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We Have Never Been Urban: Modernization, Small Schools, and Resilient Rurality in Atlantic Canada

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Abstract

This article considers some educational implications of resilient rurality in Nova Scotia, a province in eastern Canada. By Statistics Canada definitions, the province contains more than double the national percentage of rural residents, a figure that has not changed very much since the 1950s when rural school consolidation and other “modernization” schemes began in earnest. This resilient rurality is typically constructed in a metrocentric deficit perspective as a marker of underdevelopment and inevitable population decline and decay. I argue that subsequent educational reform initiatives have generally supported the closure of rural schools and have not significantly considered their effectiveness and potential to support strength-based rural development policy and social justice.

Keywords: rural education, history of education, development, Nova Scotia

1.0 Introduction

In this article I sketch a brief and admittedly idiosyncratic history of rural education in the province of Nova Scotia on the east coast of Canada. Nova Scotia is, by Canadian standards, substantially rural with 43% of the population meeting Statistics Canada criteria for rural residence. The Canadian average is approximately 19% (Government of Canada, 2014a). Nova Scotia is also relatively disadvantaged economically with average family incomes well below the Canadian average, and as much as 37% below those of Canada’s most prosperous provinces and territories (Government of Canada, 2014b). In an important sense, Canada is a spatial construction that hides multiple geographic differences and rather radical differences in wealth. The lack of a national education system or even a national ministry of education also highlights regional and provincial/territorial differences.

The general point of this article is to analyze the development of a coordinated system of educational programming organized by the state through a Canadian rural lens. As such, education represents one of the core activities of the state itself and one that is supported by other forms of infrastructure which have grown up to support and compliment the education system. In Canadian rural communities, the reality of geography and historic resource extraction economies has created a particular configuration of relatively isolated rural schools, linked by transportation and communication infrastructure (Innis, 1950). Many Canadian rural communities remain caught up in national and regional imaginaries and essences that complicate persistent problems and cultural, economic and social development.

Nova Scotia is the nationally anomalous, but regionally normal, case (within Atlantic Canada) of a province that effectively failed to modernize and urbanize the way that other Canadian provinces did. I wish to use the metaphor of the school bus to illustrate the way that rural schools in Nova Scotia were transformed through the development of transportation infrastructure, when in the 1950s and 60s village elementary schools were replaced by centralized consolidated elementary facilities and by a network of regional and rural high schools. These policy initiatives created a new provincial geography of education that reflected the rural population in the 1950s. The modernization of the province's educational system was later supported by the development of an educational bureaucracy that grew up to both respond to and to encourage the expansion of franchise to formerly marginalized populations, including those in rural areas. By the late 1980s though, the fiscal crisis of the state and the establishment of neoliberal ideologies led to a restructuring of state schooling on a global scale (Spring, 2008).

I conclude by arguing that by reviving the metaphor of the school bus and recasting it in modern terms as *The Magic School Bus* (drawing on a popular children's series about a school bus that travels through time and space), it might be possible to imagine contemporary small, rural schools as vibrant educational sites that are crucial to the prosperity of their communities and high quality schools for children. Just as the development of the paved road system from the 1930s to the 1960s created the conditions for modern schooling, so too might the development of accessible broadband and contemporary and emerging communication technologies be creating the conditions for a form of postmodern rural schooling closer to home.

2.0 Mobility, Consolidation and the Arrival of the School Bus

There was a time when it was simply assumed that communities needed schools that children could (theoretically) attend when they were able. Through most of the 19th and early parts of the 20th century as communities developed, schools were constructed across an uneven geography (Davey, 1978; Gaffield, 1987; Wilson et al, 1970). This geography was uneven in terms of the vastness of physical space in Canada and the nature of historic resource industries that developed in different geophysical regions of the country, but also in terms of the uneven social geography of an urbanizing nation. Rather than imagining a linear sense of educational progress where the "system" uniformly modernizes through time, a Bakhtinian conception of chronotope (Compton-Lilly, 2014) can help us imagine differently located places changing in more or less unique ways through time. Here, space is mutable and dynamic, and places have particular histories and transforming, dynamic geographies.

The province of Nova Scotia in eastern Canada provides an example of a jurisdiction where rurality was more than small-scale agricultural operations. The province also included a highly mobile and cosmopolitan 19th and early 20th century carrier trade, industrial communities, coastal villages dependent on the small-boat fishery, mining communities, and logging and milling operations in communities of varying size. Furthermore, from at least the 1930s, there existed an economically and culturally important tourist industry. The social geography of the province was also divided ethnically and racially, and in terms of gender and space was organized around established geographic and institutional

inclusions and exclusions that have only been systematically contested on a broad scale in the past few decades (McKay, 1994; McKay & Bates, 2010).

This history and geography established a network of communities both similar and different in structure and character, all of which required schools (Corbett, 2001; Harris, 1997; Bennett, 2011). In Halifax, and in the province's large towns, schools were established both by the Catholic Church and as publicly funded schools. While Halifax and the large towns had academies and the province's prototypical high schools, the situation in rural Nova Scotia was significantly different. As rural communities grew and then declined, so too did their small schools. While Bennett (2011) has begun to build on spotty historical information about rural schools in the province, the history of the provision of education in rural Nova Scotia is yet to be written. What is clear though is that rural schools in Nova Scotia were institutions that were effectively forced to fit in with the social, agricultural, industrial, and geographic challenges of a largely resource-based economic and social structure. There is ample historical evidence that in rural Canada, schooling was a rather haphazard affair until after World War II (Owram, 1997; McCann, 1982; Corbett, 2004, 2007).

By the 1920s educational historian Neil Sutherland (1976) argues the fundamental structure of the modern Canadian education system was established. Canadian educational historian Doug Owram (1997) agrees with the outlines of this argument and claims that the majority of Canadian youth were expected to get into high school by the 1950s. They were expected to reach high school and finish, if they were able given the particular challenges faced by differently inclined individuals in differently resourced communities. Of course, there were still a lot of reasons why they might not be able and the importance of the social and physical geography of a child's home place made all the difference. For instance, out of the group of 30 children I started school with at St Charles Catholic School in Amherst in 1964, only about half of us were still in school by graduation in 1976.

I have argued in some of my own writings that many established historical accounts of the development of Canadian education contain a significant urban bias and that the idea that a young person would continue in school even until the beginning of high school was not well established in many part of rural Canada until the 1980s and 1990s (Corbett, 2001, 2009). To this day, I would argue further, this task of "selling" postsecondary education and even secondary schooling remains deeply challenging in many rural communities.

The infrastructure for the modernization of rural Nova Scotia was laid during the 1930s in the depths of the Great Depression. When Angus L. Macdonald became premier of the province in 1933, Nova Scotia, like the rest of the Western world, was in the throws of the Great Depression. And, like other progressive politicians of his day, Macdonald mobilized the levers of government to establish the province's first social programs. He also commissioned the building of hundreds of miles of road, transforming and linking previously isolated places. The point is that this paved road system provided the transportation link also made it possible for rural children and youth to attend school on a regular basis creating the conditions for what was understood as the modernization of the education system.

One of Macdonald's principal development dreams was that tourism would become a major industry built on what he and other key cultural intellectuals narrowly saw as the Anglo-European heritage of Nova Scotia (McKay, 1994; McKay and Bates, 2010). In order for tourism to develop in this vision, the province needed both a dominant cultural narrative and good, paved roads. Through the 1950s, Macdonald's cultural attaché Will R. Bird published a series of travel books that guided the motor tourist through the highways and byways of the province. *This is Nova Scotia* (Bird, 1950), *These are the Maritimes* (Bird, 1959), *Off Trail in Nova Scotia* (Bird, 1956), are all classics of their genre, and while they were aimed at American and central Canadian tourist audiences, they were also immensely popular with Nova Scotians themselves, who celebrated and sometimes took on the constructed simple and unaffected, rustic persona of the fiddle players, prosaic small farmers, and coastal fisherfolk. We still see this in provincial tourist literature. Indeed the province's license plates (*Canada's Ocean Playground*) still herald the province as a place to play and get away from the stresses of modernity, a theme which resonates in Atlantic Canadian tourism promoters today (Kelly, 2013).

Paved roads also created the conditions for the first serious wave of school consolidation, because they permitted the safe and reasonably reliable bussing of children in rural Nova Scotia. Beginning in the mid 1950s, hundreds of village schools were closed in favour of newly constructed consolidated schools. The first was the closing of hundreds of village schools and the construction of consolidated elementary schools into which students were bussed. The province also undertook an ambitious modernization project in the construction of rural high schools in central locations, into which rural youth would be bussed creating the conditions for the theoretical availability of high school graduation to virtually everyone.

These two initial themes, mobility and consolidation have worked in tandem to both move schools further away from where children live, while at the same time shrinking the isolation of rural villages through increased mobility. The ultimate effect has been what some contemporary geographers call the shrinking of space. These two trends initiated by Macdonald's road-building schemes, have continued to evolve ever since. The vast network of rural schools that the province had a generation ago has been reduced to a relatively small number of consolidated schools.

3.0 Bureaucratization and Expanding Franchise

Through the 1950s and 60s, the education system expanded to meet the needs of the post war baby boom and the equally pressing needs of a modernizing society with a more differentiated division of labour. By the 1950s, the balance had tipped and most Canadians were now living in urban areas, reversing the hegemony of the rural, which had been established since the founding of the nation. Urbanization and social, geographic, and economic change generated the conditions for the expansion of new vocational and higher education institutions. What reformers accomplished in the 1930s and 40s in terms of harnessing the levers of the state to mitigate the effects of the Great Depression and the war effort was only the beginning.

By the 1970s, both nationally and provincially, government had become an employer of major consequence, in fact more important than any other. The state

expanded to include elaborated health, social welfare, educational, corrections, and a range of other public services including those responsible for maintaining and expanding paved road network. Indeed, Canadian society is now significantly defined by the expanse and work of the bureaucratic state. What this has meant for rural education is that new structures of authority have steadily grown up around small community schools. The schools themselves have been subsumed into wider governance bodies and local control of education has passed into history. There have been experiments with public schools in some places to return control to the local level, but these have generally either failed or ended up creating chaos and inequity greater than the chaos and inequity they were supposed to fix. The most successful experiments in local control have come in the form of private schools that have never had to worry about the problem of equity and serving all children and youth.

The construction of rural high schools and the consolidation of elementary schools created the conditions for the expectation by the early 1960s, that all children will at least reach high school. Nevertheless, this general expectation has not actually been met in all Canadian communities. In other words, time did not take care of the problem of what came to be called the “dropout” phenomenon. By the 1990s, though analysis revealed that there were still many young people who left school well before graduation creating what Kelly and Gaskell (1996) characterized as “moral panic”. Ironically, the problem appeared to be particularly acute in those places where there is a vibrant economy. For instance, Canada’s wealthiest province Alberta persistently registered the lowest provincial graduation rates in the country through the 1990s and 2000s (Statistics Canada, 2012, pp. 35-40).

It is well known that educational outcomes are inflected by spatial inequality. It is not just rural youth who were discovered to be struggling in schools. By the 1960s it was becoming clear that schools did not serve all populations in the same way. For instance, while it is true that nationally Canada produces relatively high and equitable educational results (Perry & McConney, 2013), aboriginal children and youth (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2012) as well as African Canadian children and youth (Dei & Kempf, 2013; Thiessen, 2009), and children of anglo-European descent growing up in socially excluded working class communities, (Corbett, 2007) had relatively poor outcomes in the system. Few graduated and racism, classism, and gendered educational trajectories were normal at all levels of the system. Despite legislation to integrate schools in the province in 1954, Nova Scotia’s last segregated school for African Nova Scotians closed nearly 30 years later in 1983 (Hamilton, 2007). In addition, the scars from residential schooling of aboriginal children and youth are still felt today as the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigating residential school abuse has once again demonstrated (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2014). When these identifiable populations were allowed to attend integrated schools, they were often marginalized or even abused to the point where they left the system or were systematically tracked into the lowest streams (Lyon et al, 2014; Phillips, 2011).

One of the most significant accomplishments of the sociology of education in the last 50 years has been to systematically and persistently raise questions about who gets to finish school and who does not. Sociological work and, probably more importantly, the work of activists in different racialized communities or other

communities of disadvantage have led to a significant change in the way we now see access to education. The expansion of franchise is the idea that quality schooling should be available to all children. Equity is the recognition that access to education is unequal, so by operating a system that assumes equality, the divisions between people only become deeper. We need therefore to offer additional support to historically disadvantaged populations in order to give everyone an equal shot at a good education.

In order to create modern schools that would take up the problem of equity or the expansion of franchise, a more complex and differentiated system of education would be needed. This has led to the second theme I want to take up here—the bureaucratization of the educational system. When the “system” promised little to underserved populations the administrative delivery apparatus could be relatively small. Until the 1960s, the Nova Scotia Department of Education was a small shop, parochial schools still educated a significant proportion of the province’s children, and the teaching force was only marginally professional and largely drawn from what George Perry (2013) describes as an “unending supply” of young unmarried women. When the idea that all children should be educated and that it was the responsibility of the state significant coordination was required. The special education movement which promoted the education of children who are intellectually or developmentally different also the resulted in the expansion of the educational bureaucracy.

In conjunction with the expansion of franchise came the realization that the work of teaching always was complex, but now with expanded expectations for equity it became clear that a new kind of teacher was needed to do the work. This new teacher was in one sense a specialist within the educational bureaucracy, but at the same time she was also a professional who needed to have a lot of foundational knowledge as well as the expertise to make very complex judgments about programming and the education of all children and not just some imagined “normal” child. This led to the professionalization of teaching and the movement of teacher education into the universities where other forms of highly skilled professional work had already located their educational operations (Perry, 2013). The work of teaching has become increasingly complex and the demands on teachers have continued to mount since the early 1960s.

At the same time, teacher professionalism also supported their unionization and solidarity as an economic group in Nova Scotian society, creating an uneasy settlement between the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union (NSTU), the provincial educational bureaucracies, school boards, and the changing landscape of political administrations (Poole, 1999; Nova Scotia Teachers Union, 2001). It also needs to be mentioned that the mobility, consolidation, and bureaucratization has led through the 1980s and 1990s to the amalgamation of educational jurisdictions from hundreds of local and district boards to just a handful of regional schools boards. What we can see emerging as late as the 1980s in many rural areas and in communities of disadvantage, is what historian Bruce Curtis (1988) called the education state. What he means by this is the coordinated multi-service operation that today attempts to deliver an equitable education to every child. The education state not only responds to the educational needs of the population, it also generates new knowledge about that population and how it articulates and compares with populations elsewhere.

In the case of Atlantic Canada though, modernization and the urbanization and capital formation that accompanies it has never really arrived. The four Atlantic provinces remain national anomalies retaining levels of rural population that are essentially unchanged from the 1950s when the rural-urban balance tipped in favour of urban communities across Canada. In the case of Atlantic Canada there has been a failure to launch and we have, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, “been urban.” Latour (1993) argues that the unfinished project of modernization remains illusive. His provocative claim is that, “we have never been modern”, and he argues that persistent scientific and bureaucratic efforts to standardize analytic and administrative procedures have met equally persistent resistance undertaken by resilient populations (Scott, 1999) and discourses (Latour & Porter, 2013) that effectively reject and refute efforts to manage them. In the story of educational modernization in Nova Scotia, there is one more theme to explore, that of fiscal crisis and data fixation.

4.0 The Dropout Panic, the Fiscal Crisis of the State and Educational Restructuring: The Metaphysics of Measurement

If the 1960s and 70s were about the expansion of the education state, the 1980s and 90s were about its contraction, and like the other trends I have described above it is a master trend that has never gone away. I will call this the fiscal crisis of the state (O’Connor, 1973), or the problem of declining government revenues and increasing government expenditures. This challenge has been met ideologically on a global scale by neoconservative and neoliberal reforms that have challenged the stability of the Western post-war social settlements that effectively created the activist state and generated increasing social inequality (Piketty, 2014). In Canada, a series of federal administrations beginning with the latter years of the Trudeau administration in the late 1970s and early 1980s and carrying on through the current administration have cut back the scope of social programs and transfers to the provinces. In the context of rural Nova Scotia the fiscal crisis of the state has been used as a rationale for deeper consolidation and cutback of school and other services governance. In a province that has never significantly urbanized, this has caused persistent difficulty for small rural communities (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014).

The fiscal crisis of the state is located in an understanding of globalization that positions resource-dependent countries like Canada in competition with low wage third world economies for manufacturing and resource extraction jobs. Part of the argument is that since we can’t compete with places like China and India in terms of wages, we have to work smarter rather than working harder in the ways we always have done. This has led since the 1990s to a renewed emphasis on schools and education as generators of “human capital” necessary to drive a postindustrial high-wage post-industrial economy (Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004). It has also led to support of a vision of economic development that further marginalizes rural communities which are positioned as places that are in decline, dependent on “sunset industries”, and which, in the words of University of Toronto sociologist Richard Florida (2002; 2004), lack the presence of a mobile “creative class” of socially diverse and entrepreneurial urban knowledge workers. This general ideology has supported the removal of services from rural communities and renewed older calls for outmigration, a phenomenon the economists call “labour market adjustment.” This analysis echoes older neo-classical economic

arguments about rural-urban migration in which the national labour market is “adjusted” by depopulating rural places (Courchene, 1970).

In tandem, business interests have become very concerned with schools. Ever since the Conference Board of Canada (1992) came out with its “employability skills profile” and The Corporate Higher Education Forum (1992) articulated its “learning goals” for Canadian education, the die was cast. The definition of standardized outcomes and accountability metrics instituted managerial systems and processes throughout the nation’s educational governance bodies and schools, redefining teacher professionalism and the fundamental relationship between a school and its community as well as the nature of teachers’ work (Robertson, 2000). So as the federal and provincial state is called into question around its accounting, metrics are simultaneously established to gauge the effectiveness of the schools. By the middle of the 1990s, a new structure for the province’s school curriculum was put in place using what came to be called an outcome-based education model. Standardized assessments of various sorts have also emerged to support the management by measurement movement. We now operate schools in the context of what I will call a metaphysics of measurement. What I mean here is that the effectiveness of schools has come to be defined largely in terms of performance on standardized assessments. Educational quality discussions have been subsumed in this discourse space by performative quantitative accounting procedures.

The creation and implementation of allegedly objective measurement tools further distances people in communities from what is going on in schools, and assessment becomes a question of comparing children who come from diverse geographies, cultures, and social circumstances in terms of a common metric (Luke, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, individualistic subjectivities (Giddens, 1990, Dillabough, 2009) and the establishment of multi-level global educational markets (Ball, 2012). This has particular consequences for rural children (Corbett, 2008, 2009; Shelton, 2005). No longer are teachers and parents encouraged and expected to judge whether or not a child is reading well or understanding math. These things are determined by tests that are often constructed by distant experts. This tends to cause the work of teaching to shift from a unique personal engagement with people in place to a more depersonalized, technical enterprise that involves the development of expertise within the framework of what is measured. To put it simply, a lot of teachers, parents and children themselves, not to mention education officials, become very focused on improving test scores and the metaphysics of measurement elevates test performance to a theodicy (Bourdieu, 1984).

There is a lot to be said here, but what is important for this discussion is that rural people who live in small communities in places like Nova Scotia, that have suffered depopulation, are, on the whole, at an economic disadvantage to urban places. Poverty is concentrated in particular spaces in Nova Scotia some of which are in urban. The general tendency though is for rural communities to have lower levels of income than urban places. For instance, median family income in urban-adjacent Lunenburg County is about 10% below the provincial average¹. When it comes to educational attainment, about 10% fewer residents of Lunenburg

¹ All data cited for Nova Scotia county income and educational attainment is drawn from Nova Scotia Community Counts, Community Profiles series. These data can be accessed at: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/communitycounts/profiles/community/default.asp>

County aged 20 and over, have a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree. For rural-remote Digby County, where I worked as a teacher for about 15 years, the median family income is about 20% below the provincial median. The same pattern holds in Digby as well, where around 25% fewer residents over age 20 have a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree vis-à-vis the provincial average. I can do essentially the same thing with the Canadian provinces showing how Ontario and Alberta, which are 20-25% richer in terms of median family income, score better than predominantly rural provinces. Indeed, the relative rurality of the Atlantic provinces seems to be strongly related to the relative poverty of the region and sub-regions within the provinces themselves, which can be framed as either a symptom of metrocentric policy or alternatively as a problem in itself which can only be cured by urbanization. This is the sort of question critiqued in much of the rural development literature, and how we take it up is crucial to ecological sustainability (Green & Corbett, 2013; Krause, 2013).

Quantification obviously has its place. Through quantitative analysis, for instance, we now know that parental income, social position, and education have more of an impact on academic achievement and educational attainment than anything else. And the fact is that children growing up in small rural communities of Nova Scotia are less likely to have economic stability and parents who have been successful in the education system. If instrumental neoliberal logic is all that we are able to employ here to understand and respond to rural educational problems, we reach a dead-end. Alternatively, in different times and places there have been rural revitalization movements that have led to population movements back to the country. In fact, it is not so difficult to imagine a serious and coordinated government/business campaign to attract people to rural Nova Scotia.

We cannot wait around for such a campaign to emerge, there are present and pressing problems of rural welfare at stake in the rural schools debate nested as it is within the other trends I have been writing about above including the fiscal crisis of the state. I think the real debate around small rural schools ought to be about whether or not disadvantaged children are better served in small local schools. A corollary debate concerns the consequences of removing a school from a community that has been battered by the consequences of the foregoing trends that I have addressed above, mobility, consolidation, the fiscal crisis of the state, and the metaphysics of measurement.

5.0 The Magic School Bus: Ubiquitous Networks and Small Rural Schools

There is one more trend that I want to point to and I think it is one that may help us reorient the debate if we think creatively. If the development of the modern transportation system and paved roads helped to shrink space from the 1950s, the advent of the telephone and on to modern networked communication technologies has had a similar effect. I call this ubiquitous networking. Most of us, including those of us living rurally, have now been drawn into a matrix of virtual networks that compliment and enhance the physical networks represented by roads.

As a result, the world has become smaller and larger at the same time. Over the last decade we have reached a point where many rural residents can access the world from the most rural of locations in Nova Scotia. This has the potential to expand horizons, and in certain ways it already has. It also has the potential to make it possible to learn a great deal in just about any place we choose. One interpretation

of this is that we no longer need physical meeting places for children like schools. I think we still do, and I think it undermines the welfare of rural children, youth, and communities if schools are closed. But whether or not the schools we might imagine look like the ones we have today is worth considering.

In the administrative discourse around rural school closure there is often an aura of inevitability. Schools must close because we can no longer afford them. Or alternatively, it is unfair to devote so many resources to so few people. If our telephone or road service were constructed that way, a lot of the province's communities would have withered and died. And indeed, there were some places, like the hamlet of Victory in Annapolis County, that were depopulated in the 1940s with electrification only to be repopulated and rebuilt by 'back-to-the-landers' in the 1970s. People will move into the most unlikely places and past rural revivals have illustrated this well. The fact that nearly 45% of Nova Scotians still live in rural places in the face of the powerful forces like mobility, consolidation, the fiscal crisis, and bureaucratization compelling them into urban areas, demonstrates the resilience of rural communities. These communities have been sustained in large measure for the last 40 or 50 years by: (a) highly mobile, deployable 'reserve army' industrial workers shuttling in and out of areas of capital concentration around the world, but particularly in central and western Canada; (b) 'bohemians', global travellers, and urban retirees seeking peace and natural beauty; (c) former migrants returning to family and the imaginary homelands of their youth. It is precisely because they have always been sites of multiple forms of mobile life and work that rural communities have remained resilient.

Rural decline is not inevitable. In England and in Scandinavia for instance, keeping services in rural places is understood to be a question of equity (Hargreaves, 2009, Kvalsund, 2009). I think in this discussion we are well served by returning to ideas about the expansion of franchise, which led to the inclusive schools we have today; schools where all children are expected to attend and graduate. In the face of persistent arguments around the permanent fiscal crisis of the state and neoliberal solutions to this crisis, there are equally persistent arguments about a fundamental level of service that all citizens deserve. As the federal state has retreated from regional wealth redistribution and stable funding to support core services, shrinking provincial bureaucracies and school boards have been forced to figure out how to survive with less. These local politicians are indeed in a bind and it is a bind that will ultimately be solved politically through activist social policy and progressive taxation policy (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2013).

Ubiquitous networking can help unleash some of the pent-up creativity in rural places (Corbett, 2013). Schools have not always been quick to embrace new technologies and the geography of schools with talking teachers, desks in rows, and classrooms along barren corridors has been remarkably resilient unlike most other public buildings. Schools change slowly, but they do change. There is change, but it is slow and inertia is great, and there is a deeply-rooted perception that schooling as usual provides safety (Corbett, 2010). It took decades for the school bus, a core transportation technology to recreate schools as dispersed centralized big box operations.

Is it possible for us to imagine our rural communities as places that deserve to be supported as key assets rather than as liabilities? What are the tourism, niche agriculture, and ecological possibilities for beautiful and potentially productive places like much of rural Nova Scotia? We are so busy thinking about how to get

rural youth out of their allegedly dying communities that little thought is given to the possibility that urban children might have something to learn from encounters in the countryside. More than a century ago John Dewey dreamed of an education that would teach children about the material and intellectual foundation of their current living conditions. Is it possible to imagine educational programming for instance that would introduce urban and suburban children to the rural places and processes that provide the food, fibre, and raw materials for the world in which they live? Such an initiative could revitalize small rural schools and given them a new lease on life. Rather than bussing rural children to the city, why not bus urban children to the country? For generations, this is exactly what summer camps have done. There is no doubt that many parents are worried today about a range of issues from food security to childhood obesity, to a generation of cyber-kids who would benefit from rich, authentic engagements with nature and animals. And how might networked communication and information technologies transform rural schools, which can be relatively under-resourced in terms of technological infrastructure, connectivity and resources? Such a perspective might allow to support schools closer to home for rural citizens rather than further away. Can the networked computer reel in the school busses, or at least some of them and keep more small rural schools open and contributing to their communities? Small rural schools can often serve as locations for the kind of curriculum that place-sensitive educators (Greenwood & Smith, 2007; Greenwood, 2009) have been promoting for decades drawing on what Gonzales et al. (2005) call diverse, culturally located “funds of knowledge” not easily integrated into the standardized and quantifiable metaphysics of measurement.

Today we are better connected, our teachers are better educated, and most of our children now complete high school (although it takes some longer than we would like). We are also more flexible in our life paths, for better or worse. Youth are no longer consigned to the fate of their parents, their racialized identities, their gender, and their social class at least not in the same way that they once were. Bussing children great distances to school is one of those practices that relies on cheap energy. Food security issues could also cause a revival and a repopulation of rural Canada as we come to rely less on food transported to us from far-flung points on the globe, a practice that is questionable in terms of its sustainability. Finally, some rural communities throughout the western world have become cultural micro-meccas attracting artists, craftspeople, niche-agriculture (the wine industry and its touristic spinoffs is an obvious example) and entrepreneurs. In all of the discourse about the creative class and the knowledge economy, we have often missed the way that knowledge and creative work has been developing in rural places (Corbett, 2006; Government of Nova Scotia, 2014; Huggins & Clifton, 2011; Stolarick et al, 2010; Thomas et al, 2013). By the same token, rural policy has tended to remain fixated on traditional agricultural and resource extraction industries which are important, but which employ fewer and fewer people as time goes on (Bell, 2010; Woods, 2010).

The picture can be seen as a crisis. But need it be? I like to think of the possibilities that each of these transformations has opened up. As I have pointed out, the professionalization of teaching has given us better teachers who work very hard to realize the dreams of Martin Luther King, and Canadian social reformers like Nellie McClung, Tommy Douglas, and all those thousands of others who have pressed for the expansion of franchise in diverse national contexts and at the

global level. There are also less well known rural advocates like Kirkpatrick Sale, Wendell Berry, Paul Theobald, Craig and Aimee Howley, Bill Reimer, and Rebecca Solnit. These rural activists and educators are not household names (with the possible exception of Berry) because we have not yet managed to make the protection of services in rural communities into questions of equity. Indeed, influential environmental activists such David Suzuki and Bill McKibben can be read as rural activists as well.

On a global scale Canadian education is much admired. While there is always work to do, I do not think we should be ashamed of the system we have in a largely rural place like Nova Scotia. As I argue elsewhere (Corbett, 2008, 2014), educational performance on comparative and other kinds of standardized tests is largely a reflection of relative family wealth. Nova Scotia is about 25% poorer than Alberta in terms of family income, but still provincial scores on the latest international assessment of student reading, math and science were about 3% below Alberta. It is possible to argue that Nova Scotia is actually over-performing given its relative economic challenges. Maybe it is our small rural schools that allow us to perform as well as we do? We could use the metaphysics of quantification to answer more interesting questions than comparing the ‘performance’ of grades 3 and 6 children and that of their schools to one another it seems to me.

Even the fiscal crisis of the state, the now permanent crisis of government (and in the United States of the economy itself) can be a catalyst for creative, innovative, and improvisational thinking about schools. I say this with a bit of trepidation, because the educational experimentation of the past couple of decades in the US and in the UK has been uninspiring at best, and frightening at worst. It is probably the case that we will have to learn to share services and figure out ways to consolidate some things, but this does not necessarily mean that we ought to follow the example of the railways by closing all the stations and pulling up the tracks for good. There is value in having a public building devoted to learning in a community that brings people together on a common footing.

One of the things I do is organize graduate programs at Acadia University where I work. One of these is a program that works with doctors, dentists, nurses, and other health professionals to improve teaching practice in health education and medical schools. After finishing a program with us one of the most common feedback comments was that in the classroom everyone was on the same footing. Doctors, administrators, nurses, dental hygienists, and other health interprofessionals, all met each other as equals and everybody learned about themselves from the experience. I think this is school at its best and I think every community needs a nonhierarchical place for learning.

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