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School Closure: What are the consequences for the local society?

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School Closure: What are the consequences for the local society?

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School closures have been common in rural areas since the middle of the last century, when new and modern schools replaced small old-fashioned schools with only one or two classrooms. Due mainly to the industrialisation of farming and hastened by the merging and globalisation of industry, the last 50 years have seen a migration of people from rural areas to large towns. This has caused closures of schools built in the 1950s and 1960s, which had been the pride of and a sign of development in local societies. These closures most often give rise to heated debate, the main cry of protest being that the closure of the school is a death-blow to the local society. The present study is based on a qualitative analysis performed in 2003 of 30 Danish school closures in the period 1990–1999. The results show that school closure in itself does not have the devastating effects mentioned in the debate. The main problem for local societies is a lack of people and thus lack of human capital, and in remote areas and on small islands school closure is a sign of a community in the final phase of the death process, not a cause.

Keywords: *Demography; Rural; School closure; School structure*

Introduction

In 2002 there were 1,667 municipal primary and secondary schools in Denmark. In the 1930s there were well over 5,500 schools, but since then, the number has been falling drastically, especially between 1955 and 1975, when the number of schools in rural areas fell from 3,010 to 1,199, even though the population in the same areas was rising. In total, Denmark has experienced almost 4,000 school closures, and most of these by far have been schools in rural areas.

Most school closures have gone unnoticed, as it was old schools with one or two classrooms and a small apartment for the teacher that were closed after the establishment of a new type of centralised school, with seven classrooms and separate houses for three or four teachers and their families. These "modern" schools were built mainly at the end of the 1950s and the start of the 1960s, and were

gradually supplemented by special rooms for science and gymnastics. These schools were the pride of the local societies, representing growth and culture.

The 1960s and 1970s were, however, also a time when industrialisation of farming, dairy production and slaughtering meant that jobs were moving to the bigger cities. This marked the beginning of the depopulation of rural areas and also meant that there were no longer any basic shops in rural towns, further reducing the possibilities of employment in small rural communities. Schools were still the pride and cultural centres of the municipalities, but the merging of 1,360 municipalities into 277 in 1970 increased the geographical distance between local societies and their schools and the members of local government, who were therefore less emotionally involved with the schools being closed.

Changing work patterns meant that school enrolment began to dwindle rapidly, starting in the late 1960s. Multigrade teaching became an unwanted necessity, costs per pupil rose, and local governments decided to close schools. From the middle of the 1970s this led to heated debate and riots on the part of grass-root movements, sometimes resulting in heads of local government losing their seats in the following elections.

However, the number of inhabitants in rural areas beyond commuting distance from a big city has continued to fall concurrently with the fall in the number of school-aged children up to the end of the 1990s. Thus the 1990s saw the closure of many schools built in the 1950s and 1960s as local cultural centres with 150 pupils, after a fall in the number of children to well below 100. This caused a great deal of concern, with local inhabitants claiming that the closure of the school would be the end of the local society.

In international educational journals, there are more than 100 references to the subject of school closure. Most of these references are concerned with deliberations about individual school closures, but few concern the effects on the local society. Bushrod (1999) has in a Canadian case study pointed out the relationship between school closure and a dwindling population. The study also found that school closure meant reduced socialisation and social control, while mutual support and general service did not fall more than predicted by the dwindling population in itself. Whitfield (1980) shows almost the same effects in a study of 24 areas in the United Kingdom. Witten, Mccreanor, Kearns, and Ramasubrasmian (2001) in an investigation from New Zealand find that negative consequences are most pronounced for families with few resources. Johnson (1978) and Cuban (1979) find that school closures, contrary to expectations, are not followed by extra migration, falling real estate prices or increased rates of criminal behaviour.

On a theoretical basis Giddens (1991) has described societal changes during the last 200 years, using the term "postmodern society" for current society in a knowledge- and information-based world. The present society is globalised, de-traditionalised and individualised, and in local rural societies neither school nor church have the same socialising and cohesive effects they had even 30 years ago.

This does not mean that the local societies have lost their social importance. Herlitz (2000) has framed the concept of "place ideology" to explain the mechanism by which a geographical area or town can be the common denominator for the development of a cultural, social, physical and economic environment in which inhabitants with entrepreneurial spirit establish a common basis, often in local associations. Putnam (1993) points out the importance of "networks", closely related to the term "human capital" used by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990). The establishment and survivability of networks are closely related to the number of inhabitants in the local area. Memberships of networks, often exemplified by associations in local societies, are based on voluntariness and require a minimum number of persons. Amin and Thrift (1995) show the same mechanisms in a business economic framework. There are other risk factors for local societies. Marsden and Murdoch (1994) use the term "counter-urbanisation" for a destabilising factor describing the move from big towns to rural areas of well-off families who bring with them a culture differing from the original values of the local area, and who commute to the big city every day and do not take part in local activities.

In summary, there are several factors that influence the aftermath of a school closure, and the importance of factors can be expected to have changed during the 25 years the earlier studies mentioned above cover. Therefore, there is a need for systematic knowledge of the effects of school closure. This becomes even more pertinent as Denmark faces a reorganisation of municipalities with the merging of small municipalities below approximately 30,000 inhabitants in 2006, which inevitably will lead to school closures as it did in 1970. Due to the lack of prior knowledge of the effects of school closure a qualitative explorative study was deemed most appropriate. It was also decided that an investigation of the long-term effects— 3 to 13 years after school closure—would be most informative, when the passions that run so high around the time of the closure have returned to a normal level.

Method

Material

The material in the qualitative investigation was selected on the basis of a quantitative survey of Danish school closures in the period from 1990 up to and including 1999. The survey used the school register from each consecutive year in the period. This showed that 175 schools were closed in this period. Some had reappeared under a new name, some had been merged into twin schools, and some were city schools. When these were removed, 94 rural schools that had been closed remained. A qualitative study of 94 schools would be an insurmountable task. Therefore, a selection process was introduced based on the principle that all types of schools should be covered. A closer study of the demographic characteristics revealed that five types could be identified.

1.   Mass closures, where municipalities decide to close all small schools.
2.   Single closure of a school with a sharply dwindling number of pupils.
3.   Closure of schools in municipalities which had previously put great emphasis on the preservation of small schools through school development and new activities.
4.   Closure of schools near big cities, where rural areas have been changed into suburban areas.
5.   Closure of schools on small islands.

After this typification process, a number of each type were selected from the total material with the intention of covering the following regions of Denmark:

- The area less than 50 km from the centre of Copenhagen.
- The rest of Zealand.
- Funen.
- Southern Jutland.
- Western Jutland.
- Northern Jutland.
- Islands (Bornholm, Samsoe, Mandoe, and Femoe).

The schools in the qualitative study varied in size, as follows. The maximum number of pupils per school was 182, the minimum 7, and the average 69. The maximum number of teachers was 21, the minimum 1, and the average 6.6.

Measures

Each local area was visited by one of the authors, who spent at least one day in each area initially observing the closed school and its new function, the general quality of housing, signs of life of local associations, and signs of closed enterprises. Visits were made on weekends or in vacation periods to get an impression of the situation outside working hours. After the initial observations, interviews were carried out with local inhabitants over their garden fences or in the streets, at bus stops, in shops, in the inn, outside the church or in their homes.

The interviews were what Cohen and Manion (1992) call a "less formal interview", with "open-ended questions" aimed at focusing on the factors relevant for the selected schools. The interviewers had an interview guide with a catalogue of possible effects of school closures, selected on the basis of earlier research and not least, a sample of the typical content of the debates around school closure. The catalogue contained the following questions:

- What has the school closure meant for the local society (real estate prices, taxation, number of cultural gatherings and events, shopping facilities, migration, identity, infrastructure, etc.)?
- How was the quality of life in the local area and municipality before the school closure?

N How is the quality of life in the area and municipality after the school closure?
N What has the school closure meant for you and your family? (This question was
   only put to so-called "professionals"—vicars, mayors, real estate agents, preschool
   teachers, bus drivers—living in the local area.)
N What is the general use of and your use of the school buildings today?

   The results from the interviews and the observations were written down in
protocols that were first analysed on an individual basis, using a content analysis
method for searching for themes. In the next phase of the analysis, a search was made
for common themes, which were subsequently arranged in groups and sorted according
to their relative weight in the total material. The procedures followed those described
by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) and Miles and Huberman (1984).
   In qualitative research the concept of validity has to be reframed in relation to
traditional quantitative thinking, where it reflects the existence of an objective truth.
As described by Kvale (1997), qualitative research takes a relativist position, in
which multiple individual experiences all have their own truth, none being more
valid or real than the others. The aim of qualitative research is to give the best
interpretations of the subjective perceived reality; to provide what metascientists
term "understanding" (Radnitsky, 1969).

Results

The interview protocols showed a multitude of different effects in the 30 local
societies depending on conditions related to the individual school and the local
community. Among these was the perceived quality of instruction in the school; in
fact, a few schools were more or less closed by parents who had "voted with their
feet", taken their children out of the school, and placed them in a neighbouring
school, to which all children were finally transferred. Another was the condition of
the school building. A third was the infrastructure, such as the availability of public
transportation or special lanes for bicycles. A fourth was a strong tendency towards
counter-urbanisation, which led to a large number of inhabitants having a closer
relationship with the neighbouring city than with the original local society around the
school. Where such negative factors for preservation of the local school were
predominant, protests against school closure had been weak, and after the closure
life went on without any great bitterness. Results like these are very understandable
and self-explanatory, and therefore results of a more general nature, covering the
entire material, are expected.
   The search for themes in the interview protocols singled out three typical scenarios
after school closure: the "lively local society", the "dying local society", and the
"small island society".

The Lively Local Society

The lively local society is easy to identify. It is situated within commuting distance of
a big city, it is rather close to main roads, and there are signs on the roads making it

easy to find the local society. There are many houses, one or two shops including a general shop where it is possible to buy groceries (milk, bread, newspapers, candy, mineral water, beer and wine, etc.), and a petrol station. The houses are well kept, and children's toys in the gardens and driveways show that there is life in the town. The local society is built around an old village. There is a church, a village pond, and old houses dating back more than 100 years, which are painstakingly kept in the traditional style, even though their thatched roofs are expensive to maintain and insure. There is an assembly hall with a notice board giving information about a variety of activities. There is also a school building in good repair; this is the school that was closed, but which now serves another function. It is either an activity centre, perhaps with a nursery school, or it is a private school. The sports facilities, including the football ground, are used by the local sports association.

When one asks people why they have chosen to live in the local society, most give the same answers. There is plenty of fresh air and nature, with fields and woodland. There is also peace and quiet, and life is lived at a slower pace than in the big cities. Houses are cheaper than in the city areas, but they are still, in the eyes of the rather few inhabitants who were born or who grew up in the village, expensive. Most families with children have two cars and work in the city. The parents typically try to share the workload in such a way that one goes to work late, taking care of the children in the morning, and the other comes home early to take care of the children in the afternoon. Shopping is mainly done in supermarkets in the city where they work, but there is a consciousness about supporting the local shop to keep it alive. In the lively local society it is usually easy for newcomers to come and be accepted as members of the community, especially if the newcomers are dynamic and show an active interest in taking part in the local associations.

The process around school closure has been harsh in these areas. There were protest meetings, and banners and posters were set up with texts such as "No school, no town" or "Hands off our school". However, the local politicians won the battle and the school was closed. It created a bitter climate, which lasted several years. It is a typical finding that members of the local population who understood the need for school closure kept a low profile during the debate, especially if their professional lives were dependent on their relation to their fellow villagers, such as the vet, the owner of the petrol station or the vicar.

One outcome in these local areas is the formation of a private school. The tradition of private schools in Denmark dates back to 1855, and in 2002 the number of private schools was 462. Parents only have to pay around 20% of the costs of a private school; the rest is paid by public funds, and thus the financial burden on families sending children to private schools is limited. The establishment of a private school is, however, a demanding process, as parents have to do the work, including negotiating the purchase of the school buildings and hiring the headmaster and teachers. This requires a collaborative effort and an enterprising spirit, which in itself may bond the local society together. When a successful private school is established it can in many cases attract pupils from neighbouring villages, and in one case it was

seen that the private school had reached the capacity it was built for in the 1960s and even had a waiting list. Thus a private school can make a local society more attractive than it was before school closure by promoting cohesiveness and team spirit. There is, however, a risk that the cohesiveness and team spirit may diminish and eventually die when the parents who started the school no longer have their children in the school. The survival of the private school is thus to a very high degree related to the quality of teaching, and not least to leadership on the part of the head teacher.

The other possible outcome is that the school buildings are used for another purpose than a school. Most often schools are used as activity centres for the local population, sometimes with a special branch for the elderly, and often with the establishment of a nursery school. Such uses give rise to scepticism when they are proposed and planned, but afterwards most people find that the school buildings serve the local society at least as well as the school did. Often the number of users of the buildings is higher that it was for the school. In some cases the school buildings have been used for a special school or a boarding school. In these cases the number of employees is even greater than it was when the buildings housed a regular school. A few school buildings have been rebuilt to house refugees or as apartments for elderly people. The former purpose traditionally causes much concern about the risk of theft, which, however, has proven to be unfounded in the areas visited, while the latter satisfies a need that predominates in many Danish rural areas, and is therefore looked upon with gratitude.

The Dying Local Society

Dying local societies comprise the majority of the old rural villages in Denmark. They are beyond commuting distance from the big cities, where the majority of jobs are, or they are situated in relatively isolated areas of Denmark with a low population density and without public transport. There is a church, which is still active, but which has to share a vicar with two or three other churches in the area. There is a village pond, but it is overgrown and perhaps used as an unofficial dumping ground. There are old houses in serious disrepair. Many of the houses, about 50 in total, were built in the 1930s or 1950s, but they have not been properly maintained for many years. Some houses are uninhabited, but they do not have "For sale" signs in front of them. If houses are for sale, it takes a long time to sell them. The only signs of life are a few elderly people working in their gardens or tending graves in the churchyard. The school buildings are still standing. They are heated and maintained at a minimum level, are impossible to sell, and are now used for occasional gatherings. The notice board shows that these happen very seldom.

When one looks around it is easy to see that a few years ago there was life in the village. One building with a high chimney was used for dairy work, for example. It has until recently been used for storage. Another housed a generator until the 1950s. Three buildings were shops, the last one closing 15 years ago, 5 years before the

school closed. Everything is there, or rather was there, but one very important thing is missing: people. Around 50% of the remaining inhabitants are over 70 years old, and most live alone. Now and then there are newcomers, some with children, who have to travel 10 km to the nearest school by bus. Most newcomers, attracted by the very low real estate prices, only stay for short periods, however, finding it difficult to become accepted among the local inhabitants, who in many cases have been living there all their lives. Some of the newcomers are out of work, living on social welfare transfer payments because of physical or psychological disabilities, making it even more difficult for them to be accepted in the local culture. Also, many of the original inhabitants seem to have lost their community spirit. Even at the weekends there are few signs of life. There may be two young people with their mopeds near the village pond, outside the building that formerly housed the general store. Otherwise the predominant sign of life is the blue light in the houses emanating from television screens. CNN has come to the village, but community spirit has left.

For some of these areas, especially those situated near the coastline, the summer may bring a short revival period when tourists come to the camping ground, where a small shop or even a cafeteria is open for two months, or rent some of the better houses for their summer vacation. This invasion in the summertime does not mean that the area in general benefits. On the contrary, some of the facilities used by the tourists seem ghostlike after the tourist season.

When one asks about what happened around the time of the school closure, it is revealed that there were protests, as in the lively local societies. However, the protests were not so fierce. First of all there were fewer people protesting, and secondly, the protests could be described as final cries before giving up hope for the future, declaring that school closure would be a death-blow to the local society. In retrospect many inhabitants admit that it was not a death-blow, but rather was a result of the death of the local society, caused by the migration of inhabitants away from the area starting in the 1960s, leaving too few people to sustain the society. School closure was the second last sign of the death of the society, the last and ultimate sign being the closure of the church (there are twice as many churches as schools remaining in Denmark).

The Small Island Society

Denmark has 27 small inhabited islands, 10 of which have schools. The 27 islands have areas ranging from 0.9 to 13 km^2, with an average of 7.3 km^2. The number of inhabitants varies from 9 to 1,032, with an average of 203. The islands with schools have between 134 and 1,032 inhabitants, with an average of 137. All islands are connected with the mainland by ferries, the longest route of which has a journey time of 2 hours and 45 minutes.

What almost all the islands have in common is the fact that their populations in the 1960s were two to three times the number today. The decline in population has been caused by the industrialisation of farming and fishery. Today, life on the small

islands is subsidised by a law aimed at supporting employment on the islands. Almost half of the islands have lost their schools since the 1960s, three in the period 1990–1999. Two of these are included in the present study.

Life on the small islands differs markedly from life in the rest of rural Denmark. Not only is the local community surrounded by water, but transportation to and from the mainland is a time-consuming affair determined by ferry schedules; in the winter, ferries may be stopped by ice. When the islanders are asked about the quality of their life it becomes evident that it differs greatly from mainland life. They say that on the return trip from the mainland "winding down" starts while they wait for the ferry. From then on, nothing can be accelerated. Everything takes its time and there is no hurry. Island life does not involve cultural and recreational activities. Nature and the neighbours must suffice, along with television and home computers. It is also evident that island life mainly attracts people born and brought up on small islands, whose occupations are farming, transportation, tourism, handicrafts, arts and teaching. For the islanders the school is an important institution. Not only is it the school for the children, it is also the cultural centre where islanders meet, and the head teacher is often the key figure in all activities, from amateur theatre to the submitting of applications for public support to development initiatives. The head teacher might even lead a service in the church.

Many of the small Danish islands serve as leisure areas for Danes who buy unoccupied houses for use as summer and weekend cottages. The small islands have also established marinas, attracting sailors on spring, summer and autumn weekends and in the summer months. The islands also have a variety of wildlife, attracting visitors. These activities mean that many islands can sustain an inn, which can function as a small conference centre creating jobs on the island. Most islands have a general store, but prices are higher than on the mainland and commuters are tempted to do their shopping on the mainland on their way home from work.

Closure of a school is a hard blow to an island society, much harder than on the mainland, because along with the school the island also loses the key person in its social life. There are, of course, fierce protests, and the 27 small islands in Denmark are united in the Association of Small Islands, which is a part of the European Small Islands Network. Protests are mainly motivated by the loss of the cultural and societal centre more than the damaging effect on the schooling of the children. Islanders are generally well aware that schools with one teacher and from four to eight pupils offer limited challenges to both teacher and pupils. In most cases the ferry trip to the replacement mainland school takes less than an hour, which can be used for homework. Moreover, the pupils can travel with their older brothers and sisters who go to the lower and upper secondary school on the mainland. Sometimes they may even travel with parents working on the mainland.

When a school closure takes place on an island it is in many ways the death-blow to the island community. However, the dwindling number of inhabitants causes it, which again is caused by the lack of jobs on the island. It is the end product of a development that in spite of many good intentions has been impossible to turn around.

Discussion

School closure is a well-known phenomenon in the history of Danish schools. The majority of school closures were associated with development and consolidation of a modern schooling system in which new and more advanced buildings took over from old, cramped and poorly heated schoolhouses from the start of the 1900s or earlier. Nobody—or almost nobody—complained. Industrialisation of farming has changed demographic structures during the last 40 years and even today, merging of industries as well as globalisation mean that rural areas are losing production and jobs, while a rising proportion of the inhabitants of Denmark move to the big cities.

The changing demographic structure means that many schools built as the pride of their local societies are being closed. This has, since the 1970s, been followed by protests claiming that the closure of a school is a death-blow to the society. Very few systematic attempts at mapping the effects of school closure on the local societies have been performed.

Seen from a theoretical and empirical point of view there are several factors which influence the quality and coherence of a local society in connection with school closure. Results from Bushrod (1999) and Whitfield (1980) point to the simple fact that there must be a certain number of people to sustain a local society and its school. Secondly, as Putnam (1993) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) point out, there must be a certain human capital to create a basis for networks, which through "place ideology" (Herlitz, 2000) create voluntary participation in associative activities in an environment with entrepreneurial spirit. "Counter-urbanisation", leading to a massive inflow of urban-oriented people, can be a destabilising factor (Marsden & Murdoch, 1994). In general, school closures are followed by reduced socialisation and social control (Bushrod, 1999). However, Johnson (1978) and Cuban (1979) find that school closures, contrary to expectations, are not followed by extra migration, by falling real estate prices or by increased rates of criminal behaviour.

The present study confirms the fact that school closure is a product of a declining number of inhabitants in the local community, and there are no clear signs that school closure in itself leads people to move away or avoid the area. On the contrary, if there are enough people in the area and if the human capital is high enough, the closed school may be replaced, either by an institution for which the local society has a potentially greater need, or by a private school that further strengthens the social cohesion of the local society.

If the number of inhabitants is small and the human capital weak or absent, school closure is a by-product of the dwindling number of inhabitants and of a trend which seems to be irreversible. There are no signs that school closure damages the local society further.

On small islands the situation differs markedly. Here the school and its teachers are vital for the islanders' identity as belonging to a society with a life, and more vital than for the children, who usually have to take the ferry to the mainland after Grades 4 to 6. For the same reason, schools most often continue to function until there are

only a handful of people left. At this point, the islands will mainly have recreational value for tourists at weekends and in the summertime.

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