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A Rural Perspective

School closure and community protest

Are the small communities of rural North America already doomed to disappear, and is closing their schools not objectively an inevitable part of a larger process? Well, no; probably. A reasonable prediction from the "objective" data would have seen most of them disappear well before now. Barry Lucas looks at conflicts over school closure in Saskatchewan and sees behind the familiar dilemmas, between the subjective fears of a community and the objective data used by a school board, failures to get to grips with the real problem, which demands a political solution. A systems perspective in social policy-making would show the way.

School enrolment decline and closure have been characteristic of rural, agricultural areas in North America almost since the time of their settlement, yet the fact that such a problem is chronic may also have led to an assumption that it is inevitable. Indeed, the futility of much rural protest might be traced in part to such an assumption.

This paper focuses on conflicts associated with threatened school closure in rural, agricultural communities in Saskatchewan. Two central issues were evident in these conflicts, with some variations in intensity related to particular community circumstances. First it is almost the sole defence available to many small rural communities to assume that there will be an impact upon the traditions, social identity, and ultimate survival of the community. The second issue, closely related, concerns the quality of education that such communities are able to provide under restricted circumstances; school authorities may offer alluring educational opportunities in transfers to larger schools in larger communities. On these two issues it is difficult, and probably dangerous, to draw the line between "subjective" and "objective" data.

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In rural Saskatchewan the protesting community may consist of fewer than one hundred people, while the school board experiencing the protest may be located in a town of fewer than one thousand. School organization in the province consists basically of seventeen "city and town" school divisions and sixty school divisions in largely rural, agricultural areas. The organization of the latter divisions represents a long period of consolidation, extending almost from the time of Prairie settlement, and has involved the closure of large numbers of one-room schools often in the face of strong community resistance. The fact that this number of school divisions represents a decline from 4,808 school administrative units in 1941 may indicate the magnitude of the consolidation.

The long struggle in the consolidation movement is still very much in evidence, between forces promoting the centralization and bureaucratization of educational services in larger towns, and those seeking to retain the convenience, tradition, and perceived educational and social-psychological benefits of school services in smaller communities. Population decline in the farm labour force and in small communities, many of which were originally settled as "grain delivery points" at eight to ten mile intervals along rail lines, continues as the major impetus of centralization.

A changing agricultural economy

The origins and consequences of this decline have been extensively analyzed in the rural economic and sociological literature of the United States and Canada. The central dynamic of decline concerns the changing agricultural economy, including the mechanization of farming; the concomitant increase in the size and commercialization of farms, and the resultant decline in the overall number of farms and of the farm labour force; the increased capital investment required for commercially viable farm operation and, hence, the discouragement of new farm starts by the younger generation; and, relatedly, as one writer puts it, the "decline of the economic value of children in rural areas," leading to the migration of youth to cities and towns (Whyte, 1966, p.21).

More controversial are the sociological origins and consequences of rural population decline, including, for example, the notion of "rurbanization", which suggests that a migration from rural to urban areas may have been stimulated by the diffusion of urban values and standards of living in rural areas through mass media communication, highway improvement, and the consolidation in urban areas of services, including education. The same notion is applicable to changing rural shopping patterns, which affect the economic viability and, hence, the "holding" power and residential attractiveness of smaller communities. An increased demand for a wider variety of consumer goods and services results in a tendency for rural consumers to by-pass local

convenience centres in favour of larger towns, particularly if those towns are within reasonable driving distance.

School enrolment decline

Population and school enrolment decline in Saskatchewan have also been affected by emigration from the province and by the declining birth rate trend. A study by Scharf (1974, p.93-96) has indicated, for example, that the province lost 92,203 children due to emigration during the period 1948 to 1972, and that a drop of 38 per cent took place in the number of births between 1972 and the peak year of 1954.

As to the extent of school enrolment decline, the province has experienced over the years a series of peaks, subsequent declines, and a current declining trend which is expected to result in a total enrolment figure well below that of over fifty years ago. From a total enrolment of 72,260 in 1911, school enrolment reached a peak of 230,492 in 1931, declined to 167,485 in 1951, reached another peak of 248,768 in 1969, and declined to 201,735 in 1980, a trend which is expected to continue to well below 150,000 by the end of the century. Only six of the sixty rural school divisions have experienced slight enrolment increases in recent years, and these divisions are generally located in the vicinity of the largest cities in the province, where enrolment (apart from decline in core city areas) has remained relatively stable owing to rural-urban migration. In the remaining rural divisions, enrolment decline during the five years (1975-1980) has ranged from a low of 1% to a high of 27% with an average decline of 14% (based on figures from **Annual Reports**, Department of Education, Government of Saskatchewan). Prospects for continued decline are particularly severe in those divisions in which agriculture is dependent mainly upon large-scale grain farming rather than upon a more diverse farming economy.

The field study

The four divisions chosen for the field study illustrate a number of basic conditions characteristic of the problems of rural school enrolment decline and closure in Saskatchewan. All had been experiencing steady decline in enrolment, some severely so, largely in relation to lack of economic diversity and the changing agricultural economic trends noted previously.

These trends were particularly evident in one of the selected divisions, which had farms of above average size, the highest proportion of wheat farming of any school division in the province, and the highest non-residence rates: grain farm operators tend to reside in towns, hence the decline of the "family farm." Furthermore,

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this school division illustrates the impact of proximity to large trading centres. Within reasonable driving distance of the western and eastern boundaries of the school division, two relatively large "farm cities" serve as both shopping centres and residences for farmers in the division, with obvious consequences for the welfare of local trading centres.

Other divisions chosen for the study illustrate the impact of the presence of a farm city within the division itself. Such centres continue to draw resources in a way which suggests that prosperity comes to those who already enjoy the requisite development capital. This drain is particularly evident in small communities located within a reasonable day's return drive to the farm city. In one community studied, for example, the one remaining grocery store out of an original total of five had recently closed, while a community of similar size twenty miles further from the farm city continued to maintain three stores.

The study included interviews at the board level with school superintendents, assistant superintendents (where applicable), and principals of schools recently (1978-79) threatened with the prospect of eventual closure owing to staff cuts and/or reduction of the number of grades in the school. Interviews were also held with community members involved in school closure controversy, and documentary sources such as local newspaper reports and briefs prepared by protesting community groups were analyzed.

Ineffectiveness of community protest

The small rural communities observed in this study appeared ultimately powerless to prevent eventual school closure, despite political protest ranging from petitions and briefs locally to formal deputations to provincial politicians and officials. This is not to suggest that the school authorities were completely insensitive to community concerns and pressures; in some cases pressures were strong enough to lead to the delay of school closure. But delay also contributed to the conditions precipitating and justifying closure - by emphasizing the uncertain future of the threatened school, by extending the period in which further enrolment decline could occur (partly as a result of the school's uncertain future), and, in some cases, by leading other communities to complain of the school board's fiscal irresponsibility in making special provisions for a school which had originally been slated for closure. Closure decisions under these circumstances tended to "make themselves" eventually.

A number of reasons could be suggested for the ineffectiveness of protest, certainly not all of which would be critical of school authorities. They must operate within fiscal and political limitations, including the need to mediate between the demands of some

communities for particular fiscal considerations on the one hand, and the demands of other communities for fiscal restraint on the other. One obvious source of the political ineffectiveness of community protest is the system of formal representation. The cases investigated in this study involved bitter complaints on the part of protesting community members that their interests were not being represented by the board member responsible for the area in which the communities were located. These board members were seen as favouring either the interests of the larger town in which the board was located, or the interests of another, usually larger community in the subdivision. (In one case the board member representing the subdivision had moved from the protesting community to the major town in the division, but legally remained the subdivision representative because he owned property in the subdivision.)

A more fundamental reason for the ineffectiveness of protest, however, concerns the nature of the issues voiced in the protest, and the remainder of the discussion will focus on these issues.

The issue of community survival: subjectivity and objectivity

From parent briefs and petitions:

What is at stake here is not just the question of whether students should receive their education outside of their home town, but perhaps the very survival of the town in the future.

The town will die if our high school closes. Maybe this is what they're after.

At the present time, our community is actively planning to build a larger skating rink. Who for, if you close Division Four (Grades 10, 11, 12) and take our young people from us?

A central point to be made in this and the following discussion is that while school authorities are able to support school closure decisions with relatively objective data, community protest against closure relies largely upon "subjective data", including feelings, attitudes, traditions, and the like. This is not simply to suggest, however, that school authorities have superior data resources and hence are able to overwhelm the relatively emotional protests of community groups with more sophisticated and factually-documented arguments. Rather, the point is that subjective and objective data represent two kinds of data, neither necessarily superior, and both in fact complementary and essential when applied to the planning of change affecting human behaviour.

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From this point of view, then, it may be hazardous for authorities to depend mainly upon objective data. But in the processes of decision about school closure examined in this study, such a dependence was clearly predominant. Indeed, community protest may lead school authorities to a greater dependence upon "facts" such as enrolment projections, costs of retaining the school, and benefits of transfer to better equipped schools. Moreover, when the authorities' apparent inattention to the concerns of the community leads it into confrontation with the school authorities, the community may succeed only in further demonstrating the emotionally subjective nature of its opposition.

The cause-effect enigma in community decline

The most obvious reason for the inclusion of subjective data in planning is that the "facts" are seldom sufficiently objective. How do we determine whether the closure of a school will affect the survival potential of a community? Where the school is one of the few remaining community institutions if not the only one, parents are on fairly safe ground in protesting that its removal would seriously affect the ability of the community to retain its present population and to attract any new development. In two communities studied, for example, the parents involved in protest claimed that numbers of local residents had moved out as a result of the threatened school closure and that the original community plans to build recreational facilities (intended to contribute to the attractiveness of the community) had been shelved because of the uncertainty introduced by the prospective loss of the school.

The problem with this line of argument, however, is that it introduces a "which-comes-first" enigma that lends itself to counter-argument. The question arises whether the loss of the school is a contributing factor to community decline, or whether it is merely a result of that decline. The community may even be open to blame for contributing to decline by failing to support local institutions and services adequately in the first place - as in fact was the case in one of the conflicts investigated in this study.

This case involved a severe split in the community between those protesting closure of the community's high school grades and those supporting the school board's decision to transfer high school students to a larger high school in a farm city. Some of the board supporters, who had formerly been businessmen in the small community, charged that community members themselves had precipitated a decline by neglecting local businesses in favour of the services available in the farm city.

The cause-or-effect enigma concerning the relationship

between school closure and community decline does not appear to be resolvable, and the argument may therefore be regarded as essentially a political one, in which the small community is, on record, going to lose.

Objective data can mislead theory

That small communities have records of decline raises another issue, and also reveals the misleading effects of dependency on objective data when arriving at theory. It may be speculated that small rural communities are to some degree the victims of an empirically-based demographic theory predicting their eventual and inevitable demise in a society evolving steadily towards urbanization. Such a theory might be characterized as the "resettlement idea", which involves the seemingly logical proposition that since many small rural communities are in fact declining, the rural community is essentially insignificant and is destined for eventual disappearance. Translated into public policy, this idea has two implications: Either we wait for the resettlement process to take its natural course; or if we decide to intervene, we hasten the process by withholding resources from "doomed" communities or by distributing resources to communities which appear to be potentially the more viable components of the emerging demographic scheme.

It is not suggested that any such policy leads to deliberate action by authorities dealing with small communities, but there is operational evidence that it is nevertheless at work. For example, the establishment in a larger community of a comprehensive secondary school, equipped with an array of educational options and facilities and promising "equality of educational opportunity", obviously constitutes a significant resource for that community; and the "pull" of that resource on school enrolment in hinterland communities can easily be documented, even where the school is not specifically intended to absorb enrolment in surrounding communities.

Certainly school board policies are interpreted in this way from the subjective point of view. In one case, community informants interpreted the school board's adamant refusal to establish kindergartens in rural community schools as a deliberate policy of withholding resources which would serve community educational needs and also bolster declining enrolments. Moreover, communities in rural school systems may be highly sensitive about what they regard as an inequitable distribution of resources in the system. The provision of busing services provides a prime example. In one case, the board's insistence on busing students from a closed school to a town school, rather than to a much closer rural school in need of the enrolment, was not

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surprisingly viewed by the community in need as blatant discrimination.

Potential of a systems perspective

But when, in fact, are small communities a "lost cause"? When does the expenditure of public resources on declining communities constitute not only irresponsibility, but also interference with a process of adjustment which might just as well occur as expeditiously as possible? In the review of the literature on socio-economic development undertaken for this paper, no specific "objective" answers could be found to these kinds of questions; and it seems unlikely that any ever will be found that are not heavily reliant upon subjective values and interpretations that accordingly are sensitive to political controversy.

One source, however, at least provides a strong warning about judging the prospects of communities solely in terms of "objective" indicators such as population size and degree of economic prosperity. Zimmerman and Moneo (1971) argue that the variety of communities identifiable (ranging from "Prairie Cities" with populations above 20,000 to "Stop-off Centres" with populations below 500) represent a system of land occupation based upon community cooperation. These communities, although serving different roles, "are related in a mutual symbiotic fashion and are all required for the most advantageous use of the area as a production-consumption (cycle) and living community of man". (p.36).

A key point in this argument is that the community system represents an integration of the relatively objective factors of the economic infrastructure with the fulfilment of important social needs. Thus, as Zimmerman and Moneo point out (pp. 21-23), a linear projection of the survival of small Prairie communities, based upon the development of modern transportation since 1910, would have indicated the almost complete disappearance of small communities by the present time. Instead, small communities have demonstrated remarkable persistence, even after they have lost most of their economic functions.

A systems perspective in social policy-making, which stresses functional inter-relationships rather than the peculiarities of individual communities, has two central implications. First, since the welfare of the total system is a basic consideration, it does not deny that some communities may be dysfunctional for the system, and that efforts to maintain them may therefore be misguided. Second, and relatedly, it emphasizes the need to assess with care the potential impact of any interventions on the

functioning of the system, and to design interventions accordingly.

The first of these implications is not clearly addressed in Zimmerman and Moneo's study. In common with much recent rural sociological writing, the study stresses the second implication, particularly the argument that the rural socio-economic system has been increasingly disrupted by policy interventions which reflect a centralization of social policy-making in urban areas. To the degree that social policy-making is centralized in more densely populated areas, it will reflect a lack of awareness of the particular conditions and needs in less densely populated areas. It will also tend to deal with those areas in a universalistic manner which, by definition, involves a reliance upon "objective" data.

Little evidence of a systems approach was apparent in the rural school closures examined in this study. Instead, "survival of the fittest" seemed more characteristic of the existing situation, with declining student population figuring as a scarce resource invoking political competition, rather than as a problem having applicability to the total system. This is not to say that planning for school closure is completely unsystematic, but intentionally or otherwise, interventions such as the placement of educational facilities or the redistribution of students owing to school closure appear invariably to favour the "fittest" communities, as defined in objective terms of relative size and prosperity, rather than in terms of the possible contributions of communities to the welfare of the total system. "Listening" to small communities may therefore be important, and as this discussion has suggested, such listening necessarily involves acceptance of the validity of relatively subjective forms of data.

The issue of educational quality: fundamentally political

The second major theme in rural community protest concerns the presumed "quality" of education in small rural schools as opposed to that available in towns. This issue reveals that in rural systems it is not simply a matter of small hinterland communities unanimously opposing urban-oriented policies which threaten community survival. Opposition to "urban" policies also involves denial of "urban" opportunities, and in this study, community protest against school closure and the transfer of students to larger, more comprehensive town schools was associated with bitter controversy within the community itself.

The controversy regarding educational quality was associated in particular with the closure of high school grades in K-12 schools located in small communities within reasonable busing distance of high schools in towns. Community members protesting

the loss of what had been regarded as the community high school argued for educational "quality" in a manner closely reflecting arguments in the literature supportive of small schools (e.g., Barker and Gump, 1964; Sher and Tompkins, 1976). These arguments included the presumably greater personal attention available to students; the opportunities for student involvement and leadership experiences; and the closeness of contact between students and the community. There was also the related belief that a community-centered education promotes loyalty and service to the community, and a concern for the retention of moral values. According to one brief, for example,

The intangibles are better absorbed in smaller groups.
Good morals are controlled better in smaller
communities.

More objectively, the arguments of the opponents of closure claimed that the academic quality of small school education, as assessed by student performance on standardized tests or by the future progress of students, is not inferior to the quality of education available in larger schools.

At the same time, the availability of a clearly superior range of educational options and facilities in town schools introduces almost a moral dilemma into communities, with opponents of transfer on the one hand appearing to deny these opportunities to the children of the community, and supporters of transfer on the other hand appearing to deny opportunity for those community-centered educational experiences which presumably help to insure community identity and survival.

...for those of us who live "on the doorstep" of the highly-recognized institution of secondary education that "X" Comprehensive School is, we are, I feel, negligent in our duty to our children if we DO NOT take advantage of it... There was a time when the form of education offered by our small schools was adequate, but we are well past that era now and we are forced, if we act in the interests of the children's futures, to accept progress and the good things it has to offer.

(Parent's letter to local newspaper)

In one community, controversy reflecting this dilemma had reached a stage clearly illustrating Coleman's description (1957, p.11) of social conflict polarization, where "people break off long-standing relationships, stop speaking to former friends who have been drawn to the opposition, but proliferate their associations with fellow partisans." (Indeed, even relatives in this community had stopped speaking to one another.) It does not

seem necessary to elaborate the point that school authorities may enjoy a strategic leverage as the result of such divisions.

But the outstanding feature of the educational quality issue in school closure conflict is that it is clearly a debate about the wrong issue. Since achieving a consensus based upon objective measures of quality seems just as unlikely as achieving a consensus about the consequences of closure for community survival, the question of quality must be regarded essentially as a question of providing certain educational alternatives which are supported only by minority interests in the school system. The focus on "quality", in other words, evades a fundamental political issue. It maintains the debate on a level where professional interpretations of quality in terms of apparently objective attributes - namely resources and programs seem most likely to prevail.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to deal with an issue that from one perspective may appear to be unimportant because it seems part of an inevitable process of socio-economic development and demographic change in rural, agricultural areas. According to normal and even liberal standards of efficiency and fiscal responsibility, many small rural schools have little to justify their existence. Nor does the retention of schools characteristic of an earlier era of multi-graded, country schools appear to be justifiable by current standards of educational quality and opportunity. While special qualities may be claimed for such schools, campaigns to preserve rural institutions which have "obviously lost their utility", as Biddle and Biddle remark (1965, p.165-166), are "frequently supported by some variant of the Rural Mystique," and "represent futile reactions, attempts to cling to power privileges when the kind of life for which these were appropriate has passed, or, is passing."

As this paper has suggested, however, a "mystique" may also be present in this line of reasoning, if it is assumed that "utility" can somehow be objectively measured and that observable evidence of decline thereby constitutes a predictive theory of decline. While resort to a systems perspective also fails to provide any definitive measures of the utility of rural institutions, it does have the advantage of requiring that decision-making interventions assume a responsibility for creating scenarios for the future of rural institutions and communities. One can only conclude that in cases of rural school closure this responsibility is currently far from sufficiently exercised, whether in applying information or in discussing the issues.

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