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CLOSE OR BE CLOSED:

**TO WHAT EXTENT
CAN SCHOOL CLOSURES AND MERGERS
BE CONTESTED AND NEGOTIATED?**

Three New Zealand Case Studies:

Masterton District Network Review 2003

Makoura College Closure Crisis 2008

Bush District Community Initiated Education Plan 2009

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In
Education

at Massey University, Palmerston North.

CLAIRE HILLS

2013

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Dedicated to

My parents Graeme and Grace Ayson who encouraged me from an early age to value education and lifelong learning

and

My late husband Peter who sowed the seeds of confronting the challenge of doctoral studies

and

our children: John, Sarah, Charlotte, Adrian, Georgina, Timothy, Frederick and Alexandra and their families whose encouragement has been so important to me in my journey towards a Ph.D.

CANDIDATE'S STATEMENT

I certify that the thesis entitled *Close or be Closed: To What Extent Can School Closures and Mergers be Contested and Negotiated? Three New Zealand case studies: Masterton District Network Review 2003, Makoura College Closure Crisis 2008 and Bush District Community Initiated Education Plan 2009* and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand, is the result of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same), has not been submitted for any other degree to any other university or institution.

Signed

Date

ABSTRACT

When faced with school closures and mergers stakeholders have a number of options: they can volunteer to close, they can seek a merger with a suitable partner, they can seek a stay of action by seeking more time, they can invest effort in negotiating an alternative outcome or they can resist closure by fighting to survive as a stand-alone school. Organised individual school and/or community protests are other options that may be used. This thesis explores the contestability of school closures and mergers in post *Tomorrow's Schools* rural New Zealand contexts in both the primary and secondary sectors. The three case studies selected are the Masterton District Network Review 2003, the Makoura College closure decision 2008 and the Bush District Initiated Education Plan 2009.

This thesis will show that the school closure/merger process can sometimes be successfully contested by politicised and determined educational communities. If and when the level of community concern reaches the level of community wide outrage, then politicians may decide to back down. In the Masterton District Review 2003 some schools were more successful than others in contesting mergers and closures. The reasons will be explored. Community resistance was crucial in overturning the Makoura College closure decision in 2008. The Community Initiated Education Plan policy trialled in the Bush District in 2009 resulted in a victory for the stakeholders throughout the region who actively contested the proposals and won.

The research literature in New Zealand, and overseas, shows that school closures and mergers can be expected to cause significant community culture shock. Stakeholders discover that they have a deep emotional attachment to their schools. They usually close ranks as its guardians to defend the Taonga (cultural treasure) and social capital that their school represents. In this process distinct patterns of response emerge. Anger and grief are expressed in on-going outbursts of emotive language. Parents assert their 'right' to choose the most suitable school for their child conferred by *Tomorrow's Schools* and demand clear and transparent communication from the Ministry of Education and to be fully consulted during the process. There is a clear pattern of communication breakdown between the Ministry and local stakeholders. This can be seen in community meetings, protest marches, petitions, contentious debates about transport issues, racism, white flight, demographics, economics, the virtues of smaller schools versus larger schools and the destruction of core communities. The conflict in values leads to community infighting and conflict between schools and with the Ministry and the Minister of Education. After school mergers, stakeholders face the often unwelcome task letting go of the past and engaging in the on-going challenge of creating a new culture where the unconscious taken for granted beliefs and values which had provided the cultural glue for the merging schools must be revisited until a new culture develops which is accepted by the new school community as appropriate to its needs. In the aftermath of school closures abandoned buildings, trapped in prolonged disposal processes, become environmental eyesores in their communities as they slowly succumb to vandalism and arson.

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I have been particularly fortunate to have had Professor Roger Openshaw and Professor Howard Lee as my supervisors. Their long standing reputation in educational research and supervising PhD students is recognised both in New Zealand and overseas. There is a great degree of complexity involved in doctoral supervision. It is perhaps best summed up in the term 'critical friends.' As my 'critical friends' Professor Openshaw and Professor Lee have found many different ways of encouraging me to dig deeper in the search for new understanding about the nature of school closures and mergers. For their unfailing support and their belief in me they have my deepest gratitude.

All researchers owe a huge debt to those who have gone before. The findings of New Zealand and overseas researchers, acknowledged in the bibliography, have provided very valuable insights into the complexities of the school closure and merger process for the communities involved both at the time and afterwards. I have regarded previous researchers as unseen friends on my own research journey.

The media has played a very important role in providing a record of how communities feel about school closures and mergers and how they are affected. Thank you to the *Wairarapa News*, *Wairarapa Times Age*, *Manawatu Standard*, *Dominion Post*, *Dannevirke News*, *Upper Hutt News* and *Bush Telegraph* for permission to use material from their coverage.

Thank you to over forty parents, teachers, principals and school ancillary staff involved in the Masterton District Review 2003 for their willingness to respond to my thesis survey. I thank Peter Nikolaison for permission to use a selection of his aerial photographs of Masterton schools. I am very grateful to Katherine Shaw, former member of the Aorangi School Board of Trustees in Christchurch for her hugely valuable insights into the issues facing her school and its stakeholders during its closure process and the Aorangi Judicial Review.

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Mangatainoka School, Kirsty Silvester, former Principal of Mangamaire Country School, Jo Emerson, former Principal of Hillcrest School, Jo Gibbs, Principal of Kumeroa Hopelands School, Lynne Huddleston, Principal of Pahiatua School, Vicki Maughan, Principal of Ballance School and Gerry McGirr, Principal of Woodville School.

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Last, but certainly not least, I thank my family and friends for their loving support and unfailing encouragement in my extra-mural studies which has always meant so much to me.

NOTES ON THE RESEARCHER

I was educated at state schools, Masterton Central School then Wairarapa College, itself the product of the contentious merger of Masterton Technical School and Wairarapa High School in 1938. I attended Victoria University 1962–1965. In 1966 I married Peter Hills, which was also my first year of teaching. Most of my teaching experience from 1967-1984 was part time except in two separate years when I had three children under the age of five. We were blessed with eight children, John, Sarah, Charlotte, Adrian, Georgina, Timothy, Frederick and Alexandra. I returned to full time secondary teaching in 1985.

Extramural study has long been a source of pleasure, professional development and personal growth. It has also proved very beneficial in providing me with a home based personal interest, which was very important given the size of our family. I commenced extra-mural at the Advanced Studies for Teachers Unit at the Wellington College of Education and Massey University to complete my BA and Diploma of Teaching. This was later followed by a Diploma of Second Language Teaching at Massey University. I completed the Master of Educational Administration degree at Massey University in 1999 and the Master of Educational Leadership degree at Australian Catholic University in 2005. I was accepted into the Ph.D in Education programme at Massey University in 2007.

My first piece of historical writing was as editor and compiler of '*Central School 1865–1990*'. I established the Chanel College archive and edited the annual Chanel College magazine for 10 years. I was also editor and compiler of '*The Story of Catholic Education in Wairarapa 1883–1995*,' written for the St Joseph's College Golden Jubilee. I have also contributed essays to *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography, volumes II and IV* on three Irish Catholic priests who made outstanding contributions to the development of the Catholic Church and Catholic education in the Wairarapa. Like many other New Zealanders I have enjoyed the challenge of engaging in family research: the Caradus and Carr family on my mother's side, the Ayson and Mackay families on my father's side and the Hills, Longuet, Burns and Pullar, families on my late husband's side.

After an initial teaching appointment in 1966 at Sacred Heart College in Island Bay, Wellington we moved to the Wairarapa in 1967 where I have been teaching ever since. I have had the opportunity to teach in five of the secondary schools in Masterton: St Bride's College, Solway College, Wairarapa College, St Matthew's College, and Chanel College where I have taught part time and full time since its establishment in 1978. My teaching experience has therefore included single sex and co-educational colleges, state, private and integrated schools. I am presently Senior Teacher, Principal's Nominee and Head of English/Drama at Chanel College. At various times I have also served as the staff representative on its Board of Governors and later, its Board of Trustees.

My interest in school closures and mergers and emerging understanding of their complexity and potential for leaving a toxic cultural legacy began in 1978 when, as teacher, parent and parishioner, I experienced the contentious merger of St Bride's College for girls and St Joseph's College for boys to form Chanel College. This merger later became the focus for my M Ed Admin thesis: *The amalgamation of secondary schools: a case study of amalgamation culture shock in a rural New Zealand Catholic community (1999)*. Following the passing of the Conditional Integration Act in 1975, twenty-six Catholic secondary schools experienced closures and mergers. Chanel College was the first Catholic secondary school in New Zealand that was co-educational from its beginning. The thesis examined the local stakeholder experience and compared it with the experience of the closures and mergers of Catholic secondary schools throughout New Zealand. Since this time I have taken a close personal interest in how school closures and mergers happen and how communities are affected.

This thesis examines school closure/merger issues within three case study contexts in both the primary and secondary schools in the state education sector. My experience of the Masterton District Network Review of 2003 and the Makoura College crisis of 2008 was as a member of the community in which they occurred. While there are many similarities to be observed in closure and merger processes in the primary and secondary sector there are also distinct differences that arise from the different educational contexts in which they occur.

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