

The long-term impact of school closure on a rural community in the Netherlands



The former school (Kloesewier, 2022).

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Abstract

This study researches the long-term impacts of school closure in a rural community in the Netherlands. Over the years school closure in rural areas has become a prevalent topic. When a primary school closes, a community loses a valuable facility. Not only is the school used for educational purposes, but often, the school is a primary meeting place in a village. This study is researches a community that experienced school closure nine years ago using in depth interviews. School closure is an impactful event, and to cope with the loss of a valuable place in the village certain conditions should be met to substitute for the loss of the school. The essential functions of the school for the community should be able to occur in a different place in the village. This place should be able to replace the school and thus ideally be publicly accessible. To counteract the loss of the school, active participation from community members is required. The eventual long-term impact of closure depends on how the community coped with closure, which is affected by the individual's sense of place and the sense of community in the village. The loss of the school was generally well coped with, although long-term residents still occasionally tend to miss the lively ambiance that children created in the village.

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- Introduction

For some years, facilities in rural areas have been declining (Woods, 2011). Several international research projects investigated the impact of the closure of facilities, specifically schools (Hallenbeck 2012, Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Egelund and Laustsen, 2006; Kearns et al., 2009).

Rural facilities are essential to local communities because, besides the primary function, they also have secondary, social, and economic functions, let alone physical features (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017). A primary school serves the purpose to provide education to children (Gill, 2017, Regal et al., 2020). Moreover, the building can be used for extracurricular activities (De Vries et al., 2016), a school facilitates employment (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019), and it is an essential place for social interactions (Cedering and Wihlborg, 2020; Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009), and the building itself can be an attractive landmark in the village (Lund, 2002).

Especially in rural communities, primary schools are significant meeting places for their residents (Haartsen and Van Wissen, 2012), mainly because a primary school is a key setting for shared community activities (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). Forsythe (1984) endorses that view by stating that village schools organize several activities that are accessible to the community. Therefore, school closure is often perceived as a sign of community decline (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006). This is often also experienced by rural communities: when a facility closes, they experience a change that can result in a sense of loss (Cook et al., 2007). Devine-Wright (2009) describes five stages of the psychological response to place change, which include becoming aware of change, interpretation, evaluation, coping, and action. These are all responses to place change from the moment the closure is announced. If a facility has been in a village for a long time, it can also become a symbol that resembles the town (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017). The meaning ascribed to a facility by residents depends on the memories and experiences that they have with a facility (Devine-Wright, 2009).

That school closure is an impactful event is well-known, often including a period in which emotions run high (Witten et al. 2001; Kearns et al. 2009; Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2020). These emotions result in actions that can be protective, participative, or protests towards facility closures (Barnett & Barnett, 2003; Kearns et al., 2009). However, where Devine-Wright (2009) describes a linear process, Christiaanse and Haartsen argue this is a cyclical process. Attitudes towards place change might change over time, and thus also how people cope with place change. The gap in academic literature is the

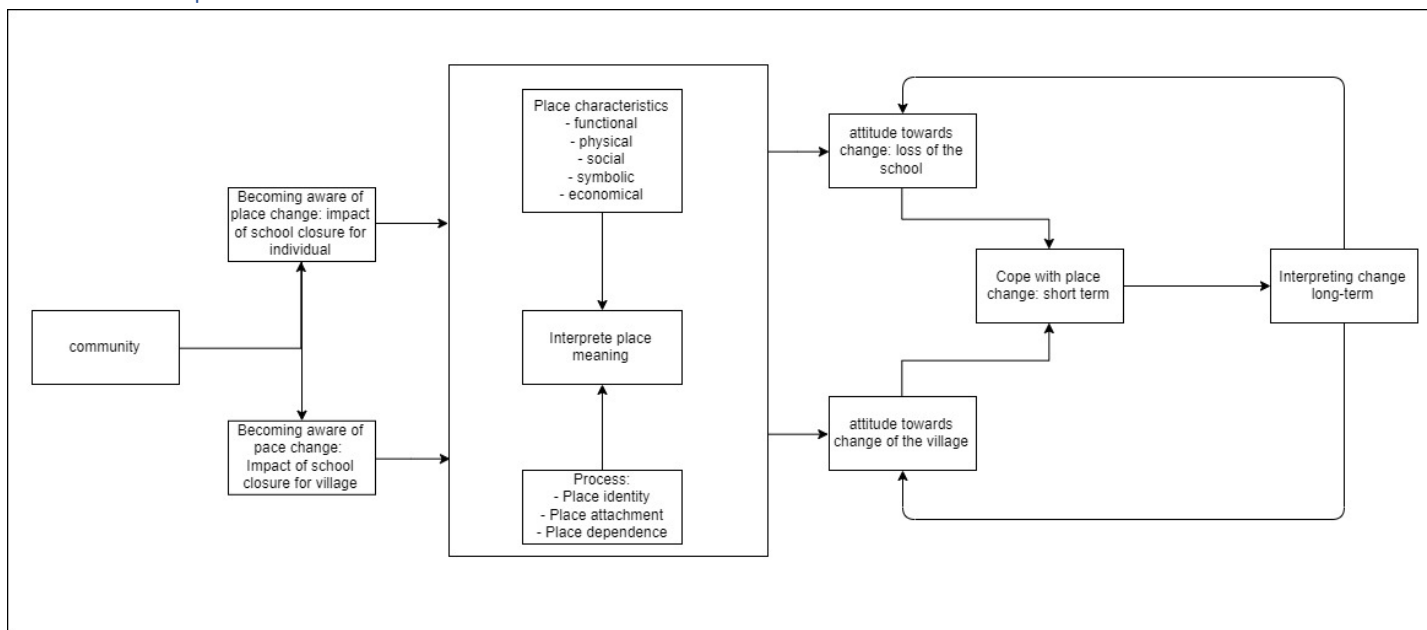
absence of insights into the long-term effects of school closure on a village when the dust about the closure has settled. It is convenient to find out whether the attitude towards the place change from a group of people that have experienced school closure changed over time and whether they still experience loss. Therefore, it is meaningful to understand how the community coped with school closure, for example, by organizing activities that could substitute the role of the school.

School closure is an issue in many Western European countries (Woods, 2011), including several cases in the Netherlands. In the province of Fryslân alone, almost a hundred schools closed between 2010 and 2020, which is roughly twenty percent of all primary schools in the province (Friesch Dagblad, 2020). Not only is school closure a prevalent event, but it is also an impactful scenario for local communities (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2020). Therefore, the long-term effects of school closure are highly relevant to policymakers. When we gain insight into the long-term effects of place change, we can try to diminish the negative impacts in the process of school closure. This study will research how residents of the community look back at the school closure, how they have coped with the change, and whether they are still coping with the change almost a decade after the loss of a school. Therefore, the research question is:

What is the long-term impact of school closure on a rural community in the Netherlands?

Related questions are: What was the role of the school in the community at the time it was still functioning? Why did the school close? How did the process of school closure take place? What happened to the building? This paper is structured as follows: the next chapter elaborates on existing literature about school closures, the different functions a facility and specifically a school can have to a village, and the impact of the closure on the village and the inhabitants. After that, the methods and ethical considerations in the methodology section will be discussed, together with the study area. Next, the results of the interviews will be addressed. This section will discuss what the school meant to the residents of de Veenhoop, what the role of the school was in the community, and finally, what the impact of the school closure was in the long term. Thereafter, the conclusion will answer the main research question.

- Theory
- Conceptual model



The conceptual model is developed by building on the articles of Devine-Wright (2009), Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017), and Christiaanse and Haartsen (2020).

Figure 1: Conceptual model

The starting point of the conceptual model is the community of the village of this study. The first stage of Devine-Wright's model (2009) is that the community becomes aware of the upcoming change of place due to school closure. When a place changes, this impacts the individual and the village. The impact of the change is related to the meaning that residents ascribed to the place.

Based on the conceptual model of Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017), the change of meaning of a place, in this case, a school building, depends on the socio-psychological process of the interpretations of place. The interpretations of the place consist of two parts. Firstly, the functional, physical, social, symbolic, and economic characteristics of a place can influence the meaning of the place for the community (Lewicka, 2011). Secondly, the *process* of giving meaning to a place is the experienced sense of place of community members (Lewicka, 2011) and can be subdivided into place identity, place attachment, and place dependence (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001).

What follows is an evaluation of whether these changes will end up being positive or negative for the community. The attitudes towards the school closure explain how the community deals with the closure. Possible coping strategies, according to Christiaanse and Haartsen (2020), can be that place change is denied (Bonaiuto et al., 1996), analyzed (Ruiz and Hernández, 2014), or accepted (Barnett & Barnett, 2003; van der Land & Doff, 2010). People can get angry about place change, and have feelings of grief or insecurity about the future (Fried, 2000).

When the function of a building changes, the meaning of the place for the community changes, mainly because people have attached meanings to certain functions of a building (Rosenbaum, 2006). Some functions have become essential to a community. Therefore, communities have to reinterpret the meaning the building has for them. When a building had a crucial role within the village, the community has to adapt to this loss of place (Reese et al., 2019). If highly valued functions from a closed facility are now experienced in other places, it can be advocated that a community has coped well with change. However, when the community still experiences a loss nine years after closure, it means that certain functions of the place that were significant to them have not been fully substituted. Christiaanse and Haartsen (2020) argue that place change is a cyclical process. *“Place change is constantly re-evaluated based on social interactions and the outcomes of responses”* (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2020, p.3).

- [Place change: meaning of the school and loss of school](#)

To identify the meaning of a facility, the functions of the facility to the community have to be discussed first. Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017) distinct the primary, secondary, social, and economic functions together with the physical features of a place. Some of the functions have become significant to a community. A rural primary school can be significant to local residents because it offers accessible education for their children (Beach et al., 2019). Especially in rural areas, the school can function as a vehicle through which memories and traditions pass to younger generations (Hallenbeck, 2012). A primary school is also a place of interaction where information is exchanged, and social networks are built up amongst children (Witten, 2001). Besides, parents gather at school to pick up their children, which offers the opportunity for informal meetings (Miller, 1993). A school also organizes numerous activities like parent meetings, sporting events, and other activities that help to develop a community and social cohesion (Gill, 2017; Regal et al., 2020).

Primary schools are not limited to the purpose of education, they can also have secondary functions that are not necessarily related to educational purposes. The building can be used as a multifunctional community center, which is accessible to community members (Supule, 2019). In Latvia, the majority of school premises are used for sports activities (Regal et al., 2020). Besides sports, it can host extracurricular activities like music and drama clubs (De Vries et al., 2016).

Moreover, a school is a guarantee of employment for some people (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). Furthermore, the physical features of a facility, like the geographical location or the architectural style it was built in (Lund, 2002) can be aspects someone can get emotionally attached to (Rosenbaum, 2006). When the functions or features of the building change, it leads to a loss of the meanings that were attached to it (Cook et al., 2007).

When a school closes, this is also impactful to the village, depending on the role of the school in the village. Therefore, geographical context matters when the relationship between a school and a community is concerned (Mosey, 2004; Massey, 1994). Hargreaves et al. (2009) found that schools in Scandinavian countries are expected to contribute to the community. Meanwhile, studies in Ireland and Latvia show that small schools add educational value compared to larger schools (Gill, 2017; Regal et al., 2020). Especially by providing unique and innovative educational opportunities (Regal et al., 2020).

Facilities in rural villages have become a meeting place for residents (Amcoff et al., 2011), specifically primary schools (Haartsen and Van Wissen, 2012; Cedering and Wihlborg, 2020). Schools are one of the main assets to invest social capital in society because schools can create social connections amongst community members (Schmidt et al., 2010; Putnam, 2000). Small schools generally have a more active role in the community (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). Although, this does not have to be true for every village (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Bagley and Hillyard, 2011).

Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2014) found that a village school is a significant place for shared activities. For example, a school provides a building- and play yard for community use (Witten et al., 2001). Therefore, a school has become significant to rural residents because they value their school as a place for social activity (Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009; de Groot and Schonewille; Gieling et al., 2019). Kearns et al. (2009) found that residents of a rural village in New Zealand even go as far as to say that the school building is 'theirs' because a school can be crucial for establishing a community identity (Forsythe, 1984; DeYoung, 1995).

The presence of a primary school is often a symbol of a healthy, viable community (Woods, 2005; Walker and Clark, 2010; Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017). Moreover, a primary school is also crucial to the sustainability of a village (Kassai and Farkas, 2016). The common belief amongst residents is that a village with a school is more attractive to young families (Lehtonen, 2021). Therefore, when a school closes, it is often perceived as a sign of community decline (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006). Primary school closure disconnects communities from their past, and villages lose a crucial meeting point (Kearns et al., 2009). Therefore, a loss of a primary school is characterized by a loss of social vitality (Card, 2003). As a result of the closure, children will be more inclined to go to another village for extracurricular activities (Meesterberends, 2012). Therefore, associations in their village might lack members, and social interactions could decline (van Leer et al., 2012). A similar result was found by Cranston (2017), who researched school closures in Ontario and describes the threats to neighborhood cohesion and social capital. To many, the closure of a primary school symbolizes the closure of the village (Van der Wouw et al., 2012).

Primary school closure will be even more painful if there are few facilities left in the village (van Leer et al., 2012). Other facilities can take over the social functions of a primary school, but when these facilities are absent, the closure of a primary school will lead to a loss of social activity (Forsythe, 1984). Although, when there is a high level of social capital, it can take over the functions of the school. This requires the active participation of community members (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006). Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020) found in Finland that maintaining local activities, having a space to organize activities, and cooperation with the municipality can replace former functions of the school.

Amongst policymakers and local residents, it is assumed that villages without a primary school are unattractive to young families (Barakat, 2015). especially in the more widespread Scandinavian countries (Assmo and Wihlborg, 2012). However, research in the Netherlands concluded that the closure of a primary school did not influence the inward flow of families with young children (Elshof et al., 2015). The reduction in services could be a reason for people to leave the village (Verwest, 2011). Elshof et al. (2015) found that there is a small peak in departures from a village after school closure.

2.3 Attitude towards change and short-term reaction to school closure

A community's attitude towards place change results from the interpretation of place (Devine-Wright, 2009). The meaning that residents ascribe to a place is a process of bonding between people and place, often referred to as the 'sense of place' (Cuba and Hammon, 1993). Sense of place is divided into three strongly related dimensions (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). The first one is place attachment, which is the emotions a place evokes, such as happiness, anger, or sadness (Lewicka, 2011). The second dimension is place dependence, which refers to people who are attached to a place are expected to behave accordingly, for example, by utilizing the local facilities (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981). The third dimension is place identity, which refers to the memories of a place or knowledge of the environment and history (Williams et al., 1992; Gustafson, 2001). This study will adopt a holistic approach, where these three dimensions will be regarded as a sense of place because these dimensions are interconnected (Chow and Healey, 2008).

On an individual level, the attitude towards place change is related to the meaning of place. When there is a high level of sense of place, there will be a negative attitude towards change (Jorgensen, 2010). On a community level, the attitudes towards school closure are often grounded in their shared beliefs and social norms (Proshansky et al., 1983). Rural communities have particularly negative responses to the possibility of school closure because they believe it will impact the community negatively (Slee and Miller, 2014). During this period, emotions often run high (Witten et al. 2001; Kearns et al. 2009; Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2020). A common belief is that when a school is closed, the community will die with the school (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). Meanwhile, others stress that school closure is particularly an indicator of community decline and not a cause to dilute the severity of the closure (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006). Length of residence is often an indicator of attitude towards place change, people who have lived in a place for a long time, generally have stronger emotional ties to the place than short-term residents (Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Stedman, 2002).

As described in the former chapter, a school can have a functional, physical, social, economic, and symbolic meaning for a community. The meaning of place for the community, combined with the individual's sense of place, will determine coping responses (Anton and Lawrence, 2016).

When the place change occurs, it can cause disruption of place meaning on both individual and community levels, which could lead to feelings of anger, grief, or insecurity (Fried, 2000). The belief of residents that they can act against closure, for instance, when it is feasible to keep the school open, impacts how communities cope with changes in their environment (Anton & Lawrence, 2016). Several community characteristics can influence how they cope with place change. Roussi (et al., 2006) state that rural communities show different coping behavior than urban communities. Moreover, the feeling that members have of being part of a community, through shared experiences and connections through social interactions (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Manzo and Perkins, 2006; Wilkinson, 2008) affects how a community copes with issues in their village (Roussi et al., 2006). A high sense of community can result in effective, collective action. Community actions can be protective, participative, or protests against facility closures (Barnett & Barnett, 2003; Kearns et al., 2009). The outcomes of these responses, in combination with social interactions, lead to a re-evaluation of place (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2020). Therefore, place change is a cyclical process because the meanings of a place can change over time (Cook et al., 2007), and place change affects some more than others (Devine-Wright, 2014).

When highly valued functions from a closed facility are now experienced in other places, it can be advocated that a community has coped well with change. However, if several years after closure the community still experiences a loss, then certain functions of the place that were valuable to them have not been fully substituted. In the existing literature, there is no documentation about the situation of rural communities that experienced a loss of facilities many years ago. I expect that the meanings that residents who experienced facility closure ascribed to the facility when it was in function determine how they have coped with closure. The meanings that residents ascribed to a place do not just vanish after action, as is suggested by Devine-Wright (2009), especially when a place still shows the same physical features. Therefore, the meanings that are attached to place most likely decrease over time, depending on an individual's sense of place and the characteristics of their community (Cuba and Hammon, 1993; Roussi, et al., 2006).

- Methodology

3.1 Method

A qualitative research method is applied to answer the research question: *'What is the long-term impact of school closure on a rural community in the Netherlands?'*. Qualitative research is best suited to answer this question because the objective is to portray the meaning of the participant (Punch, 2014).

The participants in this study include residents of de Veenhoop. Therefore, the sample could be small and more specific in the variety of perspectives than in quantitative research. This research is focused on the experiences of residents that concern the former school and their community life in the village after the school closed. The experiences make up a narrative. The narrative is the understanding of the interpretations at a point in time and a particular context (Fossey, 2002). Therefore, qualitative research is more beneficial than quantitative research (Winchester and Rofe, 2016).

3.2 Interviews

The data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the experiences of residents of de Veenhoop. Firstly, about their daily community life, and what it is like to live in de Veenhoop. Secondly, to elaborate on their memories about the school, and how they looked back at the school closure. Nine years after school closure, the participants gave insight into what changes they experienced within the village, and whether this could be related to the loss of the school. Individual characteristics and involvement with the school could explain their point of view. Therefore, using interviews was convenient to give an understanding of the translations and portrayals of their reality (Anderson, 2015)

An interview guide was created that covered a list of questions grounded in theory and based on the preliminary conceptual model. This list of questions was discussed during the interviews, in a semi-structural manner. The main advantage of semi-structured interviews was that follow-up questions

could delve deeper into the specific experiences of participants, and therefore provide a good understanding of the participants' motives and actions. To evaluate if the list of questions would provide me with the information I was looking for, I conducted a test interview with a former resident of de Veenhoop. After adjusting the list of questions, I was able to initiate meetings. For the interviews to be as convenient as possible, they were in the language that was most comfortable to the participant. Therefore, half of the interviews were in Frisian and the other half in Dutch. The interview consisted primarily of verbal exchange, hence, its success mainly depended on my interviewers' interactional skills, as was found by Clough and Nutbrown (2004).

3.3 Participant selection

To select participants for my research, the goal was to interview people that resided in de Veenhoop during the school closure. These people would be able to tell what changes they observed in the village in the years after the closure. Therefore, to recruit participants for the interviews, a convenience sample was chosen. This is a type of non-probability sampling in which the selected cases are accessible to the researcher (Burt et al., 2009). In preparation for the research, I reached out to the current owner of the building, informing him about the research idea. After visiting the former school, the owner provided me with beneficial information about the building, the village, and the people. The strategy to approach participants was via snowball sampling. Using snowball sampling, participants recommend other residents that might be relevant for the research (Sadler et al., 2010). Therefore, the first potential participants' names were recommended to me by the building owner, and the snowball sampling started.

Participant	Age	Gender	Residence in de Veenhoop	Relation to the school
Clara	71	Female	Moved here 25 years ago	Worked at this school
Ymie	75	Female	Moved here when she married a 'Veenhoper' 50 years ago	Her children went to this school
Lydia	63	Female	Moved here when she had just married 40 years ago	Her children went to this school
Joost	40	Male	Born and raised, but lived in different places, returned to de Veenhoop for work	He went to this school

Bauke	80	Male	Born and raised in de Veenhoop, never left.	He went to the school, and his children as well
Evert	29	Male	Born and raised, but has lived in different places to for work	He went to this school
Leo	47	Male	Moved here for work from another part of the Netherlands	Did not want his children at this school
Cynthia	44	Female	Moved here for work from another part of the Netherlands	Decided to let her son go to a different school
Robbin	24	Male	Born and raised in de Veenhoop	He went to this school
Jens	49	Male	Born and raised in de Veenhoop.	He went to this school, and his children as well
Simon	50	Male	Moved here 20 years ago	His children went to this school
Arie	21	Male	Raised in de Veenhoop	He went to this school
Simone	39	Female	A newcomer	School was already closed

Figure 2: Characteristics of the participants

The first participant I reached out to was the head of the village council: 'Plaatselijk Belang', dedicated to the interests of the villagers. I asked him if he could share a message with the community in which I introduced myself and requested volunteers to participate in my research. However, I did not get any response to the email. Therefore, I was entirely dependent on the use of snowballing. To assemble as many perspectives as possible, I could ask for the contact details of someone with specific characteristics like their age, their time of residence, living in the core of the village, or outside of the core, for instance, on a farm. The last interview was conducted with a newcomer with young children, to have a variety of perspectives of the village. The interviews were conducted during the months of February and March 2022, at the home of the participant and lasted between thirty and seventy minutes. During the first contact with a potential participant, I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my research briefly. If they agreed to cooperate, I would plan an appointment. At first, I would discuss the purpose of the interview and the informed consent with the participant (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The informed consent included an outline of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the guarantee that the obtained data would be solely for this research. The informed consent also included the request for the interview to be recorded. During the interviews, participants answered the questions from their own experiences and beliefs, and since this was personal information, I wanted to ensure their privacy. Therefore, pseudonyms were used in this study, to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The audio recordings were stored in a password-protected device, and I made sure the consent forms were in a secure place.

After data collection, using semi-structured interviews, the audio recordings were used to create a transcript. The interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the interview, primarily before the following interview (Dunn, 2016). When the transcriptions were complete, open coding was employed to develop preliminary themes without neglecting valuable information (Bernard, 2006). After multiple readings of all materials, the themes and patterns from the interviews were organized into categories, to make connections between the observational data and the research questions.

3.4 Reflection and positionality

One of my motivations to research the school closure in de Veenhoop is because I am originally from a village in the same municipality. Knowledge of the research area provided me with helpful insights, for example, when participants talked about specific locations in and around the village. Moreover, I speak the Frisian language. This could frequently break the ice since half of the participants felt more comfortable speaking Frisian. However, my insights could also influence the objectivity of the research (Winchester and Rofe, 2016). Therefore, I had to reflect on my behavior to prevent preconceived opinions about experiences that participants shared with me.

During the research, certain limitations had to be considered. During the time the interviews were conducted, COVID-19 was prevalent. Still, I wanted to have the interviews in a physical meeting because it offers a more confidential environment for the participant (Bernard, 2006). Besides, it allowed me to analyze the non-verbal communication of the participant. Due to the COVID-19 situation, I paid attention to the safety measures and personal hygiene when I met participants. Therefore, I took preventive measures by doing a self-test before leaving, limiting the number of people I interviewed to a maximum of two a day, and keeping a social distance during my visit.

3.5 The study area

De Veenhoop is a village described as rural, at least from a Dutch perspective. It is located in the southwest of the province of Friesland in the municipality of Smallingerland. Many people from this area have to travel more than five kilometers to general facilities like a supermarket (Steenbekkers et al., 2006). The place has a history of extracting peat since the 17th century, which explains the village's name. The name de Veenhoop translates to 'a hump of peat'. The residents of Boornbergum used the hay fields of de Veenhoop and the current nature area 'Kraanlanden'. Boornbergum was eight kilometers away from these hayfields, and they would go there to harvest every summer. They would access de Veenhoop by flatboats over ditches or using the paved roads. The main road leading to de Veenhoop is named after this former function.

The construction of a canal in 1875 replaced the smaller waterways and became the most significant itinerary to transport peat. At that time, more people settled at the end of this canal, and de Veenhoop became a hamlet. Back in the day, the total period fertility rate was around five children per woman (Beets and Van Nimwegen, 2000), which led to the need for a school in de Veenhoop. In 1920, the school 'Op 'e Feanhoop' was established for all the children in the surrounding area. Thirty years later, in 1950, a korfbal club was established in de Veenhoop. At that moment, more than sixty pupils attended the school. At that point, de Veenhoop was still a hamlet. It was not until 1955 that de Veenhoop was declared an independent village. In 1968, the village advanced with the addition of a pub, on a farm that

originates from 1872. This is the current restaurant 'Polderhûs'. In the 1970s, the number of pupils decreased to only about ten. Therefore, the school was on the brink of closing in the 1980s. Eventually, the Council of State decided that the school in de Veenhoop could remain open because they were further than six kilometers away from another school. In 1985, preschool was added to primary schools in the Netherlands, boosting the number of pupils. The most recent developments in de Veenhoop were the arrival of a korfbal canteen at the start of this century, and a panna cage about fifteen years ago. In 2012, the school no longer met the national directive of 23 pupils. Therefore, the school organization OPO Furore, to which the school belonged, had to announce the closure if the minimum would not be met before the first of October 2013. This number did not seem feasible because the school would be left with eleven pupils for the next school year. Therefore, the parent's council decided to close the school at the end of the school year 2012/13. After closure, the population of the village decreased with ten people to 238 residents, which is about three percent of the village (Allecijfers, 2022). Although, this population trend had already been going on for a couple of years. In 2014, there was a takeover of the restaurant 'Polderhûs', which had always been a meeting place for residents. The former owners organized evenings in their restaurant with entertainment for visitors, like karaoke evenings and the opportunity to play cards. However, this all came to an end after the takeover, when the residents and the current owners had a disagreement.

In the past, de Veenhoop was mainly inhabited by farmers, and more autonomous than it is now. Residents felt a strong sense of belonging to the village and experienced their daily life here (Thissen and Loopmans, 2013). Nowadays, there are still fifteen agricultural companies, which means that at least ten percent of the residents of de Veenhoop work in the agricultural sector. In the last decades, rural residents have become more mobile, wealthy, and individualistic (Woods 2005; Thissen 2013). Since the second half of the past century, residents were able to commute between the city and the rural, which attracted more residents to rural areas. The main function of the village changed from a place of production to a place for living (den Hartog, 2006; Thissen, 1995). Over the years, the village has become more outwardly focused. Nowadays, the main work sector in rural areas is related to recreation, tourism, and nature (den Hartog, 2006). There are currently five recreational companies where tourists can spend the night, which together could house a few hundred tourists. Nowadays, the website of de Veenhoop brands the village as 'a village for water sports' (Feanhoop, 2022).

After the school closed in 2013, the municipality owned the building. The school remained empty until it was purchased in 2017 by a couple that projected a plan with the former school building.

- Results

4.1 What is the current function of the school, and what does it mean to the community?

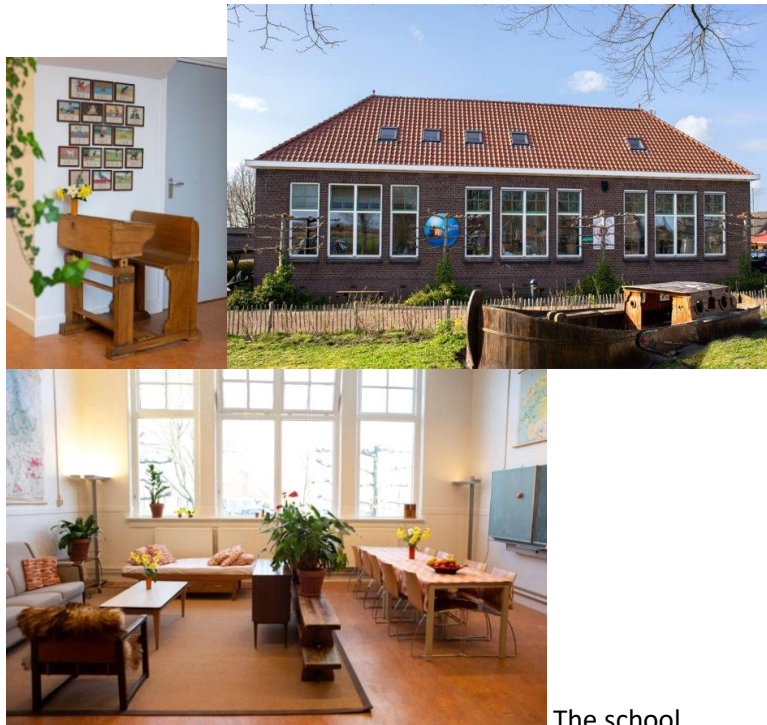
To learn about the current function of the building and to understand how the community coped with closure, multiple sources were consulted. Firstly, news articles were read, and secondly, interviews with residents from de Veenhoop and the current owner of the building were conducted.

The building was left empty after the school had closed. The municipality owned the building and planned to sell the building. During the interviews, many participants speculated about what they would have done with the empty building. Back then, there had been numerous ideas for the building, from a nursery to an exhibition place to a bed-and-breakfast to a community center. The village council emphasized that the school had a significant role in the history of the village and expressed the wish to establish a tourist center there (Leeuwarder Courant, 2013). However, the municipality would decide what would happen to the building:

“The building did not qualify to become a community center, because the municipality pointed out that we already have the Polderhûs and the korfbal canteen as a potential meeting place” - Cynthia

The municipality wanted to receive the assessed value of the building, which was 210.000 euros (Leeuwarder Courant, 2013). However, after almost four years, the building was still empty. Therefore, the municipality hired a realtor to sell the building. People could send in their bids, and the highest bidder would be able to submit their plan to the municipality. The municipality did not agree with the plan of the highest bidder. Therefore, the current owners could present their plan in January 2017. Their idea to start a bed-and-breakfast was accepted by the municipality, and the land use plan changed to residential. The building was renovated in 2018 and 2019 and reopened in April 2019 as ‘Kloesewier’.

After they moved into the building, they organized a walk-in for the residents of de Veenhoop to tell them their plans for the building. As you can see in the pictures below, they decorated the bed-and-breakfast with a school theme where they kept much of the interior the same, to keep the ambiance of a school. The walls are decorated with old maps and paintings of former learning methods. Physical features of a place are one of the characteristics that influence the meaning of a place to a community (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017).



interior

Paintings and blackboard

The school

Old-school

Figures 3, 4 & 5: Images of the former school. Source: Kloesewier (2022) <https://www.kloesewier.nl/>

During the four years that the school had been empty, the building had been vandalized, which hardly ever happened in de Veenhoop. The fact that the building was this lifeless, was hard for some of the residents:

“There was no life in there anymore, it was just a dead thing standing there” – Clara

Even though the building has a completely different function than before, residents are primarily happy that the building is still there:

“It is great that the building is still here, and that is used. It would be a shame if it was demolished because it has been here for more than 100 years” – Ymie

The building has become a part of de Veenhoop. Clara, Bauke, Evert, and Joost all called it an iconic building for the village. This corresponds with Gustafson (2001), who found that history is a significant component of a village’s identity. They like that the owners left the appearance of the building the same, and they are glad the building is of use.

“The school still is as it was, that is really nice” – Joost

The interviews were conducted during COVID-19 times, and the building had only been in use for a short time before COVID-19. Besides the walk-in, the owners did not organize any activities for the residents. The owner stated that they had considered celebrating the 100th anniversary of the building. However, due to COVID-19, this could not proceed, and it is not clear if they plan to organize any activities for the residents in the future.

4.2 Reflections on the past role of the school

By origin, de Veenhoop is a village with all Frisian people, especially farmers, and many family ties.

“In the past, this was a tight-knit community. There lived 12 farmers on this road, now it’s just one. If we had meetings, we would talk about our work. A lot has changed” - Bauke

Like many rural villages in the past, de Veenhoop was a place where the residents experienced their daily life (Thissen and Loopmans, 2013). Some participants still describe the community in de Veenhoop as a cohesive group of people by several participants:

“If someone is having trouble, everyone is ready to help, at least the long-term residents are nowadays” – Lydia (63)

The long-term residents are residents who have been born in de Veenhoop or who have lived here for a longer time like Clara, Lydia, and Ymie. These people are generally more active in the community than more recent residents of de Veenhoop. That these residents support each other was experienced by several participants. Someone used the example of someone passing away:

“It’s all with each other, also because it is small. A village is a warm place. My husband passed away a short time ago, and everyone looked after me” - Ymie

When participants went through a hard situation like this, they received visits from several neighbors. Lydia describes that residents would help each other out on more practical occasions as well. Because the supermarket is a few kilometers away, people would help each other with groceries, and in case they forgot something they could ask a neighbor. In the past, not everyone owned a car so people could borrow each other’s cars. Back in the day, the head teacher still lived next to the school, and her vehicle was always available for others to use. This corresponds with Hargreaves et al. (2009) who state that teachers were prominent figures in the community in the past.

According to Bauke, the school was at the root of engagement with other residents of de Veenhoop, which is consistent with what Cedering and Wihlborg (2020) found in Sweden. In the 1980s, village meetings were in school. Furthermore, the school was used by the theater group, by the choir, or visited to listen to an invited speaker. Moreover, the village paper was printed in school, the banker could stay in school one day a week accessible for everyone to do their business, and during the local Veenhoopfestival, the police would stay in school.

“It was a multifunctional building” – Clara

This quote is consistent with research in Finland from Supule (2019) about rural schools. Besides all the activities that were in school, the school also organized activities for the children and their parents. These activities were usually organized by parents together with the school. Lydia, for example, organized many activities with other parents.

“With a few women from de Veenhoop we had organized a carnival for the children, the school was also involved. And we once did a playback show, also with school” - Lydia

The relationships that these activities build amongst residents, were valued by Lydia. To her, the school was the center of the village and the place of commotion. Clara completely agrees with this statement. To her, the school represented liveliness in the village. She viewed the children as ‘our’ children, ‘our’ referring to the community. Just like the school itself, she also viewed that as a part of the community.

“The school was -proverbially- owned by the village. Everyone could just go in and out, everyone was familiar” – Clara

This corresponds with what Kearns et al. (2009) found in New Zealand. Furthermore, the school was Clara’s workplace. Every time the school organized something, she could count on many volunteers. For example, when they baked pancakes on the last day of school. She explains that the school wanted to involve the village in its activities. With Saint Nicholas, the whole village was invited to come, all neighbors, parents, and grandparents. Ymie experienced this as well:

“School activities were specifically for parents and children, but there were also residents from de Veenhoop. It was nice to celebrate Christmas together” - Ymie

To Ymie, the school was a place to meet fellow residents and socialize. She engaged with the school from the moment her children attended school. As Cedering and Wihlborg (2020) state that schools are meeting places, this school also had a social function for the pupils, their parents, and the village in general. Many of the participants had actually attended this school. Bauke and his children, Lydia’s children, Ymie’s children, Joost, Evert, Robbin, and Arie all attended school in de Veenhoop over a timespan of about sixty years. According to Clara, the small scale of the school offered a pleasant pedagogical environment. Therefore, one of Lydia’s sons did not need to go to special education, because he could receive some extra attention. Robbin also experienced that the small number of pupils meant that children received more individual support from their teachers. However, the small scale of the school also had its costs. In retrospect, both Joost and Evert had doubts about the quality of the education they received. This does not detract from the fact that the school connected the children from the village by allowing them to engage in friendships, which could build social networks in the village (Kearns, 2009). In their teenage years, Lydia’s sons went nights out with the friends they made in primary school. Arie and Robbin also have some of their best friends in de Veenhoop. They used to play

football in the schoolyard all the time, even after they had left this school. The schoolyard became a meeting place because boys who attended school elsewhere joined them to play. Although Evert did not build up this long-term friendship, he acknowledges the social value of the school.

“The school enabled us to meet other people from the village, and your social network was therefore also in the village”- Evert

These social networks were also built among the parents of the pupils, consistently with Miller (1993) in rural communities in the United States. Robbin said that his parents would meet others at school when he was dropped off, picked up, or when he would play with a friend. Jens shared that parents also became closer. They regularly went on a trip with each other, for example, by boat into the natural reserve around the corner. Other occasions when they would meet were at a parent meeting or when a speaker was invited to school.

“The school connected us. Back then, there were evenings when everyone from the village was welcome. There was more contact amongst the residents”- Arie

These findings correspond with Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2009), who found that the primary school is a valued meeting place in Nordic and British countries. When Ymie’s children left school, she still volunteered on school trips after her children left school, because she enjoyed the contact with the children. The engagement of parents with the school was characteristic behavior for most parents. Jens and Simon were involved in the parent’s council for the last couple of years. In the past, Bauke and the father of Joost had also been active in this council. Bauke’s wife had been a daycare woman, and the mother of Joost was just like Lydia, regularly prepared to help. Only the parents of Robbin and Evert were not involved with the school, while both their parents were entrepreneurs. Since both Lydia and Jens compared their pursuits in the village as a second occupation, involvement was often time-consuming.

At first, the school was specifically for children from de Veenhoop, because it was the only school in the wider vicinity. Over time, families became smaller and in 1985 the government wanted to close the school in de Veenhoop or the school in the neighboring village.

“That is when the ongoing fight started to keep the school open” - Jens

Bauke remembers the fuss to keep the school open. In 1985 they went with a bus full of ‘Veenhoppers’ to the State Council. Amongst them were mainly parents but other residents joined as well. The main reason for the fuss was the fear that the loss of the school would mean the end of the village (Van der Wouw et al., 2012).

“Many residents thought: if the school remains, the community will stay alive as well”- Bauke

At every village meeting, the necessity of the school for the village was emphasized, especially by the long-time residents. They called the school the soul of the village, which ensured liveliness in the streets, corresponding to what Walker and Clark (2010) found in England. Besides, Lydia thought the school would attract families with young children, which would guarantee the continued existence of the community. It was perceived as the duty of the villagers to keep the school open:

“it was goodwill from the parents towards the community to send their children to this school”- Arie

The common thought amongst residents was that the school was for the community. Whenever someone would not send their children to the school in de Veenhoop, Arie said it would be the talk of the town. Lydia even described it as a sin, in her opinion, the community should do everything to help the school. To Bauke, it was as if it was the parent's duty to send their children to the school in de Veenhoop, so that the school, and therefore the community, would stay alive. This is consistent with Woods (2005), who describes that the presence of a primary school symbolizes a healthy community. At one point, his daughter was the only girl left in school. He and his wife argued about whether they should send her somewhere else, but they did not because they were afraid of judgment from other community members. Cynthia emphasized that former residents send their children to different schools because they did not wish to create ill will with the residents of de Veenhoop. Lydia told that about a time when parents decided to switch schools for their children:

“Those people were not part of the community for a while because they also had the strong feeling that they were talked about a lot, so they didn't go to a pleasant evening for a while. But after 1 or 2 years they were there again” - Lydia

However, Jens did not attend school at a younger age because he attended a religious school, and he has never experienced any strange looks or exclusion from the community. Nevertheless, he did send his children to the school in de Veenhoop, and compared to his parents he has been much more involved in the village. Therefore, this statement of Bauke could be true:

“The school ensured more involvement in the village. Those who went to school for Christian education in another village were less involved in the village than if you had your children at school here”. -Bauke

Eventually, the school in de Veenhoop could stay open, mainly because of the distance to another school. However, for the school to remain open in the long term, more pupils had to be recruited. Some children lived between de Veenhoop and Aldeboarn, and some families were willing to send their children to de Veenhoop. Parent's engagement with the school and their willingness to help each other ensured that these children could come to this school:

“Back then, we as parents helped them, we picked them up in turns” - Ymie

In the same year, preschools and primary schools merged by law, which boosted the number of pupils at this school.

4.3 How did the residents cope with the school closure?

In 2012, the news arrived from the municipality that the school could not remain open with the number of pupils at that time, the first stage of Devine-Wright's model (2009). Parents and teachers were sad to hear the news at first. Therefore, the parent's council organized meetings at the school for all parents. During these meetings, they discussed potential actions they could take to keep the school open. They realized that the only way to keep the school open was to obtain the minimum amount of 23 pupils. Therefore, they discussed potential target groups as ways to promote the school. All those involved concluded that there should be a focus on the unique qualities of the school, which mainly included the

personal attention from teachers, the small classrooms, and the stimuli. They promoted the school by recording a video to show that their school was 'a good school for every child', and they shared this message using social media. Besides, volunteers went on recruitment campaigns to promote the school in the wider vicinity. Cynthia remembers this as a resident who was not involved with the school:

“At that time, someone visited us to recruit our son for the school in de Veenhoop” – Cynthia

However, these actions came too late. Cynthia had already decided on a different school for her son. It became apparent that there would not be enough new pupils for the school to sustain. Even though the school was allowed to continue for one more year, only eleven pupils would be left. Therefore, the board and the parents jointly agreed that it would be better for the children to close the school at the end of the school year. With a mutual agreement of the board and the parents, the school closed in 2013. The goodbye of the school was a celebration, with the last opportunity to walk through the school, which was an emotional moment for many:

“The closure was hard, we had one last walk through the school, and I saw others cry. I had a tough time as well” - Arie

For several residents, the closure was an emotional moment. Arie, Clara, Ymie, Lydia, Robbin, Jens, and Simon found the closure a regrettable event. The school had been a symbol of the village, and Simon said that the heart had been ripped out of the village. All of these participants have lived in de Veenhoop for over twenty years, which is consistent with Cuba and Hammon (1993), who state that residents who have lived in a place for a longer time are more likely to have strong emotional ties to a place. Evert, Bauke, Cynthia, Leo, and Joost cared little about the closure because the school did not have a significant role in their life at the time. As Stokols and Shumaker (1981) found, they were not dependent on a function of the place, and therefore less likely to feel attached to the school.

“At first, the school was of added value for the village, but that declined. The parents whose children went to secondary school were not involved with the school anymore” – Bauke

He had been less involved with the school from the moment his children went to secondary school. Evert and Joost experienced the same as a child. After they left the school, the school did not play any role in their lives anymore. The participants with their children in a different school were generally less engaged with the village. Cynthia even deliberately chose another school for her children. She heard about the involvement that was expected from parents at this school, and she did not want to invest her time in that. Even though Evert was not involved with the school, he noticed that a place of social interaction had gone. Several participants noticed that de Veenhoop changed a lot over the years. After the residents experienced the school closure, they had to cope with change (Devine-Wright, 2009). Simon states the loss of the school as follows:

“The daytime changed during a weekday, it gave an empty place while there used to be liveliness” - Simon

Especially children had been responsible for creating the ambiance in the village. Arie was still a child back then, and he shared that all children would wave to bystanders, putting a smile on their faces. Nowadays, it is as if the geniality in the streets has changed. In the past, Lydia would sit in front of her house and enjoy all parents and children passing by. At once, this buzz in the streets disappeared:

“It became quiet in de Veenhoop, very quiet” – Clara

She still misses the children and the going back and forth of parents. Jens experienced the same development, he endorses that things have settled down over the years. Especially the parents at the fence being gone decreased the amount of interaction in the village. The school was the only daily accessible facility in de Veenhoop where people would meet. As was found by McMilan and Chavis (1986), they state that these interactions create a sense of community. After the school had closed, several participants indicated that people would cross paths much less than before.

Nowadays, children from de Veenhoop go to four different primary schools. Therefore, children play less with other children from de Veenhoop, and thus parents do not cross paths either.

“For my children, I would have liked it if they could meet their friends the moment they walked out of the door. There are a few other children, but they are not at the same school” - Simone

Bauke agrees that the children were key to staying in touch with other residents. However, he states that when he sits on a bench at the waterside or plays with his grandchildren in the panna cage, he still meets people. The panna cage has been used quite a lot by the youth in the village. After school, Robbin and Arie played football in the panna cage with several friends from the village. They continued to do so several years after they left primary school. However, as they grew older, they did not utilize the panna cage as much as they used to. Nowadays, the panna cage is predominantly used by children from camping guests. Although this panna cage is near the former school, in Clara’s perception there is not really a center in the village anymore. The school had always been one of the main places of interaction. Although towards the end, many activities like the choir, card play, and village meetings were already organized in the restaurant, and later in the canteen.

“When the sports club had built the canteen, we moved our choir practices to the canteen” - Ymie

Until 2014, activities in the evening often took place in the restaurant. Most activities had been in the restaurant, and the owners were involved with the village. According to Cynthia, the owners enjoyed the togetherness and therefore wanted to attract as many residents as possible. These evenings had taken place for 56 years in de Veenhoop and were mainly visited by middle-aged to old men who experienced this as pleasant evenings. However, in 2014, this restaurant was sold to outsiders who did not live in de Veenhoop. They wanted to close the restaurant at half-past nine in the evening, while these card evenings usually would go on much longer.

“That didn’t go well with a few residents, who said: we’re not going to organize anything in this restaurant anymore” - Leo

In response, the restaurant was not keen on involvement with the community. Therefore, another meeting place in the village disappeared. The only alternative that was left was the korfbal canteen. Although the canteen was perceived as the replacement for the school by the majority of the participants, there was criticism of the canteen as a meeting place:

“The school was the center of the village, now the korfbal canteen has to replace it but it’s different because it is used much less” – Lydia

Cynthia agreed with her, she calls the canteen soberly furnished and thus not as cozy as the restaurant or the school. Meanwhile, Jens was pleased that there was still a place left for them to meet. When a korfbal game takes place, that is one of the few scheduled events accessible for residents.

“There are quite a few people who do not play sports but do come around to watch the korfbal and connect with neighbors” – Arie

However, according to several participants, the existence of the korfbal club is also in danger. Currently, there are two teams but no influx of young people.

“At the moment it is still possible, but for how long?” – Ymie

Although the canteen is also available for other activities, participants noticed that there is less interest in joining activities than there was in the past. Joost shared that he has to make much effort to gather a group of people for village activities. Ymie (75) thinks that organized activities are not appealing to the youth. Over the years, several groups have fallen apart, like the theater group, and the choir, mainly because there was no influx of new members.

“We lost these groups and the school. But we wanted to still meet each other, therefore we established the activity commission that would organize activities for the village” - Clara

The municipalities' coordinator complimented the committee on the number of activities that take place in a village of this size. Yearly organized activities in de Veenhoop, not including COVID-19 times, are jumble sales, a barbecue and stew buffet with the neighborhood, a cleaning day, village meetings, and the 'Veenhoopfestival'. This corresponds to the three conditions that Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020) found in Finland to substitute the functions of the school. Firstly, there is cooperation with the municipality. Secondly, local activities are maintained, and thirdly a place to organize the activities. If these conditions are met, it is an individual's choice to join these activities. Joost observed that it is often the same people that join. Therefore, the participation of the community has declined, while Egelund and Laustsen (2006) found that in rural areas in Scandinavia the functions of a school are taken over if residents stay active in the community.

“There are also people living here, who have been here for a while, that I've never seen before and whom you don't meet anywhere this way because they're not going anywhere. Otherwise, you would have met them at the school” - Joost

This would be true, on the condition that these residents have children of primary school age. However, after the school closed, the participants perceived a change in the population. Simon had talked to a young family who moved out shortly after closure, who mentioned the travel time to a primary school as one of the reasons. According to Evert, most of the young adults that do live in de Veenhoop have grown up here because they know what it is like. He states that the number of residents under thirty is counted on one hand.

“I think it does have to do with us not having a school” – Evert

Lydia also thinks the village has become less attractive to young families with children because of the absence of a school. The condition of a primary school is consistent with research from Barakat (2015) in Germany, who found that villages without primary schools are unattractive for young families. The people that do move to de Veenhoop are mainly older, according to the participants:

“It's especially older people from the west of the Netherlands that move here after retirement to enjoy the quietness” – Jens

However, this is not always the case, even though it was not their first preference. Simone (38) moved to de Veenhoop with her husband and two children. After they had sold their house, they rented a chalet in de Veenhoop for temporary use, while they were looking for a house:

“We were looking for a house on the edge of a village with a supermarket, bakery, and a school. De Veenhoop actually was beyond my limit, because you do not have any facilities over here. A school has actually always been a priority” – Simone

Simone first thought of de Veenhoop as a cold and barren place, but after living there for a while, her perspective entirely changed and they bought a house in de Veenhoop. However, due to COVID-19, they have not been able to participate in any activities in de Veenhoop.

“COVID-19, but also the disappearance of the school and the increasing elderly population have reduced the social interactions that I have within the village” - Clara

In the past, everyone was actively involved with the village. Nowadays, Arie still experiences de Veenhoop as if he is part of a community. Even though many new people moved to de Veenhoop, he still makes small talk with other residents he is familiar with. Evert has a different vision of the social interactions within de Veenhoop. According to him, there is not a community to be part of in de Veenhoop. He argues that communities can only exist in larger villages, with places where people can meet each other at a football club, a school, and a village feast. He does not experience that in de Veenhoop. He is not attracted to joining organized activities because he does not feel like there are many young people like him with whom he would connect. Meanwhile, others did enjoy these gatherings:

“The stew buffet for all residents was amazing. Everyone was excited about it” – Cynthia

In Robbin’s opinion, several people have taken initiative to organize activities like this, so he does not think the school closure influenced the existence of groups or services in de Veenhoop. Although, it is a fact that de Veenhoop has developed into a very different village than it was in the past. One of the most prevalent developments is the rise of the recreational business.

“The village has changed a lot. Recreation is growing in de Veenhoop, in the former school, but also around it with the build of new recreational apartments” – Joost

For Evert and his company, this development is beneficial. Altogether, the recreational companies in de Veenhoop can house a few hundred tourists, which causes a vibrant atmosphere in the summer.

“I am very glad about the livelihood of the village in the summer, otherwise it would be too quiet for me here” – Simone

The rise of tourism has been embraced by many participants as a positive change in de Veenhoop, because they enjoy the buzz that it creates in the village, one of the main things that the participants also enjoyed about the school.

- Conclusion

This thesis researched the long-term impact of school closure on a rural community in the Netherlands. When a primary school closes, a community loses a valuable facility. By conducting interviews with residents from de Veenhoop role of the school in the community was discussed, and how they have coped with closure. To find out what the long-term impact of place change has been, the research question was:

‘What is the long-term impact of school closure for a rural community in the Netherlands?’

The main answer to the research question is that the long-term impacts of school closure are limited for this rural community in the Netherlands. Although there are distinctions amongst the participants in the degree of impact of place change, the consequences of school closure are predominantly accepted. Over time, residents adjusted to the changing place, even though long-term residents occasionally look back at the past with nostalgia. The consequences of school closure for the community are impactful but negative impacts can be prevented if certain conditions are met.

In the past, the rural school offered accessible education for the residents who mainly experienced their daily life in the village, comparable to the results of Thissen and Loopmans (2013). The educational function of the building is replaced because there are alternative primary schools in neighboring villages about six kilometers away. The downside is that children from de Veenhoop attend four different primary schools. As a result, children build social networks in other places, consistent with Meesterberends (2012), who states that children are more inclined to go to the village where they attend school for extracurricular activities. Therefore, children play less with other children from de Veenhoop, which is a pity for the children and their parents, as the results showed that children are a unifying factor for parents. When children within a village are less likely to meet, this also decreases the opportunity for parents to connect. Therefore, there should ideally be a place for children in the village to meet. A few years before the school closed, a panna cage was built next to the school. Two participants used the panna cage with friends who had attended the school. However, as they grew older, they stopped using the panna cage. Nowadays, the panna cage could still be a place for children to meet, although children of camping guests mainly use it.

Not only was the school a place for children to build social connections, but many of the participants also emphasized the role of the school as a meeting place, as was found in the literature (Haartsen and

Van Wissen, 2012; Cedering and Wihlborg, 2020). This did not only include parents, but also elderly people who were still voluntarily involved with the school. When the school closed, many residents lost a place of social connections. An activity commission was founded that compensated for the loss of the school by organizing activities. For these activities to replace the social function of a school, there should be a place for these activities to take place.

Although there were other meeting places available, the degree to which the school as a meeting place is substituted is disputed. When the school closed, residents were still able to meet in the restaurant or at the korfbal canteen. However, a restaurant is privately owned and therefore only suitable as a meeting place if it aligns with the owner's vision. The korfbal canteen is part of the korfbal club, and thus primarily accessible to members. Residents that do not have a connection with the sport, are less likely to visit the korfbal canteen. There is a field of tension between these places, because the school was a public facility for the whole village, while the other facilities are privately owned or meant for a specific group of people.

The school was and still is, an iconic building for all participants that went to school here. To them, the school mainly evoked feelings of belonging to the place because of the memories they created together during activities at the school (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981; Gustafson, 2001). The building has become an essential part of the village, and the physical features of the building still remind the participants of all the memories they made at the school. Moreover, the school was a place where attendance was self-evident. When children or parents consistently meet each other, this builds a sense of community because people share the same experiences as a parent, and interact daily (McMilan and Chavis, 1986). To several participants, the soul of the village left when the school closed, as was found by Van der Wouw et al. (2012). While to other participants nothing changed because they were not dependent on a function of the place and thus less likely to feel attached to the school, as was found by Stokols and Shumaker (1981).

Over the years, the role of the school in the community had already decreased. Most of the activities took place in the restaurant or the canteen. The residents that first organized activities for the school now organize activities for the village as part of the established activity commission. The main difference is that at activities organized for school, all parents and children were expected, while village activities require more initiative from residents to participate. Although Egelund and Laustsen (2006) found that the social function of a school can only be taken over if residents stay active in their community. Meanwhile, the results indicated that it's a pretty tight group of people that visit these activities, residents who otherwise would have met each other at school. Nowadays, when participants reflect on the role of the school, they primarily indicate that they miss the liveliness in the village caused by the children. Although partly, the liveliness in the streets has returned in the summer, due to the developments in de Veenhoop. De Veenhoop has become an attractive tourist destination in the summer, which creates buzz in the streets.

5.1 Recommendations for policymakers

Therefore, policymakers should acknowledge that school closure is an impactful event that has to be anticipated by municipalities years in advance. When the conditions in the village are right, negative impacts of school closure can be prevented. A place should change without alternatives for the functions in the village to compensate for this loss. Therefore, certain activities that take place in school, are recommended to be moved to a new facility before closure, which will ease the ability to adapt to place change for residents. Alternative facilities should be freely accessible to all residents, preferably non-profit, like a community center, to focus on the social function of the place. Besides, the facilities manager plays an essential role for the facility to be successfully utilized by the community. Therefore, the manager should be someone involved within the community.

Moreover, children are often a unifying factor within a village. There should be places available where children can meet, like a playground. A bottom-up approach is advised because community characteristics are not homogenous, and thus every place change should be treated carefully. If there is a suitable place in a village, and collaboration with the municipality, the community is responsible to organize activities, as was found by Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020). The activities that are organized within a village should emphasize different age categories. Especially opportunities for children to meet can result in more liveliness in the streets.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

This research has touched upon the long-term impacts of school closure in a rural village in the Netherlands using interviews. Future research could follow up on this study by researching several rural villages in the Netherlands that experienced school closure, to compare the long-term impacts. If these results show a great deal of variation, future research could elaborate on the characteristics of communities that could determine their coping behavior to place change. Moreover, to gain more insight into the coping behavior of a community, future research could elaborate on the relations amongst community members by conducting focus group interviews to discover shared experiences and coping mechanisms. All in all, school closure is an impactful event, although, in the end, the long-term impacts of place change depends on the community's resilience to cope with change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed consent

Toestemmingsformulier

Betreft: onderzoek naar het effect van schoolsluiting in de Veenhoop. U heeft misschien wel in de krant gelezen dat schoolsluiting een erg actueel onderwerp is en op veel plaatsen in Nederland gebeurt. In Friesland alleen zijn sinds 2010 al bijna 100 scholen gesloten. Over zo'n schoolsluiting is niet zomaar iets, en daarom wil ik graag onderzoeken wat de ervaring van u is geweest van de schoolsluiting, en hoe u er nu op terug kijkt. Met dit onderzoek hoop ik dat andere dorpen met kleine scholen kunnen leren van uw ervaringen.

Ik verklaar hierbij op voor mij duidelijke wijze te zijn ingelicht over de aard, methode en doel van het onderzoek.

Ik begrijp dat:

ik mijn medewerking aan dit onderzoek kan stoppen op ieder moment en zonder opgave van reden

gegevens anoniem worden verwerkt, zonder herleidbaar te zijn tot de persoon

de opname vernietigd wordt na uitwerking van het interview

Ik verklaar dat ik:

geheel vrijwillig bereid ben aan dit onderzoek mee te doen

de uitkomsten van dit interview verwerkt mogen worden in een verslag of wetenschappelijk publicatie

toestemming geef om het interview op te laten nemen door middel van een voice-recorder op een mobiele telefoon

Handtekening:

Naam:

Datum:

Contact details: W.k.lindeboom.1@student.rug.nl

[Appendix B: Interview guide](#)

Persoonlijke kenmerken en betrokkenheid in dorp:

- Waar komt u vandaan?
- Hoelang woont u al in de Veenhoop?
- Wat betekend het voor je om in de veenhoop te wonen?
- Plezier verandert afgelopen jaren?
 - Door schoolsluiting?
- Mensen die niet uit de veenhoop komen, aan hun moet vertellen, wat zou je dan zeggen?
 - Is dat de afgelopen jaren verandert? (na de schoolsluiting?)
 - Komt dat door de schoolsluiting?
- Hoe is de sfeer in het dorp?
 - Is dat de afgelopen jaren verandert?
- Wat is een typische Veenhoper?
 - Is dat de afgelopen jaren verandert ((de schoolsluiting?))
- Hoe ziet het contact met medebewoners er voor u uit?
 - Dit verandert?

Telkens vragen: is dit loop v/d jaren verandert?

Betrokkenheid bij de school:

- Waar ging u als kind naar school?
- Heeft u kinderen?
 - Waar gingen uw kinderen naartoe?
 - Waarom koos u voor die school?
 - Indien de school op de Veenhoop: waarin merkte u dat deze school verschilde van andere scholen?
- Wat zijn herinneringen aan de school?
 - Positief (nog één? doorvragen)
 - Negatief, op doorvragen.
- Hoe vaak kwam u er?
- Op welke manier was u (nog meer) betrokken bij de school?
- Wat voegde de school toe aan het dorp? (in uw optiek)
 - Vind u dat nu op een andere plek in het dorp?
- Werd de school ook nog voor andere activiteiten gebruikt? Zo ja, welke?
- Speelde dat voor u een rol? Deed u daar aan mee?
 - Waar vinden die activiteiten **nu** plaats?
 - Is er een verschil toen het vanuit de school werd georganiseerd? Of activiteitencommissie? ((Werkt dat dan anders, nu ereen commissie die daar voor in het leven in is geroepen?))
 - Verschil in wie er aan meedoet bv?
 - Het soort activiteiten?
- Wat was voor u de belangrijkste functie van de school?

Schoolsluiting (devine wright)

- Wat vond u er destijds van dat de school moest sluiten? (emotie)
- Wat was uw reactie toen u het nieuws hoorde? (onverschillig, boos, verdrietig, ongelooft).
- En wat merkte u van anderen, hoe gingen zij om met dit nieuws? (de sfeer in het dorp)
- Hoe kijkt u nu terug op de schoolsluiting? (zelfde emoties?)
 - Mening verandert?
- Wat vindt u er van dat de school er nu nog wel staat, maar een andere functie heeft gekregen? (physical)

Nu:

- Wat is er veranderd in vergelijking met toen de school nog open was?
Bijvoorbeeld:
 - Contact met uw burens
 - Uw sociale netwerk. (dat van uw kinderen)
 - De aantrekkelijkheid om hier te wonen
 - De (type) mensen die hier komen wonen?
- Zie je jezelf hier nog lang wonen?
- Hoe zie je de toekomst van het dorp voor je?