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### The “New” Rural: Small and Rural Schools’ Influence on Regional Urban Developments

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#### Abstract

Rapid urban development in small rural communities is occurring at an unprecedented pace in regional Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite this growth, rural schools are positioned at the margins of the planning process and the implications of this urbanisation trend remains unknown. This research challenges the notion of the rural-urban divide by locating rural schools as a key part of regional urban development and thus will be of interest to government officials, developers, educators, and local community interest groups. The study explores the social, economic and political impact of urban development on small and rural primary schools (n=6) in two of the fastest growing regions in the country. Interviews with school principals and focus group interviews with school boards of trustees were conducted. The findings suggest the emergence of new, complex and contested “semi-rural” identity as an outcome of the uncertain and ever-changing demographic landscape. Varying school leadership and governance perspectives of urbanisation are placed on a spectrum, premised upon different experiences of the struggle to balance new, and often competing, parent and community aims and changing school populations. The findings contribute to theorising about the construction of rurality and its influence on the creation of a new urbanised semi-rural community identity. Findings offer the potential for knowledge sharing amongst rural schools currently or for others likely to experience rapid urbanisation in their communities in the future.

**Keywords:** rural, identity, school governance, school leadership, urban-rural divide

#### Introduction

Small and rural Aotearoa New Zealand schools are experiencing the recent phenomenon of rapid urbanisation in their local communities. Record population growth (Statistics New Zealand, 2017a), rising living costs (Statistics New Zealand, 2017b), and a housing supply and demand imbalance (Statistics New Zealand, 2017c) have contributed to unprecedented new “urban” housing developments in regional areas. In turn, the impacts of these new homes are being experienced locally at both school and community levels, despite schools’ and communities’ positioning at the periphery, or even exclusion, in the consent and planning processes.

Locally elected school boards of trustees are responsible for school governance; however, changing demographic landscapes have ushered in a wave of new social, economic and political challenges. Considerations, such as changing school and community populations in terms of ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic background, as well as new, and often competing, parent and community aims are part of on-going school governance conversations. This study raises critical

questions about the demands of rapid urbanisation on local school governance, by examining varying school leadership and governance perspectives of urbanisation in previously small and rural communities.

This paper begins with a brief literature review, a description of the rural and educational context, the theoretical framework informing the study and the methodology that was used. It then discusses the findings and the implications of those findings. This study contributes to existing knowledge and theorising of the rural school context through its finding of a new, complex and contested 'semi-rural' identity resulting as an outcome of the uncertainty of rapid urban development. This emerging new semi-rural identity locates the rural as a key part of educational research, by identifying ways in which the rural context informs urban settings which challenge traditional notions of a rural-urban divide. Through the lens of local school governance, this study highlights the role of education as a reflection of wider social, economic and spatial or demographic policy areas.

### **Literature Review: The Changing Demographics of Rurality**

International rural education literature tends to focus on contextual rural factors such as geographic and cultural isolation (Arnold, 2001), issues of rural identity and values (Hargreaves et al., 2009), geographically isolated settings (Halsey, 2018), teacher preparation (Farr Darling & Taylor, 2015; Reid et al., 2010), and school leadership (Anderson & White, 2011). Many of these studies draw on ethnographic methods, and are localised, small-scale projects (Stelmach, 2011). Common themes within the existing literature often highlight the challenges or barriers of rural education. They include discussions of potential spatial disadvantage, diminished access to school and community resourcing (Anderson & White, 2011; Coker, 2019), inequitable distribution of opportunities (Butler, 2019), and school and student achievement (Sullivan et al., 2018).

Such findings, albeit unintentional, can be interpreted through a deficit lens contributing to the so called rural-urban divide (Bernard, 2018). Sullivan et al. (2018) explain how, in education, a deficit lens of rurality is visible through global discussions of rural educational disadvantage that relies on lower test scores, graduation rates, and university entrance statistics, as well as lower family and student socioeconomic status to explain the disparities between rural and urban students. The author of this paper, however, aligns with other critical scholars who re-frame such educational disparities as outcomes of wider educational opportunity gaps (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013).

While relevant to educational research, the debate about the rural-urban divide is itself an increasingly contested topic across disciplines and policy domains (Ledger & Fuqua, 2021). Ledger and Fuqua identify a "*changing global discourse of what is rural*" (p. 2) which acknowledges a new complexity amongst different rural contexts. They refer to the progression of OECD rural paradigms from the old, to the new rural (OECD, 2006) and the most recent Rural Policy 3.0 (OECD, 2019) to illustrate the development of rural definitions and policy approaches. This research enters into current conversations about the rural-urban divide aligning with the OECD's (2019) new rural paradigm in two distinct ways: first, in this study's perspective of rurality that functions within the OECD's most recent three-fold definition of rural, as the study participants' locations were all close to a functional urban area; second, in the OECD's Rural Policy 3.0 objectives of well-being which extend from a traditional focus on the economy to include society and the environment. Through a focus on regional urbanisation, more specifically, new housing developments on the periphery of Auckland offer a platform from which to discuss the shifting Aotearoa New Zealand rural-urban divide.

Regional urbanisation is a critical global issue with 70% of the world's population and 86% of those in OECD countries projected to live in cities by 2050 (OECD, 2016). The OECD's (2013) *Rural-Urban Partnerships* report explores the changing dynamics of rural-urban relationships. One of the

OECD (2013) report's findings was that urbanisation has altered the "population of many rural areas around cities" (p. 22) in which the enhanced mobility of people, goods and services has resulted in cities and rural areas including both urban and rural elements.

## **The Rural and Educational Context, Aotearoa New Zealand**

### ***The rural context***

Aotearoa New Zealand is a relatively small country of approximately five million people located in the South Pacific (Statistics New Zealand, 2021a). The country hosts a variety of geographical landscapes, including mountain ranges and rugged coastlines. While rural areas are located across the country, the far north and east coasts of the North Island and the west coast and southern tip of the South Island are well known rural locations. The New Zealand government classifies rural areas as "land-based areas outside urban areas" with populations of fewer than 1,000 residents and with "at least one community or public building," such as a school or shop (Statistics New Zealand, 2021b). This study posed a new challenge of mediating/balancing traditional demographic conceptions of rurality with areas experiencing rapid urbanisation in an educational context.

### ***Rural schools and school governance***

The Ministry of Education does not have a formal definition of a rural school. Instead, researchers are encouraged to adapt the Statistics New Zealand (2021b) definition to best suit their research. In this study, a set of five criteria were developed to identify potential research participants. First, schools in the South Auckland and Northern Waikato regions were targeted as both areas represent two of the fastest growing regional areas in the country. A new housing development in the local school community was a second requirement. Third, only primary schools were considered. Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools offer schooling for years one to eight, generally catering to students ages five to 12. Most small and rural communities meeting the Government's definition of a rural area, as outlined in the previous section, only had a primary school. Students in these rural areas had to travel to another town for secondary school. A school roll of 200 students or fewer was the fourth criteria. This number was selected in direct consultation with the Ministry of Education. Finally, only government state-funded schools were selected as participants.

Aotearoa New Zealand's school governance system is unique. Unlike other global contexts, each individual school is governed by an elected board of trustees. Parents of enrolled students as well as community members living in the local school area are eligible to be elected board of trustee members (New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2021). Each board of trustees has mandatory seats for the school principal, one elected school staff representative (typically a teacher), and a student representative for secondary schools (thus not relevant to this study), and the possibility of two co-opted trustees selected for specific expertise. Boards of trustees have a range of academic, financial, legal and policy obligations, with guidance available from the New Zealand School Trustees Association.

Boards' responsibilities include setting the strategic direction of the school via the school charter, and monitoring student achievement and overall compliance with national education guidelines. The employment of teachers and the appointment and appraisal of the school principal, as well as the maintenance of property and oversight of school finances, also fall under the responsibility of boards of trustees (New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2021).

Of immediate relevance to this study is existing research which identifies flaws within Aotearoa New Zealand's self-governing school system for small and rural schools. As Wylie (2012) explains, the "unevenness of the expertise that boards can bring to their schools" (p. 173) contributes to approximately 20% of boards struggling with their self-management responsibilities. This finding

is especially true for “*rural communities, and in small schools*” (p. 238). The novel focus of this study on urbanisation demands on schools provides a platform for the perspective of boards to be heard on the topic of a new educational landscape.

### Theoretical Framework

The experiences of changing rural identities, culture and practices represent historic and current narratives. As Woods (2006) explains, “*social and economic restructuring that was unsettling conventional understandings of rural space and that introduced new actors into rural politics*” (pp. 579–580) in the 1980s has been, and remains, central to current discussions of the rural context. The outcomes of spatial, demographic and community change which contribute to place-based discussions of educational change are also visible in the location of the current research. However, the experience of urbanisation in this location only amplifies global undercurrents in the urban-rural divide (Sassen, 2012). Traditional agricultural distinctions between urban and rural areas are being contested.

Fraser’s (1995, 2000, 2008) theorising is useful in understanding the complexity of urbanisation’s influence on rurality. Her work is based in the principles of redistribution, recognition and representation. Redistribution refers to the unequal distribution of resources and labour. Rural research that examines differential access to material and school-based materials, as well as teaching staff and professional development, offers examples of redistributive claims (Butler, 2019). Meanwhile, the term recognition refers to the acknowledgement and promotion of identity and difference which can be cultural or symbolic. Studies noting the difficulty of defining rurality (Stelmach, 2011) and place-based identities (OECD, 2013; Stephens, 2019) are examples of recognition claims. The third principle of representation is the political element of Fraser’s theoretical model. Representation refers to matters of social belonging and “*issues of membership and procedure in which concerns about inclusion and exclusion are central*” (Fraser, 2008, p. 21). Research which positions the urban as “*synonymous with society*” or the economic, political and social dominant culture (Stephens, 2019, p. 2045) are examples of Fraser’s concept of representation.

### Methodology

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a larger qualitative case study conducted in two phases over a three-year period. The aim of case studies as described by Yin (2003) is to understand a complex social phenomena in a particular context. In its focus on the impact of urban development on multiple small and rural communities and their local schools, this project aligns with Stake’s (1995) definition of a collective case study. Collective case studies gather data from several different sources which allows for the generalisation of study findings to a wider context and/or population. This research has been approved by the author’s university Human Participants Ethics Committee.

This paper is concerned with data that were collected in phase one of the overall study. As such, phase one has focused on two regions with the highest percentages of growth, largely attributed to unprecedented new housing developments: the wider Auckland area (2.3%) and Waikato (1.9%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Phase two focuses on data collected from two additional high growth regions in and around Christchurch and Tauranga.

The data from phase one of the study were collected over a one-year period from two key data sources in six rural schools on the periphery of the Auckland regional boundaries. The author conducted semi-structured focus group interviews of approximately one hour with rural school boards of trustees. These focus group interviews were supplemented by in-depth semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the school principals. In particular, these data were

focused on the perceptions of these key stakeholders about the impact of urban development on multiple small and rural communities, including schools.

All focus group and individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, then de-identified and coded individually by the author and a research assistant. An iterative thematic analysis to identify relevant themes followed, using NVivo software. The emergent themes were analysed and coded three times to ensure agreement on the coding.

## Findings

The data analysis indicated that there was a diversity of views amongst the research participants. The diversity of their perspectives can be placed on a spectrum of three categories. On one end of the spectrum is what is coined here as the “*traditional*” view of rurality. In the middle of the spectrum is a more nuanced or diplomatic view of the outcomes of urbanisation on the local community and school. Finally, the third category reflects a more positive outlook on some of the benefits of the increasing urbanisation on rural schools and the communities in which they are located. Distribution of participant perspectives across each category locate approximately 70% in the traditional view with 2% and 27% in the middle and positive categories respectively. Each of these perspectives will be discussed.

Findings from this research suggest the development of a new semi-rural identity from the lens of school governance. This new identity is complex, contested and under on-going negotiation by elected school governance representatives, who represent a range of often conflicting views about urbanisation’s influence on rural Aotearoa New Zealand. The findings also indicate a fluid or bi-directional nature of school board of trustees’ perspectives of urbanisation on their local schools. While some board members’ comments sit more firmly within one category, the majority of comments can be placed across the spectrum, reflective of the challenges of making sense of a new community and school context.

### **The traditional view**

Comments that are representative of the traditional view of rurality reflect a desire to maintain the existing identity of the rural community and local school. The primary messaging here is what one board member called a “*disconnect between the ‘old’ and new*” which reflect an overarching negative outlook on the process of urbanisation and corresponding changes. As one board member lamented, “*it’s just a hard thing, because it’s just got no rural feel anymore. [Geez] you look over and ... horrible, it’s horrible.*” The board member was referring to the houses in the new development around the school having a 16-week build time, the outcome of which is a common remark about the speed in which ready-to-move-in homes spring up very quickly. A similar comment about housing came from a board member at a different rural school who shared her view that:

*It’s a lot more robust and a lot more people concerned. And I think for good reason you know, 150 people living in a country town gonna be morphing into 6000, that would scare, that would hold concerns for lots of people.*

These distinctly negative views of urbanisation are at the very end of the spectrum. A slightly more nuanced outlook is presented by another board member who stated that:

*I suppose the threat that we do face in the future is that with continued growth and swamping of urbanisation and all that sort of thing, is that potentially what other people find is that they do have to develop this larger mentality which isn’t growth-orientated. It’s not productive, you know, you shut yourself off to all sorts of great ideas when you do that ... so, I suppose that is a potential threat for our school community and other rural schools out there, is that, what is being lost by this unchecked urbanisation [is] this swelling of the urban borders and how’s it gonna ... roll out down the line.*

Although outside the scope of this paper, uncertainty was a key emergent theme within the study data and is mentioned here due to its relevance to the transcript excerpt above. Board members and principals at all schools discussed to varying degrees their worries about the uncertainties or unknowns of the changes to their communities and school culture. The disconnect between old and new within this traditional view of rural communities also applied to community members. One of the self-identified “*established people*” or lifetime rural residents critically commented on this old versus new binary: “[people] move to a rural area because they want a rural lifestyle, they don’t particularly want lots people around—that’s the established people, where ‘new’ people coming in want services like they have in Auckland.”

Similar comments occurred amongst other school boards, such as in the following statement: “all these Aucklanders moving to our area and we don’t like that ... Aucklanders are like, ‘we demand this and this’. So there is a kind of divide, between different expectations.” This sentiment was echoed by each participating board of trustees in which terms such as “townies” and “city slickers” were used to describe the new residents of the housing developments in participating rural schools. Some board members more implicitly called on the intrinsically held value for the rural amongst the new families in the area. One board member explained:

*because we are that small country feel about us, even though a lot of our kids are townie kids or city kids, they do like the rural outlook of the school, and they do like the close-knit feeling and the school culture that we have here.*

This interview excerpt relies on the self-identification of new families’ preference for a different, rural education for their children. Their inclusion in the rural school creates a semi-rurality feel, but with a pride of the original rural school character. Although more tentative, the same sentiment is shared in this hopeful statement: “so Calf Club days, flower shows, you know all of those little rural things. I would hope that ... the new community would embrace that as well.”

Staying within in the school context, the traditional view of rurality is demonstrated in this school principal’s statement: “so our Calf Club is about tradition ... it’s a really strong focus. You know, our day is huge but very traditional.” In the Aotearoa New Zealand rural school context, Calf Club is highly regarded and a popular annual event. Children bring in a range of animals, traditionally calves and lambs, which are a means of demonstrating respect and care for animals as well as agricultural knowledge. Prizes are common, with Calf Club day being a highlight of the year for the entire school community. In a strong statement about traditional rural events like Calf Club, another school principal simply stated: “it’s 100 years [of tradition], and so it’s really important to maintain that history.”

Other principals took a more direct, educative stance towards inducting new parents and children into their school’s rural ways of being. One principal stated:

*I’m not sure if it’s expectations or understanding of how country schools operate in comparison to how city schools operate. We try really hard to keep our new families because we know we’ve got to school them up. We’ve need to, you know, get them to understand that this is how we do things at our school, this is what it looks like. So yeah, so we do a lot of work right from the very beginning, you know, getting the parents involved and in, and, trying to make things are clear as possible, make the doors as open as possible to come in and ask questions, to clarify, to nip things in the bud pretty quickly.*

A similar active approach to maintaining traditional rural school culture was through purposeful selection and training of new teachers. This principal explained:

*So, even though we sort of try to clearly articulate that in interviews and people say, ‘yeah, that’s what I’m looking for, I’m looking for a change,’ [they arrive] and pretty quickly we can see they’re not the right fit. Whether it’s that they’ve come from a situation where they’ve got lots of other people around them doing things for them; that they just don’t quite*

connect with our kids—whatever, so we have gone through a patch of just not the right fit of staffing for this environment. And another example would be, like we have some community events, and the old team [of teachers], we're all there, because we know it's important to be seen in our community, to engage with our families outside of school. Whereas some of the new staff that have come in, they don't see that, they're a bit removed like, "I've done my job," and walk away. So, that's been a big challenge for me as a principal, just managing that. Um, and in some cases, I've managed people out of our school, because it's not been a fit for them or us. And, in some cases, it's been about supporting and managing them to come around to our way of thinking.

All three examples above demonstrate the pivotal role of the school principal in maintaining rural school cultures and ways of being. Principals employed three primary strategies to continue their rural school traditions: active managing of new family's expectations of the school, providing firm guidance on existing rural school culture and practices, and ensuring a united rural focused vision amongst their teaching staff.

Teacher representatives on the board spoke less directly about a traditional view of rural schools. One teacher offered her desire to maintain traditional school culture by sharing:

*I like the relationships that we have with our, you know, like I know all of our parents, I know most of the grandparents and the aunts and uncles. And, you know, that's ... it feels nice, it feels like home. So, yeah, I'd hate to lose that. And I think most of the staff come and stay for that as well. And they bring their own kids here as well. So ... they'd want to be part of this school community as well. My husband and my children and I lived in the schoolhouse for three and a half years and we're a part of the community that way.*

This teacher's comment provides an insight into traditional rural school culture in which deep relationships have formed between families and the school. Entire families are well-known due to generational enrolment, and their subsequent thorough support of the school. The note about living in the schoolhouse is another rural tradition, where the school board may own a house on the school property which is rented to a teacher. Historically, the schoolhouse was used as a teacher and principal recruitment strategy. The increasing need for upgrading school buildings and property services are two other visible outcomes of urbanisation for school boards. Every principal and board described how much of their school governance role had shifted towards maintenance and development of school property, as the result of new family enrolments at their schools. The physical and thus visible nature of school property changes also contributed to some board members' negative attitudes towards urbanisation and the new residents it brought to their formerly rural communities.

### ***In the middle: A nuanced or diplomatic view***

Findings aligning with a middle ground perspective of urbanisation's influence on rural schools were less common than the traditional views. With specific reference to new housing, a board of trustee member stated:

*So, obviously there are farms being sold up in, and bits being cut off, and, there is growth, but it's not massive urbanisation or anything like that. It's more lifestyle, people moving out of the city into a bit more country.*

A similar pragmatic view was put bluntly by a board member at a different school. He directly stated, that "I don't think we're going to be in a position where we're going to have to compromise our rural school feel." The process of urbanisation at this school was in the initial stages, which may have contributed to this more balanced view of the ability to maintain a rural school culture. On the other hand, the board and principal were unified in their vision to actively induct new families into its established rural school culture. As this school, the principal explained:

*Their [new urban family] culture is different than the traditional Kiwi farmer. You know? Different ways you speak to people, different all of that kind of stuff. So that's quite a battle ground. I don't think it's about explaining to the parents or the kids that the school values and school expectations are also what society expects. So, you have to, you know, work on that together.*

Another line of comments from the principals focused on adapting rural school traditions and ways of being to be inclusive of new residents:

*We've got less and less farmers and so we want to keep it because it's a historical event but you want to edit and change it so it appeals to other people. So for example, everyone has to do Calf Club but you can do growing a potato in a bucket, so you don't have to have land so that it's inclusive of everybody. And the fact that many people don't have mums and dads at home to help out because they're working all the time to help you bring up a lamb or to do this big project, so it's about having enough options so that everybody can feel involved in it and still take part and feel value in it. It's hard when there is no Calf Club at all or cows or anything like that. It's all been a bit changed this year. So yeah, just keep. I think you have to be willing to change as a school and adapt. If you keep doing the same things you've been doing for the past 100 years you will not be the school of choice.*

This school principal's comment about working with new families to meet somewhere in the middle and about moving forward with current school values and traditions is a more pragmatic and constructive outlook on the influence of urbanisation on school communities.

### **A more positive outlook**

The third perspective of urbanisation was positive, which reflected some acknowledgement of benefits to the school and local rural community. Positive comments all initially came in relation to the wider rural community. For one previously rural town, the increased population gave greater political voice via the official recognition of a community committee with direct links to the local regional council. Committee meetings were regularly attended by local councillors, regional representatives soliciting community feedback on new council plans and, twice a year or more, the Mayor himself. Community members used this new political recognition to advance community needs for new transport and infrastructure projects, and the re-development of the main street. This was in addition to increasing rural services like the introduction of weekly curb side recycling and the desire for a supermarket. Board members who attended these meetings regarded the outcomes of these meetings as positive for their school:

*It's a good community feel I think ... there's still quite a bit of buzz around building a community and helping it grow.*

*Potentially one advantage of some more people coming in, is that then there would need to be some other infrastructure in place which would then provide some central meetings points which actually could develop more of a community feel.*

There was a similar perspective on positive school change. All but one principal described how school board elections were much bigger, with more candidates expressing interest in serving on the board of trustees. Half the schools had elections for the first time in "many years." As one principal explained to me, prior to more families moving to the area, she had to rely on the same few parents to raise their hand. Two other principals said that they struggled to achieve the required quorum of board members, despite significant efforts to "tap people on the shoulder" and reaching out to their personal networks. Likewise, principals identified additional professional expertise that new parents and community members were bringing to the board.

In sharp contrast to some of the traditional views of urbanisation, to some degree, all boards and particularly principals identified how some new families actively sought out a rural school. They



noted that new families from urban areas are “coming because they value that small school feel and the nature of like a rural school which is what we market ourselves as.” Such parents were making an informed choice in favour of a different rural school experience for their children. Other urbanisation benefits to schools are demonstrated in the following comment from a board member:

*On the positive side, it's probably saved a few schools and clubs. They're looking like the small rural schools and the numbers were declining and he was saying a few hundred, we're talking about ten years, the roll was half what it was now. And the different sports clubs couldn't get teams together anymore and then now, some of the kids now can get a cricket team because [of] this. There's just enough people ... whereas everything was starting to fall over because we couldn't get the, couldn't get the numbers.*

In addition to the ability to provide further extra-curricular activities, increased school roll numbers had further benefits for rural schools. A higher school roll allowed for boards to hire more teaching and support staff, and parent involvement in the parent-teacher association increased as well. Finally, while one teacher who expressed a traditional view about parent “demands” and expectations of schools, some boards found it helpful to have additional parent involvement, which helped to move initiatives forward, like play-based learning and increased digital technology use. As one board member said, “it's more the parents to be honest ... I think a bit more development and urbanisation will benefit the community.” This positive outlook nicely summarises the advantage of new families enrolling at his school as the result of urbanisation.

## Discussion

A new, complex semi-rural identity has emerged from the divergent views of urbanisation's impact on rural Aotearoa New Zealand schools. Underlying this claim is the argument that this contested new space is one in which the rural informs the urban. The analysis of research data presented in this article articulate the ways in which rural schools are proactively constructing their own rural school identities and narratives. In this way, this research directly speaks to this special issue theme by examining how this research research is challenging traditional perspectives of rurality.

### **Redistribution: Varied views of rurality and urbanisation**

School governance discussions about the housing market, the movement of new urban residents into rural new housing developments, and related change in school and family demographics are classic examples of Fraser's (1995, 2000) concept of redistribution. Board of trustee members who lamented the loss of the rural feel, with the quick build of “horrible” houses in the new development, align with the differential access to material resources. At the core of this injustice is the economic disadvantage felt by some board members. All the new housing development homes were of higher financial value than the majority of older, comparable rural homes in the school area. Deemed “affordable” houses by the New Zealand government, these homes at the time of their builds were \$600,000 or more.

Redistribution is often discussed primarily in economic terms; however, access to human capital is another aspect of redistribution. In education and in this research, human capital was discussed by school boards in response to specific questions in the semi-structured focus group interviews. Human capital discussions revolved around the interests of parent board of trustee members, some of whom had previous school board trustee experience as noted by several principals, and finally, enhanced professional expertise. Professional expertise is typically influenced by geographic location and the arguably smaller size of the pool of professional expertise in rural areas (Ledger et al., 2015). The ability to harness the diversification of the community and board trustee expertise is one of the ways in which rural schools develop their new semi-rural identities. Drawing on the advantages of new community members' personal and

professional backgrounds enabled some school boards to successfully manage a period of transition between existing and school emerging identities, cultures and practices.

### **Recognition: Creating and maintaining space for a semi-rural identity**

With the rural informing the urban in the local schools in this research, Fraser's (1995, 2000) principle of recognition seemed to be in play. Indeed, this research builds on a small number of studies that examined community culture from the perspective of increasing urbanisation of rural spaces (Bonner, 1997; Howley & Howley, 2010; Salamon, 2003; Stephens, 2019). Bonner's (1997) coining of the term *rurban* in the American context is relevant to this analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand school governance data. Rurban refers to the intersectional space where urban and rural communities overlap.

All the local school communities involved in this research align with Bonner's (1997) concept of *rurban*. Principals and boards of trustees who were able to strike a balance between traditional rural school cultures and practices that were also inclusive of new families demonstrated the complex process of crafting a new *rurban* or semi-rural identity. This balance is reflected in one principal's statement:

*Because we provide the opportunity for students who can do animals to do animals [at Calf Club], and ones who can't [who] are a bit more, I guess, "suburbanly" to have a chance to do a project that's kind of rural based but not animals. I hope that we can continue to maintain that balance and that the community would support that as well.*

Through difficult conversations about how to respond to the on-going uncertainty of intersectional place-based change, rural school boards of trustees were, as Stephens (2019) explains, questioning and countering "dominant, urban-centric narratives about place and identity" (p. 5). In line with this special issue, the same act of semi-rural identity sense-making positions school governance as educational context that contributes to the resistance of "othering" or deficit views of rurality (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 34). The full spectrum of views about rurality within the study data illustrate the contested and messy nature of new identity creation. During phase one of the study most urbanisation in the rural communities involved in this research were still underway. Consequently, this identity creation process is best described as a negotiation in progress.

### **Representation: School governance's role in the semi-rural**

Representation, the political element of Fraser's (1995, 2000) theoretical model was implicit within the layered discussions of urbanisation. This research provides voice to school boards of trustees whose communities are undergoing unprecedented demographic change. Their experiences are similar, with no guidelines, advice or experienced mentors to support them. This is uncharted territory for school trustees. Boards of trustees in this study are proactive in representing themselves in conversations about urbanisation, rather than passively accepting deficit views of rural schools or allowing their existing culture, practices and traditions to be changed by an influx of new families from urban settings. As one board member firmly stated, "we have a lot of community members that still encourage that rural, you know, *rurality*".

Representation claims for rural people, places and contexts are inherent within discussions of the rural-urban divide which position the urban as the economic, political and social dominant identity (Corbett, 2006; Stephens, 2019; Thomas et al., 2011). School board trustees are enhancing their political voice (and thus representation) in multiple ways including: speaking out in community meetings, reaching out to local councillors and mayors to discuss the impact of urbanisation on their schools, and requesting meetings with housing developers who as all boards noted advertise the local school in their advertising campaigns.

## Conclusion

Despite the continued rise in new urban developments across regional Aotearoa New Zealand, to date there has been limited, if any, research about urbanisation's impact on rural towns, especially in relation to examining this phenomenon from an educational perspective. Recent council reports from Auckland and Waikato District Councils (Auckland Council, 2017; Waikato District Council, 2017), the districts in which all study participants were located, do make token references to some of the tensions associated with such rapid growth. Auckland Council's *Auckland plan*, for example, identifies continued population growth in South Auckland, with intensified housing developments planned over the next five and ten years, and included a Southern Initiative section that identified educational achievement as one of its goals (Auckland Council, 2017). A section in the report on rural areas referred to the "long-term consequences of prolific subdivision across rural areas" (Auckland Council, 2017, p. 221). Auckland's Council wants to maintain the "character" of rural areas and support small and rural communities. Similarly, the Franklin Section of the recently reviewed Waikato District's Plan also recognised the special "rural character" of rural areas, noting the potential negative impact of the "scale and intensity of development" on rural communities (Waikato District Council, 2017, p. 1). The Waikato District Council also outlined a strategic growth strategy that balances interest in, and capacity for, rural development.

So while the two council reports illustrate some acknowledgement of rurality as part of their development plans, the initial phase of the current study reported here firmly indicates the complexity and contested reality of merging the rural and the new urban in rural Aotearoa New Zealand for communities and schools. As this paper has shown, members of school boards of trustees and principals are grappling with multiple challenges associated with rapid demographic growth. This fragile new identity is under constant negotiation. However, one thing remains clear: the rural aspect of school culture and practices is resisting the urbanisation of schools. Instead, the semi-rural identity is firmly based in what one school principal describes as, "the rural—our way of doing things."

At the core of this new, negotiated semi-rurality is the social construction of new perspectives of geography, spatiality, and community that, in turn, are generating new conversations about their impact on education and, in this research, school governance. Rather than being usurped by an urban perspective, a rural perspective is impacting the urban with a new semi-rural identity that is complex, contested and under on-going negotiation and renegotiation.

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