDSB has chosen to adopt these minimum standards as their communication standard. Trustee B (personal communication, April 29, 2011) acknowledges that the extent of the school board's communication process consist of school newsletters and notices that go home with the students. As B states, "parents get the word out." B also acknowledges that there can be an element of inequity to this approach given that while, "parents are pretty good at lobbying the board, there have been some parents in some communities that may be more effective than others." This is precisely the point that Jacques was making.

In addition, TVDSB makes little effort to communicate with the broader community that an accommodation review will be undertaken. When Trustee B was asked about the communication to community members who did not have children at the targeted school(s) at time of review, B stated that this was not an issue:

I am not sure how much they care. Just to be frank, I think some care when they worry about real estate prices because if the school in the neighbourhood closes they could worry about no new parents moving in, so there is a direct economic impact. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

This was an interesting response given that two of the four criteria under the provincial guideline to be considered when valuing the continuance of a school speak to the

school's value to the community as a whole and its value to the local economy. This lack of outward communication from TVDSB on the impending process can be seen as a contributing factor to Jacques' observation about lack of interest by the Churchill community in the ARC.

The Caradoc South community certainly noted the lack of communication from TVDSB to the broader community. Van Dijk described the lack of information coming from the school board in great detail: "Nothing. No mail, no mailings, no handouts. There was nothing in the restaurant which is like the local portal, like the hub" (personal communication, March 18, 2011). I can personally attest to the veracity concerning his comments about the Melbourne restaurant. It only took me one visit there to become "plugged in" with the community. A number of other interviewees acknowledged that they did not receive any direct information as they were not parents with children in the system at the time. Their consensus was that they should have been in the information loop.

One of the most poignant responses to the issue of the board's lack of communication on the impending review came from Thomas regarding how not being part of the information flow deeply impacted the Muncey-Delaware community. Similar to the residents of East London, residents of this First Nation community feel that they are marginalized by institutional power-brokers. Although not officially part of the Caradoc South school catchment area, there had been students from Muncey-Delaware attending the school from time to time for decades. Exclusion from the process felt to them that once again something was being done to them without their involvement or consent. As Thomas explains:

There was no rhyme or reason, I believe. But I think, maybe because we didn't have a tuition agreement at the time, I don't know, but they knew that we were there. And I don't think that, in the past, the representation of native people were not even thought of, so for us to not be thought of again, I don't know if that was not the case, but I wasn't going to let it rest because as an educator I want the best for my people. I want them to be confident of their actions but I want them to have the best of whatever it is, you know the resources, the teachers, the facility, whatever it is. But I want them to make their own judgement calls, to make them feel like who they are, represented, to be honoured as native people, whatever. But I think that we didn't get a fair chance. (personal communication, April 29, 2011)

The narrowing of communication to parents only on TVDSB's part diminishes the process. It excludes a large segment of the community that has a genuine interest in the school. That interest, as recounted time and again in the interviews, goes beyond their personal financial self-interest.

### **Transitional considerations**

As previously discussed, the provincial accommodation review guidelines established a four-part validation process designed to weigh the value of the local school in relation to the student, the community, the school board, and the local economy. While this assessment placed the value of the local school in regards to student well-being above all other considerations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2), the impact of

the transition from the closed school to the new/consolidated school setting appears to have never been evaluated in-depth by education officials. In its report to the TVDSB, the Churchill ARC proposed just this approach as part of its recommendations: “THAT the Board monitor the progress of students and impact on the families affected by any school consolidation following this ARC process to inform the future practice of the Board” (TVDSB, 2011a). This recommendation was not picked up in the parallel administration report on Churchill, nor was it part of the final TVDSB decision. As student well-being is the most important consideration in the evaluation guidelines, the absence of any real data on how students are coping with their transition to a new environment is troubling in terms of evaluation of the efficacy of the policy’s outcomes.

As with the overall current literature on school closures there is, as well, a dearth of research on the impact on students as they transition to a new school environment. Kirshner et al. (2010) in one of the few studies on this issue, notes that, “[t]he few studies of how closures affect displaced students yield a mixed picture” (p. 409). Their review cites research conducted in Chicago on the impact of school closures on students from eighteen elementary schools closed between 2001 and 2006. While test scores fell in the first year, in subsequent years they came back up; however, a high percentage of students (40%) ended up transferring to “problem schools,” given issues of geographic necessity. The cultural impact on those students attending the schools identified as problem schools did not form part of the research. The research dealt with test score results only, not personal, social or physiological considerations. The research on transitional impacts on students is just not being conducted, yet community schools are still being closed.



Thorpe spoke highly of the TVDSB's ability to deal with student transitional issues. His perspective on this point was that the school board was doing a good job in this area, and it was not an issue of concern.

We have a lot of history now for what is best to accommodate kids in a new school setting. Generally speaking kids are much more flexible and adaptable to schools than their parents are and there are very few instances of an unsuccessful amount of students from schools leading to kids being treated detrimentally. But it is a conscious process that the board undertakes and expects its administrators and staff to pay attention to children to the best of their ability. The other reality of course is that kids are not permanently in school. They move through the chairs, they move through the steps. Kids move every year voluntarily from school to school to school because their parents move or their circumstances change, so there are transitions of kids in elementary schools every day of the week. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

The perspective presented by the students who recently transitioned to a new school presents a much different picture from that of Thorpe. The students from Caradoc South, in their first year at their new school, recounted an experience of loss in personal academic standing, similar to that recounted in Kirshner et al.'s (2010) research. However, it was the cultural impacts that were most referenced. In terms of loss of academic standing (six of the seven participants stated they experienced this, while one stated that her grades actually improved), during the interview process it wasn't the loss of grades scores that came across as the most important issue, but rather the impact of the transition on their sense of self and personal identity. While rationale for individual grade

loss varied from “hard to keep up” to “it’s distracting in the new class” to “it’s different” to “it’s hard to get used to” (personal communication, April 28, 2011) all participants (including the one whose grades increased) commented on their sense of being seen as outsiders, and the cultural disconnect they were experiencing in their new surroundings.

The description of their new surroundings included commentary such as, “creepy,” “loud and obnoxious,” and “harassing” (personal communication, April 28, 2011). When relating experiences with their new classmates, the description was just as offsetting. Typical observations highlight the cultural challenge these students continued to face six months after their transition: “there’s a lot more drama at this school,” “they were like freaks,” “they really don’t care about anything,” “it was kind of scary,” and “there’s a lot of fights.”

The impact of this cultural disconnect on the students has been noted by adults in the Melbourne community. King, the local librarian, describes the incredible emotional scenes she witnessed in the public library after the transition took place:

Oh they were very upset. They were in tears. They were very, very upset. I especially felt bad for the kids going into grade 8, because they had gone there their entire life and then they had to go to a new school. And you know what kids are like in grade 8, especially the girls. It is very hard to find your spot. And a lot of the girls would come into here and talk to me and cry about how hard it was to fit in. There were bigger classrooms. They had known these people all the way from Kindergarten. They had known everybody in the school. It was only 80 kids. So, then to go to a school that is about four or five hundred; it was quite a

shock. And they didn't have a lot of choice. And some of them were separated from their friends here because of boundaries – geographic boundaries. So some would say, “At least I can go to grade 8 with my best friend,” they may have to go to Ekcoe, because of the boundaries. And they were very strict with those boundaries. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Not all interviewees share this position. This is certainly the case with Polhill, who as a Churchill ARC member supported keeping the school open. Still his view on whether there is a unique sense of place that a particular school brings to its students is similar to the opinion expressed by Thorpe. It was Polhill's opinion that any student sense of angst is derived directly from their parents: “The only reason your kids are saying that [they don't want to move schools] is because you told them that. And a lot of the comments that kids were making were driven by the parents and not the kids' own minds” (personal communication, April 27, 2011). To him, a building is simply a building, and buildings are interchangeable. “What difference does it make what the walls look like? So if you get the same flavour in the school as before, it shouldn't make a difference.”

Kohut-Gowan, in her presentation to the TVDSB on the future of Churchill school and its relationship to the current students, presented a compelling story to keep it open, demonstrating the connectedness between place, belonging and achievement. She described the potential challenge faced by Churchill students, many struggling with a variety of both personal and academic issues, when dealing with a change in a school: “It's like walking up a long flight of stairs, you stumble on a step, causing you to go back down and start again. Then you have to climb up a different flight of stairs. This is

daunting to many” (TVDSB meeting, May 10, 2011). I sat amazed at the meeting when no trustee in attendance asked her to elaborate and clarify this statement.

In a subsequent interview, when I asked her to elaborate on this comment, Kohut-Gowan spoke to quality of life challenges Churchill students would face in a new environment. She spoke of concern that the Churchill students would “get lost” in a new environment, given that their social supports would be taken away from them. She described particular concern for special needs students and those students who have personal socio-economic challenges

And especially if they have special needs, or if they have problems, like if they come from a fragile demographic and they don’t have a stable family background already that this can be devastating to have a completely new social environment and an environment that is not necessarily going to be aware of their specific needs because they do not know these children as well so I think it is going to be ... it’s not going to be a benefit to these children that are involved. It isn’t. I think the benefit would have been if they could have kept the school open and of course it comes down to money but for them to stay where they are because they have teachers and they have staff and they have those friends and they are already in their own environment. (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

This observation is especially poignant when considered in conjunction with the provincial accommodation review guidelines (detailed in Chapter Four) which states that students needs will be considered above all else in the evaluation of a school on-going operation. The provincial guidelines specifically address program and curriculum issues,

and physical considerations, such as accessibility, but they do not speak to emotional and cultural considerations.

### **Safety issues**

The provincial guidelines also speak to the safety of the school, but do not address safety issues of the neighbourhood the school is located in, or the issues of safety experienced by students in their coming and going to the school. This particular issue was seen to be more of a concern in Churchill, an urban community, than Caradoc South. As a parent, Jacques describes her consternation with the possibility of a new location.

My issue with going to Lord Nelson is the fact that we have kids caught crossing a four lane road; the path that most of the kids are going to take is going to be down Wavell which is where all the high school kids stand and smoke, where all the fights happen, drugs, you name it. And our kids have to go through that to get to school every day, and they have enough problems, they don't need that.

(personal communication, May 16, 2011)

Haroun provides additional insider observation to the community safety discussion in the Churchill community. From her understanding of the local landscape she expressed concern surrounding the safety issues of students faced with travelling to a new facility, identifying “excessive bullying right in the region around the Prince Charles school” (personal communication, May 11, 2011). She also identifies a potential outcome of the closures of Churchill regarding parents’ concerns for their children’s safety, that of parents moving to an entirely new school district. “A lot of parents whose children attend

here have said to us, if Churchill closes and people from here are expected to go to Prince Charles, we will move” (Haroun, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Consideration of safety outside the physical entity of the school does not appear to be a policy consideration.

In the rural community this issue takes on a different dimension. It not only relates to parental concern for having a sense of personal assurance of safety, it also relates to a diminished sense of the role of the parent, the grandparent, and the community member in their part in creating that safe environment. The frustration of no longer having a direct role as a contributor to the safety and well-being of the community’s children comes through in Sandra Johnson’s reflections on this point:

Now that we don’t have a school, I hardly know anyone in this town anymore. I love living in a small community, I know where my kids are all the time. We know where our kids are. We can keep on top of them. They used to do a lot of activities in a small community, which we were part of. (personal communication, March 1, 2011)

### **Parental concerns**

In addition to the safety issue, a number of other parental concerns are also not considered. Parents interviewed demonstrated distress over the cultural norms of the new environment. A case-in-point is the fundraising expectation of the new school environment, described by one grandparent from the Caradoc South community: “Parents are fundraising constantly. We didn’t do it like that when our kids were in

school that I can remember” (S. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2011). This was a theme Caradoc South parents identified if their children now attend the “new” school in Mt. Brydges. The level and degree of school fundraising was completely foreign to them, and several mention with distress this new reality. McDougall (personal communication, March 5, 2011) recounted how she felt about what she described as an on-going fundraising atmosphere at the new school. “They want money for something every week. It is ridiculous.” She also was distressed by the reality that her child could not participate in certain events at the school unless she also participated in the fundraising activities and secured monetary pledges. When her child asked if she could participate without collecting pledges, she was told, “Just have your parents take it into work.” McDougall was taken back as this type of activity was outside her cultural norm. She describes this practice as having a personal, financial and emotional impact on her as the parent:

Well that wasn’t the question. And I am not asking people at work, and I am not asking everyone around here. Everyone is having a hard time. So I’ll give her \$5 or \$10. Every week they are asking for something, and you feel that if you don’t put something in your child suffers. That was not the experience with the local school. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

### **Deconstructing community**

In terms of impact on students, the move to a different school outside of the community creates a real sense of isolation that is manifested in many different ways. In

the Caradoc South case a major boundary road between two municipalities runs through the village of Melbourne. Once the local school was closed students on one side of that road went to the school in the community of Glencoe, and the students on the other side of the road went to the school in the community of Mt. Brydges. The consequence of this action was the creation of a division in the community. As noted by Golden, “It’s like the children within our community don’t even know each other; you just don’t walk in the same group of friends” (personal communication, March 17, 2011). The consequence of this policy decision may have a long term adverse impact on the local community. Again, as Golden notes, many student activities are focused at the school, which is no longer located in the community resulting in, “no sets of [local] loyalty or wanting to be a part of that community.”

There is another dimension to Golden’s observations regarding how after-school activities now occurring outside of the community lessen the future social cohesion of the community. That is the personal consequences to the students themselves. Within the first year of the closing of South Caradoc, a lack of participation in extra-curricular activities has been noted. King, from her vantage point as the village librarian, noticed that many students seem to no longer participate in these activities giving the busing situation.

Now that they are bused, I have heard the kids say that they can no longer do these activities because they have to be on the bus at a certain time, if the parents aren’t available to bring them home. And a lot of the parents out here work in London or Strathroy, or they are farmers. And they can’t just stop their day to go



pick up the kids. And I think that has impacted their extracurricular activities, whatever they may be. (personal communication, March 17, 2011)

Impact on parents in terms of family lifestyle issues goes beyond considerations like fundraising or taking on a new role as family chauffer transporting their children to events in neighbouring communities where the school is now located. It also has an impact on the quality of family life. Previously, I reviewed the impact of busing in terms of its impact on the former Caradoc South students. It was shown to have had a significant impact in reordering the rhythm of student lives, in the most part adding both additional pre- and post-school travel and preparation time and a level of stress to their day. The Johnson's, Melbourne grandparents, have taken on the role of pre- and post-school childcare for their two granddaughters, in part because the school bus departure and arrival times do not coincide with the parents' work schedules. They recount how their grandchildren now leave much earlier for school than previously and get home much later and the impact this has had on the quality of family life: "These kids are in bed at 7 o'clock at night. They're worn out. They hardly see their parents anymore" (J. and S. Johnson, personal communication, March 1, 2011).

### **Provincial policy framework re-examined**

As discussed in Chapter Four, the framework for how the current accommodation review is unfolding can be linked to two principal pieces of provincial legislation, Bill 160, which established a new educational funding paradigm, and Bill 104, which created a new administrative reality. Thorpe's reflections on the provincial policy directives

which have had the most telling impact in shaping current educational direction produced a list of three. His list acknowledges the two pieces of legislation noted. His reflections on the local impact of these two bills contained observations that were similar to those of local community members evident in Chapters Six through Eight). The third provincial directive he identified was full funding for the separate school system. I chose not to edit this from Thorpe`s comments, as it does demonstrate how the economic efficiency argument dominates once again.

The first was extension of the full funding to the separate school system which is a choice that was made here, different from the choices that were made in Newfoundland and Quebec. What that has done is necessitate a closed use...a closed review of the use of resources because there is obviously some level of duplication when we run essentially two parallel education systems – publicly funded education systems. The second change of substance that has affected how education operates was the decision to remove the local funding component of public education from the local tax payers, while obviously the local tax payers pay it and continue to pay, the cost of education, they do it indirectly and the provincial government is responsible for virtually 100% of Board budgets, which means that the opportunity to prioritize locally has been diminished, which has an effect that we will be talking about later, on how school boards operate. And thirdly, to a greater, lesser degree, the whole question of amalgamation of school boards, had an effect because it meant that entities that had previously prioritized certain areas were no longer able to do so because they became part of a larger

entity. So those three things I think are the things that are the hallmarks of change. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

At one level, Thorpe's contentions ring true. The combination of Bills 104 and 160 can be seen to have fundamentally changed the nature of the local school board's policy relationship with community. Policy direction can be seen to be tightly bound to the funding source, and without the ability to raise revenue locally the school board's ability to respond to local needs in a unique situational manner can be seen as inherently limited. However, the manner in which the accommodation review process is delivered, how the board chooses to act out the provincial policy agenda, is entirely its own. This is an expression of its own sense of institutional agency where and how it expends and emphasises agency to achieve its own organization ends.

TVDSB's expression of its institutional agency has been roundly criticised by the majority of those I interviewed, specifically on two fronts. First, the overtly managerial approach TVDSB has taken to the policy process, invoking a process that Keevers et al. (2008) would describe as "a highly corporate ways of working" (p. 471). Community members unanimously denounce the accommodation review process as tightly controlled and highly guided towards a pre-ordained outcome. In large measure the TVDSB's narrative, as expressed by Thorpe, employs the provincial directives as the source of its actions. This contention is reinforced by Polhill's assessment of the accommodation review process and TVDSB's latitude for action:

Well, you know, there are a lot of areas that do have the right kind of demographics to need a school. This one is on the short end of that one and there may be other places where 400 students are getting bused to somewhere else. And

if you think, that's a lot of money, that's a lot of cost to get bused to other schools. So I am not trying to hand a complete financial analysis of the school board but I think they are trying to do the best job they can with the money they got and it's not like the city, if you need something, the next budget you are giving you can raise peoples' taxes. They can't do that. It's all fixed by the provincial government. They give you so much money and you deal with it.

(personal communication, April 29, 2011)

In his reflection on the process, Polhill echoes the school board's narrative: that they have limited options for action, they need to strive to create efficient school sizes of approximately 400 to 450 students per facility, and it is the financial imperative that is solely driving the decision, not any sense of an administrative preference. The agenda setting of the ARC process in advance by the TVDSB limits the discussion of options, and it can be argued that this practice is in effect contrary to the expression of the democratic spirit that is contained within the provincial policy. That spirit supports the establishment of an ARC in which community consideration is taken into account as part of the decision-making process, providing for public participation not just consultation.

Secondly, and closely related to the managerialism displayed by TVDSB administration, is their seemingly unwavering refusal to consider joint community uses of the local school in order to keep the facility operational. As referenced in Chapter Five, the Ontario government, through the introduction of *the Facility Partnership Guideline* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a), has introduced the means to begin to considerate alternatives to closure. The Hamilton-Wentworth Board of Education, as an early adopter of this approach, has shown an alternative institutional mindset to that

displayed by TVDSB. In HWDSB's case the school facility is seen as a community asset, not a board asset alone, and other uses are brought into it in order to keep it operational.

Managerialism was demonstrated at the November 29, 2011 meeting at the TVDSB offices. The facility partnership guidelines were discussed at length at the meeting, as these guidelines pertain to the TVDSB. There was an expression of angst by some trustees that a partnership may limit the school board's ability to act unilaterally. Tucker assured the trustees that a facility partnership does not limit the Board's ability to conduct an ARC, even if an on-going partnership is in effect with the school under review. In addition, it was discussed at the meeting that while facility partnerships were now part of the ARC process, given the provincial guidelines, all the TVDSB needed to do to satisfy the guidelines was to explore possible partnerships; it did not need to actually enter into one.

There is a continued reliance on the funding formula as rationale for maintaining a continued focus on the school as a solely educational facility and not opening it up to other uses. In 2009, the educational advocacy group People for Education, in its annual report on the state of Ontario education, contained a section illustrating how other Canadian jurisdictions were using the school as a centre for integrated community services as a means to keep more schools open. In their review of six jurisdictions, including New Brunswick, British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, they cite several approaches which "have prevented some school closings by providing funding and policy to support a range of services in school buildings" (p. 7). These provincial and territorial governments provide direct support to

their respective local educational administrations, for the pursuit of workable alternatives to school closures.

### **In closing**

As a process, the TVDSB accommodation review policy has several inherent shortcomings. Its focus favours the institutional position over all other considerations. It fails the test of what constitute citizen engagement as posed by Arnstein's (1969) ladder, preferring a managerial stance in which professionals dictate the course of action to policy recipients. Policy aspects such as community focused communications, transitional issues for students and parents, and future consequences of community impacted by a closed school all need to be revisited.

The final chapter examines these design issues and policy shortcomings against the initial research questions, within the context of the current decision-making environment.

## Chapter Nine: Observations and Discussion

*Participatory policy analysis purports that all affected parties to a policy decision should, through the means of discursive democracy, have a political voice and “should be heard without prejudice or advantage.” (deLeon, 1994, p. 88)*

My intent in this research was to discern the nature of the relationship between the values of policy-makers and the values of the members of affected communities, using school closures as the example. Beyond the current dominant neo-liberal narrative, how those affected by a local school closure define their community and understand its values provides an important aspect to the research. In the course of my study I chose an urban and a rural case study, in part to ascertain if the experiences of participants from these two different settings provided a different understanding to this issue. Aside from some minor variances, busing being the most notable example, interviewee narratives from these two cases was remarkably similar, in both nature and scope and illustrated important differences in values were at play.

Other topics raised by the research explored provide a foundation for future research. These include an examination of meaningful participatory practices in local public policy making; the issue of the role of citizens in shaping public policy; and the question of the responsibility of schools in building a sense of community. I contend that the dominant policy paradigm, the penchant of public institutions to rigorously adhere to the dictates of neo-liberal economics and new managerialism in their decision-making

practices, underline the work's central question about the impact of values on policy formation. In particular, the research reveals a deep and divisive institutional-community dichotomy when it comes to the implementation of school closure policy. This division is centred on the scenario where the social purposes of the local school as defined by the community is in constant tension with the school board's economic policy purposes. Keevers et al. (2008) state that even when there exists within an organization forces committed to pursuing the principles of social justice and community engagement in their policy deliberations, the influence of "the business case" is so prevalent that it negates all other positions and "the requirement to organise themselves according to business and market principles and align the organisation's philosophy, aims and activities to the 'results' outlined in the funding department's corporate plan [dominates]" (p. 469).

In the case of the TVDSB, Trustee B is well-known as a stalwart advocate of social engagement and inclusion. However B's position on school closure policy delivery does not appear to align with this reputation; the prevailing institutional group-think of neo-liberal rationalism appears to have a direct influence on the trustee's outlook. B's cited position on the accommodation review process is all about managing expectations both in terms of the perceived fiscal imperatives of the board and the challenges in initiating any actions that stray too far from the predetermined solution: "So I do think in entering the process, you don't want to create a sense of false hope that there is a laundry list of solutions that cost money when the cupboard is bare but also the cupboard is all committed" (personal communication, April 29, 2011). Aside from the obvious fiscal prejudice offered in the first part of this comment, that is the need to base decisions on



perceived economic efficiency, the latter part of the statement demonstrates a definite support for a managerialist approach. The influence of business case dominance is quite evident.

TVDSB's managerialist approach to the issues can be seen in the agenda managing practices revealed in this research, practices such as the naming the school to be closed in advance of the public consultation. In the eyes of the community members, this practice taints the process. Community participants described the outcome of the process as "pre-determined," "a done deal," or a "sham." In addition the preference by the school board administration for the model of larger elementary schools, the scale of efficiency model illustrated by a preference for elementary schools in the 400 to 450 pupil range, also demonstrates managerialist tendencies. This preference is diametrically opposed to that of parents interviewed who specifically chose to live in communities where their children would attend a "smaller" school.

Throughout the research, a significant point of criticism of TVDSB's current accommodation review policy was focused on its design, specifically related to what is best described as a design devised to ensure the absolute predictability of the final outcome. As detailed in the research, these design elements include the tightly controlled presentation policy, limited public communication resources, committee information derived almost solely from school board sources, the control of ARC appointments, pre-identifying the school to be closed in advance of the process (which tends to create an adversarial environment between communities), and the practice of separate recommendations coming from the accommodation review committee and the school board administration. The last item of this list significantly demonstrates the shortfall of

the process. This practice diminishes the work of the ARC. By having the school board administrative recommendation separate and following that of the ARC a scenario is identified where the board trustees, in their deliberations, now have two opposing recommendations to choose from. It creates an adversarial environment by design, leading to an atmosphere promoting winners and losers. An issue of fairness is at question on the part of the school board. This question is evident when reviewing the cumulative impact of school closure procedural practices.

Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) advances the position that school boards have an obligation to ensure fairness in their dealings with the public, regardless of the pull from institutional masters such as perceived fiscal imperatives. “[T]he boards’ duty of fairness to their constituencies cannot be sacrificed on the altar of efficiency and predictability of outcome of community participation in closure decision-making” (p. 14). Further she states that school boards have a moral obligation to be fair, given both their role as public institutions and also the consequences of the impact of the closing of a school has on a community because “school closing impacts the fabric of every aspect of community life” (p. 15). This sense of moral obligation escapes consideration by the rational-technical decision maker. It requires a decision-making model that favours doing the “right thing” over doing the “rational thing.” From a communitarian viewpoint, Etzioni (2004) describes the higher form of decision-making as one that recognizes the difference between citizenship (legal status) and membership (common good) and favours the broader obligation of membership over the narrower obligation of legal status. It is not enough that a public body gives the appearance of operating in a moral fashion; it actually needs to be operating in a moral fashion. To better understand how

this seemingly values dichotomy between the school board and community is played out. I have chosen to revisit the initial research questions, in light of the observations and findings that have surfaced throughout my investigation.

### **The research questions revisited**

#### ***How do the values of the decision-makers influence and shape the policy agenda and its delivery?***

In answer to this question the following needs to be considered: do the policy makers see themselves as stewards of a public body or informed decision-makers best able to direct the course of educational policy for the good of all? Thorpe's comments bear consideration when contemplating an answer to the question. He constantly referred to the need to ensure that decisions ensure budgetary balance. Budget is not seen as a means to an end, but rather an end in and of itself. Building on Pal's (2006) contention that the values of decision-makers establish a set of normative standards within organizations, it follows that this tendency to place fiscal matters first defines and motivates policy-makers accordingly.

A seeming challenge to my research was the non-participation by TVDSB administration. While they never said no to an interview, they never said yes either; their non-interview position in itself was very telling in terms of identifying their values. The reluctance to directly participate provides an interesting insight into the institutional values, and the normative standards this practice defines. It speaks to the lack of openness and transparency. The TVBSB administration's actions, in regards to how they

perceive their public role when asked to provide comment, are strangely guarded. Dr. Killip's response to my request for an interview with board administration (as originally discussed in Chapter Three) reveals TVDSB's position on institutional transparency and openness:

You indicate that the study revolves around school closures, however, in one case (Churchill) the review is still in progress and as such we could not support use of this case. There are several other completed reviews (e.g., Lucan area; Lambeth area) that would be more suitable. (personal communication, January 5, 2011)

The question begs to be asked, suitability for whom? The following excerpt from the same response by Dr. Killip demonstrates the dominance of the institutional-centric procedural approach on the part of TVDSB administration. It clearly places their emphasis on the meeting of their ends in regards to the policy process, over community desire:

A broader and more important question/issue for us is that the reviews are not about school closures but instead are about providing the best possible learning environments for all students. (personal communication, January 5, 2011)

This above statement validates the institutional-centric claim. First, it provides no recognition of the impact on community in the review process, while two of the four provincial policy guidelines provide an opportunity for community focus (Ontario, 2006, p. 2). Second, it alludes to the managerial preference advanced through the process of accommodation review, the development of larger elementary schools built upon a certain pedagogical preference. As stated in Chapter Five, the review process provides

good cover for the school board administration to advance their vision. The following comment from Thorpe clearly defines this vision, which has no reference to the role of community as far as the school system is concerned.

[W]hat we are talking about is adapting a school system that was formally four systems and attempting to group schools as conveniently as possible, given that all of the variables and constraints of existing buildings and transportation and all of those things. So, when the Board builds new schools, a similar process of consolidation and amalgamation of existing schools, it is striving to hit that average, but it is, even then, a average and not a target that has to be out in all cases and there has to be schools larger than and smaller than 450 where circumstances justify. (personal communication, May 17, 2011)

Additionally, as revealed in Chapter Four, the accommodation review literature's recurrent reference to financial considerations reveals both a predilection to fiscal matters and a seeming lack of consideration for community considerations. This tendency demonstrates the high value that is placed on the rational-technical approach. Tucker, in a presentation at the City of London, displayed this preference for managerial practice when he detailed the rationale for the proposed closing of the Churchill school:

I know the neighbourhood [Churchill] well, and the programs are better consolidating from four schools into three. We will pass on the benefits to the taxpayer. There are 690 empty desks in that neighbourhood. We need to look at the big picture, and realize the savings in teachers, heating, and cleaning costs. (CPSC meeting, February 8, 2010)

As a good manager Tucker is demonstrating, in this statement, what looks like prudent fiscal stewardship. What he is not addressing is the social, emotional and safety concerns of families.

TVDSB administration appears to view themselves as the best informed party to decide, create and direct policy. They value an approach that advances a specific set of institutional imperatives, namely neo-liberal fiscal policy and a proclivity for an economy of scale efficiency model that creates a school system built upon a series of larger elementary schools. The normative standards arising from these values favour a managerial approach that leads to a profound disconnect with the community. The extent of this disconnect is evident in the following comment by Thorpe, as he describes the role of board administration in guiding and defining the accommodation review process.

That is the job of the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy's role is to attempt to assist, in this case, its political masters, to adopt the solution which is in the view of the administration, the most efficient, the most effective and the most consistent thing in this position to accomplish the most desired results. So when administration makes a recommendation it is based on its best review and analysis of any information it has available to it. It is as objective as it is possible to be and it proposes a solution that is as efficient and as effective as possible at accomplishing the necessary outcome. (personal communication, May 17)

***How do people view the concrete and practical application of school closure policy in their communities?***

As explored in Chapter Seven, the narratives from community members regarding the closure procedures revealed several concerns. These include lack of communication; overwhelming process issues; concerns about paternalistic institutional attitudes; and a sense that a process touted as designed to promote community building actually acts as a catalyst to instil both institutional-community and inter-community confrontation. Voices from others interviewed also raised similar issues. The observations made by Trustee A and London city councillor Polhill both spoke to communication and process challenges that lessened the soundness of the review. When measured against the rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, a case can be made that the TVDSB accommodation review process might not make it past the level of tokenism, when it come to the utility of the citizen engagement practices employed.

As catalogued in Chapter Seven, the accommodation review process resulted in a co-opting of the public sphere (the public sphere as identified by Arvind (2009) as “a countervailing force to the state’s official space” (p. 3)) through involvement of the community in what appeared to participants as a formal chimera - the practice of committee meetings, deliberations and recommendations providing input to a decision that was already made. The reflections captured at the conclusion of Chapter Seven speak of how the process is viewed by participants. They expressed anger, hostility and grief towards the TVDSB, and expressions of friendship and respect to fellow members of their community who participated.

*How do they (community) view the consequences of school closures, especially as they occur in local settings?*

It's helpful when considering this question to revisit the definition of community as laid out in Chapter One. While a definitive definition of community may seem to be elusive by nature, interviewees had no difficulty in articulating community on their part. In reviewing their responses the sense of community was a combination of many elements including: Schmidt et al.'s (2007) definition of community as a measure of civic engagement, Valencia's (1984) view that community is built on the strength of relationship with local cultural events, and Egelund and Laustsen's (2006) concept of "place identity" in which community acts as a common denominator for the development of a shared cultural, social, physical and economic environment. In all cases the following position was unanimous: community was lessened with the loss of the local school. As stated in Chapter Six, the school was presented in interviews as an essential element in the community's DNA. Meeting the challenge of school closures caused some participants to rediscover the commons in their community and led to the development of what can best be described as a form of higher end communitarianism.

Pascopella's (2004) research on rural schools closing in the U.S. placed great emphasis on the input of the closing of schools to community. "When you close a small rural school you're kind of closing a community. It's hard to believe but it's true." (p. 76). Certainly the Caradoc South interviewees expressed this same sense of inevitable community decline. This sentiment was shared by the voices from the Churchill community. While it is part of the City of London, and surrounded by neighbourhoods



with other schools, interviewees felt that the local school defined them. It is the only public institution in the community, and as such it created that shared common denominator.

***How does (or do) the end results of school closures reflect what community members value?***

School closures represent a fundamental disconnect between the end result and what community members value. The issue of fiscal accountability was not a dominant consideration for community members. They did not see it as a key issue, and when it was discussed with them they tended to challenge the board's fiscal arithmetic, questioning the purported financial efficiencies from closing the local school. They saw a definite credibility gap in the school board's argument.

There was also no prolonged discussion on curriculum by community participants. Aside from those interviewees who represented multi-generational school attendees and felt that they received a good education at the school in question so their children will as well, the issue of closing and consolidating schools to advance a better curriculum was not seen as an important consideration. However, participants did not express any overt desire to direct TVDSB on what the curriculum should be. Their comments were focused on the broader social, familial, cultural and economic impacts of having the local school remain open. Their commentary focused on the school in the community and issues related to size, safety, and distance travelled. The communal was touted as the fundamental (and preferred) characteristic setting smaller schools apart from larger schools. This position was not only held among the adult members of the

community. The Caradoc South student focus group revealed how they were deeply affected by the loss of the intimacy that the local sense of the communal provided them. Beyond the outward appearance of producing a collective brave face, a prevailing sense of grief permeated the whole discussion with this group.

### **Final reflections**

As an issue of analysis, the effective translation of public policy into practice evident in the current school closure scenario in Ontario offers several interesting messages for future policy design and delivery. Listening to what the community messages tell us can lead to a better understanding on the delivery of policy in future. School closures in Ontario have been cause for great emotional consternation. In large measure, this can be attributed to the attachment that communities have with their local school. On one level, the local school becomes a community icon, centering citizen identity. On another level the local school affords parents a sense of influence over the lives of their children and inclusion in a community of their making. The closing of the school takes away both elements from them.

Current provincial accommodation review policy was designed to give voice to community when considering the matter of a school's future, in part to address the highly emotional nature emanating from this type of decision-making. The model of citizen engagement promoted ostensibly created a place where dialogue among all parties, community, parents and school officials, could occur to reach a democratic solution more or less acceptable to all. However, in the case of TVDSB and the two case communities

revealed a set of tensions between the intent of current policy and its practical and procedural contradictions.

A significant contributing factor to these tensions can be found in the values distance between school board officials and the community. This value distance greatly influenced how the board officials viewed the policy's application, a view that proved to be antithetical to community's perception on how the practice should unfold. To begin, Board officials have taken the neo-liberal position that they "own" the school, and as the owners, or at least the managers, it was their duty to operate in the most efficient and effective manner possible. Their decision-making process hinged on this principle. The community position was strikingly different. They saw the local school as belonging in the community, belonging defined not as an act of ownership but rather as a natural organic relationship. Tensions are evident as these different parties operate from strikingly different value perspectives in the decision-making process, where the ability to decide the outcome has been unequally distributed.

Smith (2001) expounds a communitarian agenda for schools because, as he argues, it better suits the concept of school as an integral part of community, promoting participation in a shared life, and a concern for a democracy as advanced by both Dewey (1964) and Lindeman (1956). The shared role approach closely aligns with one of the recurrent themes that resonated from the interviews with community members. Within this theme they described their sense of the role of school and community as one that advances the concept of school as a place that both helps to form and informs the concept of local community.

The province has invested school boards with the ability to make unilateral decisions on the future of local schools. As long as the provincial guidelines are followed, the decision of the local school board is guaranteed to be upheld. Yet a key intent of these guidelines can be seen as a requirement for the school boards to consult with the local community. At the same time local school boards are subject to a universal funding formula, fundamentally a per-student allocation to the revenue line in their budgets. Aside from some slight allowances in the formula recognizing limited special circumstances, no recognition is given to unique local conditions. While school boards appear to have the freedom to act for the best interests of the local community, they also appear to be on a defined tether, which has been interpreted by some as a limit to institutional agency.

In addition to these challenges a model of citizen participation has been superimposed on the process. The process not surprisingly is highly politically charged as it deals with the issues of the future of community viability, the ability of parents to make decisions regarding their children, and the perception of community versus bureaucratic decision-making. There appears to be no easy solution to this rather complex and at times seemingly paradoxical policy issue. In this instance, the normative practice, as shaped by institutional values, is out-of-step with those of community. The consequence of all of this is that these two parties, who should be natural allies promoting common cause, are at odds with each other. Until the root causes of these differences are addressed, which does not seem to be likely in the current scenario, the operational environment created by this situation will remain.

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE**

Review Number:	1010-5
Principal Investigator:	Rebecca Coulter
Student Name:	Bill Irwin
Title:	<i>Public school closures in Ontario: A case of conflicting value?</i>
Expiry Date:	September 30, 2012
Type:	PhD Thesis
Ethics Approval Date:	November 24, 2010
Revision #:	UWO Protocol, Letters of Information & Consent
Documents Reviewed & Approved:	

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or information/consent documents may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB, except for minor administrative aspects. Participants must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information/consent documentation and/or recruitment advertisement, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

***2010-2011 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board***

<b>Dr. Alan Edmunds</b>	<b>Faculty of Education (Chair)</b>
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University of Western Ontario  
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