

Educational Priorities and Capacity:
A Summary of Research on Rural Education in Manitoba
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Introduction

Rural communities have become peripheral to the world economy, and have been marginalized and/or made vulnerable by ongoing events of resource degradation, out-migration, administrative neglect, and other processes. In their immediate environments, we see the effects of globalization, be they on trade, labour relations, regulatory control, or governmental rules and guidelines (Lutz & Neis, in press). In fact, their circumstances teach us, through their social values and economic actions, “to question the wisdom of market logic and governments’ unremitting policies of urbanization” (Ommer & Turner, 2004, cited in Harris, 2006, p. 163).

In education, the effects of these policies/ideologies engender school reform efforts that essentialize schooling across contexts, for reasons that do not always reflect local purposes, interests and/or capacities (Howley, 1997), in the name of provincial, national and/or global interests. In fact, school improvement efforts have been criticized as paying insufficient attention to context, especially in terms of racial, class, gender and urban/rural differences (Hatcher, 1998; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Regarding the Manitoba context, Henley and Young (2002) have stated, “the concerns of urban Winnipeg have often overshadowed those of the rural areas of the province” in school reform, even if, as they suggest, “the city has never achieved hegemonic domination over them” (p. 322). Given the current educational climate, however, it may be time to question whether the hegemonic domination of urban (and or urbanizing) concerns in policy and practice at the provincial level has become the norm.

The policy background that has underpinned the globalization/urbanization movement has created issues for rural settings that run contrary to the *K-S4 Agenda’s* claim of educational excellence: isolation from specialized services (Cheney & Demchak, 2001); limited accessibility to quality staff development and university services (Hodges, 2002); teacher shortages especially in key areas of math and science (Lemke & Harrison, 2002) with little hope in recruiting new teachers who wish to live in larger metropolitan areas (Ralph, 2002); decreasing enrolments which leads to a decrease in funding (Ralph, 2002), a declining pool of qualified administrative candidates (Waddle & Buchanan, 2002) often due to little administrative support and an overburdening of community expectations, serious issues regarding recruitment and retention of student services (Wallin, 2006), and school closure (Carlson, 2002).

In fact, such issues ensure that rural communities become innovative out of necessity. Contrary to stereotypical views of rural communities as “backward,” leadership in those rural communities that envision a future “embraces exploration, openness to new ideas, respect for traditions (social and of the physical and natural environment), and a desire for learning” (Harris, 2006, p. 162). As the formal centers of learning, and often as the largest employer in the community, schools become the heart and symbol of community identity. Unfortunately, their policy and legislative environments lead to tensions between rural priorities/lifestyles and urbanizing/essentializing agendas. As the public and symbolic leaders of school divisions, superintendents and school boards often face dilemmas between managing standardized (and standardizing) provincial requirements and responding to very different local community interests and needs.

Haas & Lambert (1995) suggest that rural school improvements that are genuinely “rural” (a) are grounded in a sense of place; (b) value outcomes arising from individual situations rather than predetermined, specified results; (c) invite contributions from those who are usually marginalized in community development and reform efforts; (d) are systemic, comprehensive, long-term, multifaceted, and; (e) are grounded in and energized by a moral stance of rural communities and schools strengthening themselves. In order to address the effects of policies that have marginalized rural areas, there is significance in finding “a new way of thinking about government finances that examines the real situation of women’s and men’s lives, and includes a majority of citizens...in the decisions which shape policies, set priorities, and meet the social and economic needs of all citizens” (Bakker, 2006, p. 2). Rural educational stakeholders are well aware of how educational priorities are related to each other, and how the intricacies of the ways in which education is funded and governed, decisions are made, and communication is managed may reflect on the leadership of the division and the quality of the educational experience the school division is able to provide. Education cannot be separated from the economic and demographic realities of community life, even though the artificial separation exists in provincial educational, economic, and demographic policy. Since the threads entwining the school division and its communities are inseparable, any means of addressing the educational needs of rural school divisions must also address the needs of the communities they serve. It would seem obvious, then, that that all stakeholders, whether they be rural municipality representatives, school division representatives, health representatives, Aboriginal community representatives, business representatives, government representatives, and the list goes on, must come together to strategize on the ways they can work together to improve

the condition for those who live in the area. Just as local school divisions have been encouraged to work with outside agencies to share resources and ideas, so to much provincial education authorities strategize with government representatives in other ministries to cross the artificial boundaries created by bureaucracy in order to create policies that validate the holism and connectedness that is the rural way of life.

Manitoba Research Context

Wallin (2006) offers the following description of a number of Manitoba communities and rural municipalities based on her research work with rural Manitoba school divisions. The results accrue from a provincial survey and case studies of four school divisions that represent the four rural educational regions across the province:

Demographic Information

The primary industries of the rural communities that were part of this study tend to align with much of the literature on rural communities (Hobbs, 1994; Statistics Canada, 2001) to include agriculture, health and education, manufacturing and construction, and trades, transport and equipment operators. Communities that have been able to diversify and/or those that do not have to rely on government transfers and/or social assistance tend to fare better economically. Some rural communities, though not many, have been able to gain momentum in population, industry, services and infrastructure, often as centralization of services occurs (Stabler & Olfert, 1996). Increases in population often are the result of migration (often retirees from the local rural municipalities), immigration, and increasing Aboriginal populations. Rural municipalities tend to face more significant decline than local communities.

Social and economic variability abound, but rural poverty is a major concern across the entire province—there is a need to track the encroachment of rural poverty, and to initiate programs designed to support the rural economy and those who live in poverty. Health care is a major concern of most communities, particularly in terms of access to service (mental health included), and in recruiting/retaining health care professionals.

In most of the communities under study, the median age of the population was close to or above the median age for Manitoba (36.8) and Canada (37.6). However, in one northern community, the median age was much lower, reflecting a younger, more transient population and work force. Youth migration tends to be widespread, though residents were proud of those who returned to their communities to live and work (though this proportion is small).

Some communities are ethnically homogenous, but of those communities that are not homogenous, the representative population is primarily a combination of European and/or Aboriginal ancestry, with higher proportions of Aboriginal population increasing as one moves north. The religious background in the study communities was predominantly protestant, then Catholic, but there are increasing numbers of those who indicate they have no religious affiliation. Most communities suggested that social and/or class conflict was limited, but the proportions of those who suggested social and/or class conflict was a concern generally increased with the economic and/or ethnic variability found in the communities.

Education rates for those aged 20-34 without a high school diploma varied greatly, ranging anywhere between 18.3% in some areas to 50.2% in others, as compared to the Manitoba (22.5%) and Canadian (15.6%) rates. Generally speaking, the proportion of those with trades certificates and/or college diplomas was similar to and/or much higher than the Manitoba (10.3% and 15.7%, respectively) and Canadian (10.8% and 19.9%, respectively) averages, and the proportion of those with university degrees was much lower than the Manitoba (18.4%) and Canadian (22.9%) averages.

Primary Findings

The relationships between educational priorities work themselves out differently in rural areas than they might in an urban environment because of the unique contextualities of rural life. Three educational priorities are consistent across the provincial contexts: Improving Student Outcomes, Quality of Teachers and Administrators, and Educational Finance. Other priorities can be found in Appendix A, Table 1 (p. 7). Some priorities are a direct match to the *K-S4 Agenda*. Most priorities have some overlap with the *Agenda*, but the circumstances of each rural context impacts on how they are managed. Some priorities do not match at all; and two rural priorities (Educational Finance and Governance and Management) subsume the entire *Agenda*. The following sections provide some detail in relation to the three priorities that were consistent across the province.

Improving Student Outcomes. The lack of access to resources for special needs students and student services such as mental health, and the problems in recruiting professionals for specialty positions has the potential to detrimentally affect rural school divisions' abilities to serve students. In some high growth rural school divisions in the South, a lack of professional development in particular areas such as EAL and behavioral issues strain the ability of professionals to meet student needs. More commonly, however, rural school divisions face reduced optional programming and increased workload due to declining enrolments. Some participants spoke of the potential impact *Bill 13* (Appropriate Educational Programming) might have on rural school divisions, suggesting that there is a growing tendency to refer only serious student service needs due to heavy workloads, long waiting lists, and limited student service personnel. Current special needs funding structures are not adequate in rural areas affected by decreasing enrolments, since class composition is increasingly diverse (and needy), even if enrolment is decreasing. Areas in the North face an increasing diversity of student need affected by transience, socio-economics, family dynamics, ethnicity, and health, with little support and/or infrastructure available to address the issues. Some school divisions have been able to develop programs through partnerships with community groups, businesses, and neighbouring school divisions in attempts to offer variety and meaningful opportunities for students. Others have centralized their educational services, and positioned themselves as regional service providers with particular specializations. Alternately, the vast geographic size of some school divisions makes centralization of services difficult, and when combined with declining economic and social circumstances, creates challenges to the ability to maintain current programs and services. Finally, the downsizing of social service agencies in rural communities hinders the development of Inter-Agency approaches for the provision of student services.

Quality of Teachers and Administrators. The caution within this priority relates to access to professional development opportunities, time commitments away from school to travel to centers that provide professional learning opportunities, and funding issues for rural school divisions. Teachers tend to be satisfied with the professional development opportunities available to them, although some suggested that educational assistants needed more opportunities for learning. However, many staff members feel ill-equipped to deal with an increasing emphasis on social programming and behavioral issues. There exists an increasing difficulty in recruiting professionals, especially for student service positions or specialty areas. Rural teachers and administrators face increasing workload issues because fewer people manage and deliver educational service. Added to these challenges is a lack of a substitute pool for teachers, bus drivers, and other educational support personnel. Many teachers find themselves working in multi-age, multi-grade classroom situations with increasing proportions of special needs students. This, combined with less attractive collective agreement benefits and fewer social attractions, may encourage teachers to reconsider their place of employment. Divisions that are closer to urban areas face losing teachers to the attractions of working in urban environments. Other areas that are geographically isolated service centers face recruitment issues for specialty positions but do not necessarily face retention problems, particularly because local residents often return "home" to live and work. Interestingly, although recruitment and retainment can be a problem in the North, many educators choose to come to the area because of the beautiful natural environment and lifestyle it affords. A larger problem for many divisions occurs due to the fact that professional development opportunities are being centralized in Winnipeg, and fewer presenters are willing to travel to rural centres for local professional development. In addition, although some divisions are fully equipped to use technology to facilitate learning opportunities, other centres (often urban centres) are less capable (or willing) to reciprocate.

Educational Finance. *Educational Finance* is not a priority found in the *K-S4 Agenda*, although it is obviously the foundation of most issues within public education. Current taxation and funding structures warrant scrutiny. Educational finance in relation to property taxation in rural areas has been a contentious issue for some time, and there exists an increasing disparity between those who have the ability to pay, and those who do not. Rural poverty is a very real, and a growing concern, and in some areas, the local tax base is almost nonexistent. In other areas, the issue is spoken of in terms of the willingness to pay education tax, although a demographic analysis of the local rural municipalities indicate that rural poverty is a concern even in high growth communities. The current formula does not adequately recognize that cost factors are higher in rural areas; special levies simply do not meet actual need. In addition, grant matching opportunities with the provincial government for new programs are generally not considered to be an option when school divisions face budget shortfalls due to declining enrolments, and therefore have to put resources into maintaining, rather than developing, programming. In some areas, there is an obvious income disparity gap developing in the community, which plays havoc on school divisions' abilities to provide equity in terms of programs, extra-curricular activities, and student needs. Some boards have already redirected extra funds to special needs students within the division, but even this is considered to be limited in terms of addressing the actual need. Other finance issues faced by school divisions are related to the lack of discretionary spending capacity of small rural school divisions, the costs of transportation (including bussing costs and the travel

costs associated with professional development), and the costs of provincially legislated changes that are mandated but do not include any attendant financial support.

There does exist a moderate, but positive, perception of the capacity of rural school divisions to achieve their priorities. Administrative perceptions regarding the school divisions' abilities to achieve their priorities are consistently higher than staff and/or parent/community groups. The strengths of rural school divisions relate to the diversity of networks they create to facilitate resource (money, time, people) management and distribution. The concern here, though, is that local networking could have finite potential, to which some of the amalgamated divisions across the province might attest. As more rural areas face poverty, increasing responsibilities and less resources, even shared services will ultimately become strapped without additional inputs of governmental support.

Finally, ambiguity and/or skepticism regarding the provincial government's role in rural educational management and change abound (Appendix B, pp. 8-10). When asked what role the provincial government should play in educational governance and change, responses tend to center on educational funding, curriculum, student needs, participation and input into provincial policy and decision making, and educational change issues (Appendix B, pp. 8-10).

Implications

The findings of the study lead to a number of implications for those living and working in rural communities:

1. Rural communities need access to a holistic educational experience that responds to the needs of early childhood, public education, and adult education;
2. Education cannot be separated from the continuity of community life, even though the artificial separation exists in provincial educational policy
3. The stories of those who live and work in rural communities must be shared widely to bring to the attention of people their successes and those of neighbours. On a wider scale, a stronger media presence must be cultivated (especially with the popular press);
4. Meaningful and locally determined research and participatory partnerships between researchers and those who live in rural communities must occur and be shared with local, national and international interests;
5. Rural concerns must be shared with government policy makers and become a recognized and consistent lobby presence;
6. Provincial education authorities and local rural stakeholders in and out of education must creatively strategize with government representatives across ministries to cross the artificial boundaries created by bureaucracy;
7. Cross-community groups must work together, sharing information and services rather than duplicating them or maintaining jurisdictional "turf wars"--which also has implications for privacy legislation and bureaucratic mechanisms which have a tendency to insulate; and
8. Governmental and community agencies must engage in proactive processes and practices that facilitate school divisions' abilities to meet provincial mandates while respecting local autonomy, culture and economic realities.

The literature on school improvement which is underpinned by globalizing interests, and upon which the *K-S4 Agenda* is based, has led to an essentializing of schooling across contexts, and has therefore created many challenges for rural school divisions, and/or not addressed other areas that need to be considered because of their differential impact on rural environments. However, there are some priorities (in particular, Improving Student Outcomes, Quality of Teachers/Administrators, and Educational Finance) that are common across contexts, even if the processes and methods used to address them may have to differ. Since educational leaders are the group most optimistic in their belief that rural communities have the capacity to achieve their priorities, it follows that they should take the lead, in partnership with provincial authorities, in developing and implementing rural school improvements that are grounded in a commitment to quality rural schooling and community development.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Educational Priorities

Priority	P	1	2	3	4
Improving Student Outcomes	X	X	X	X	X
Quality of Teachers and Administrators	X	X	X	X	X
Educational Finance	X	X	X	X	X
Early Childhood	X	X			
Social Issues	X				X
Strengthening Links Between Schools, Families and Communities	X				X
Special Education		X		X	
Community Development		X		X	
Discipline			X		X
Recruiting/Retaining Teachers/Administrators	X				
Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence		X			
Accessibility to Educational Services				X	
Educational Management and Governance				X	
Vocational and Technical Education				X	
Alternate Delivery Systems				X	
School Facilities					X

Appendix B

Responses Regarding the Provincial Government's Role in Educational Management in Change in Rural Environments

Perceptions Regarding what the Province DOES do:

- Educational Funding/Spending
 - Education spending in the province is swayed more by vote courting than sound educational programming decisions--the rural voice is often defined by which political party is in power, skirted around 4 year political life cycles.
 - Lack of recognition for travel expenses and the distance factor for professional development and meetings in rural areas which impacted on resources in terms of time, energy and funding.
 - The downloading of responsibility onto school divisions without an attendant increase in provincial resource contribution was seriously hampering the school division's ability to provide programming.
 - Governmental policies and initiatives do not recognize the contextual issues in rural schooling, and tend to regard all rural schools as being the same, based on funding formulas that are suited for an urban environment.
 - Frustrated with partial government funding or matching grant options that entailed increasing local budget contributions which they no longer have. This kind of grant structure puts pressure on boards that have difficulty maintaining programming, never mind increasing options. In this way, trustees felt that they then potentially faced government criticism that the division "wasn't doing its job."
 - One-time grants with specific time requirements (Early Childhood Development Initiative, Class Size and Composition) may help to initiate small projects, but they have little to no consistency or impact for school divisions with declining enrolments that must put their resources into maintaining programs
 - Need for capital funding remains a huge issue
 - Although the provincial government has put more money into transportation costs, it is still not nearly enough.
 - Categorical funding may not reflect actual needs of rural/remote school divisions, but its categorical nature does not allow for school divisions to move this funding to alternate areas of need.
- Student Needs
 - lack of mental health, audiology and other clinical and special services available to rural areas, stressing that this issue has been raised often, with no support
 - lack of vision and support for distance learning and technological infrastructure development to support student programming, PD, etcetera
 - Ramifications of Bill 13 and how the downloading of responsibility to school divisions for that legislation would affect student support and resource needs.
- Participation and Input
 - suspicious of regional "consultations" designed ostensibly to elicit rural input. In their view, consultation can be described as superficial at best, and is used more to provide direction than to elicit input.
 - lack of networking between rural stakeholders and Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth personnel, minimizing the ability of rural stakeholders to sensitize MECY to rural issues
 - lack of recognition regarding the diversity within what constitutes a rural environment.
 - "Government skirts around issues and gives you the party line."
 - Most of the opportunities for input and/or participation in processes for change are held in Winnipeg
 - There do exist some staff opportunities for involvement in writing curriculum or participating in pilot projects—but generally the rural areas have to advocate for inclusion
 - Becomes very difficult for the division to participate in provincial initiatives because of the time and distance involved in the participation.
 - Political disputes of provincial organizations are sometimes not a concern for rural stakeholders, and/or they have the potential to damage good relationships in the local school division as local people are forced to participate on behalf of their representative groups

- Most PD is still in the south, and even regional PD is localized and is a tremendous distance and time burden, particularly for half-day meetings that are organized at times of the day that are very inconvenient
- PG has begun bypassing school boards as a governing body and dealing directly with schools, which in their estimation de-legitimizes the role of the school board and is an encroachment on their governance.
- Public education lacks profile in the province
- Educational Change
 - Rapid change in educational trends promoted by the provincial government distracts stakeholders from issues that may be more important to rural Manitoba--time, energy and focus is spent on transient trends instead of on more important local needs.
 - Limited consideration what rural areas have or do not have, such as public transit, the impacts of weather that lead to loss of contact time with students, limited program options and small staffs—all of which impacts on how educational governance and change is managed differentially in rural areas than in urban environments.
 - PG caters to “perimeteritis”
 - SD are positive about the cross border school attendance agreement with Saskatchewan and appreciative of the open, transparent working relationship between the provincial governments and school divisions as policy was formed.
 - Issues are seldom addressed at a provincial level until they become issues for urban educators
 - Limited consideration of the effects new legislation has on local school boards (i.e. seatbelt anchors)

Perceptions Regarding what the Province SHOULD do:

- Education Funding/Spending
 - Re-examination of the funding formula
 - The downloading of costs from the province to the local school division has got to stop
 - Resources and funding must be provided to ensure that all curricula can in fact be implemented properly
 - Recognize special funding for travel and PD in rural areas, particularly since amalgamation
 - Need to cover transportation costs fully so that monies can be spent directly on educational issues, not getting students to the door.
 - Geographic size and diversity of a school division must be taken into consideration, because they have a particular impact on the expenses
 - Support for technological infrastructure
 - Need for changes in the Level I funding structure as well as additional funding for students with Level II need.
 - Recognize and provide support for the fact that the cost factor is simply higher in rural areas. In their estimation, the province has to create a formula that recognizes the decreasing industrial tax base in rural areas, while conceding that schools still need to be able to provide quality education, even in areas of declining enrolment. Examine some funding structures where funding is not based on enrolment
 - Needs to increase its presence and support for the implementation of technology services across school divisions in the province, particularly in rural areas where distance, time and travel issues accrue costs that would not be necessary if technology was utilized to its potential.
 - Provide support and create partnerships between government, industry and education for the development of a healthy rural economy—with incentives for business development in rural areas
- Curricula
 - Relevant to rural needs
 - The proliferation of changes to and/or additions of curricula places impossible demands on schools, teachers, students and rural communities who generally do not have the resources to provide and/or carry out all these demands.
 - Need to promote vocational and trades programs.
 - Defining and providing the differences between some of the terminology used to encompass special needs programs, such as “adaptations,” “modifications,” and “individualized program.”

- Helpful if the provincial government created some resources that were exemplars of adaptations, modifications and individualized program options when they created new curricula so that teachers had a stronger sense of how to differentiate curricula for individual needs.
- Student Needs
 - Recognize and help deal with the critical shortage of specialists available to rural areas (including mental health)
 - Recognize the workload issues of professionals in rural areas where fewer people do more to ensure the needs of students are met.
 - More supports for special needs education
 - More money needs to go into recruiting and setting up incentives for quality rural teachers and/or other professionals such as doctors, speech pathologists, and other social service providers.
- Participation and Input
 - Advocate for and create connections between universities and school divisions to provide professional placements in rural areas for teachers, doctors and specialists in order to foster recruitment and retention of rural professionals.
 - top perpetuating an essentializing negative message regarding rural areas; recognize that rural communities are unique, diverse and have strengths—there is no one rural voice.
 - More networking opportunities with Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth representatives
 - Need for PG to provide better and active listeners and offer timely feedback.
 - Like to see provincial consultants placed back in the field so that remote and rural school divisions had more access to these services.
- Educational Change
 - Recognize that there are places where bureaucratic decisions and policies do not fit the context.
 - Local areas want to maintain local autonomy
 - Need for the provincial government to have presence, voice and vision in its workings with provincial education
 - Develop a rural and northern policy agenda to keep in mind differential needs.

“We want what is best for our kids. They shouldn’t be denied because they aren’t close to the city centre.”

“There has to be the will on the part of the government to value children and put children first, ahead of the fiscal and political landscape.”