

# Nordic education policy in retreat neoliberal economic rationalization and the rural school

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe)**Agneta Knutas**

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**Abstract**

The Nordic educational welfare model was implemented to support social justice and equal opportunities for all. After the fall of the Berlin wall the welfare model is weakened due to influences from international and global trends. It is found that with the introduction of new public management steering of public welfare and the decentralization of responsibilities from state to municipalities, local authorities are left to their own devices to solve disparities between, for example, a decreasing population and a shrinking economy. The article looks closer at the disparities between the structure of new public management steering and context-related variables of diversity. Arguing for diversity as cultural variation, the article draws on empirical data based on focus-group interviews with teachers of three multi-grade schools in rural Norway. To support the analysis, Bourdieu's theories on structure and agency (habitus and field) as well as cultural, social and symbolic capital are utilized. The results give examples of the cultural socialization of individuals/groups – and how they pursue their valued resources and pursue their interest in practice. In reference to new public management and the steering of education, the findings indicate resistance and complexity concerning contingent social and cultural influences, and dispositions in the educational field investigated.

**Keywords**

Culture, education, new public management, Nordic welfare, policy, rural school

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to look deeper into some of the changes affecting the Nordic welfare education model.<sup>1</sup> First, the introduction will present the background for the changes and some challenges that arise, and will then conclude by presenting the research question.

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With the introduction of the Nordic welfare model, an educational compulsory school was implemented to support social justice and equal opportunity for all. The welfare system underlined the interconnection between community and the local school to support culture, socialization and identity in the building of democracy (Blossing et al., 2014; Lundgren, 2010; Telhaug et al., 2006). After the fall of the Berlin wall we find that the Nordic welfare model is weakened due to influences from global and international trends (Wahlström, 2011). Towards the background of global and international influences, a known change is the implementation of new public management in public administration enhancing economy, efficiency and diversity through competition. Another known change in the Nordic welfare model is the decentralization of responsibilities from the state to the municipalities. In reference to Nordic welfare, it is found that with the decentralization of responsibilities from state to municipalities, local authorities are left to their own devices to solve disparities between, for example, a decreasing population and a shrinking economy (Karlsen, 2006).

Informed by previous research, we also find that municipalities and local authorities in Norway are consolidating local schools in order to reduce costs. During the last 15 years around 550 schools have closed down (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013: 2). The majority of the schools that have been closed had less than 100 children and for the most part they were situated in peripheral (rural) areas. We find similar trends in school closures in most developing countries (Kučerová and Kučera, 2012). In a paper on consolidation, school and size, Abalde (2014) points out that studies so far have not reflected enough on the possible interaction of small-sized schools and context-related variables' contribution to education and the local community (Abalde, 2014).

### *Structure and context*

Coming back to school closure in Norway, it seems that new public management (economy, efficiency, diversity through competition) of public administration stands in contrast to the Nordic welfare model supporting social justice and equal opportunity for all. In reference to policy and the argument of social justice and equal opportunities, I agree with Tesar (2016a) that we ought to pay attention to the “holes in the bucket” (ethical dilemmas) in reference to policy. I suggest one such dilemma is the disparity between political incentives of social justice, equal opportunities and the new public management of efficiency (Tesar, 2016a: 595). Arguing for diversity as cultural<sup>2</sup> variation, the article draws on empirical data based on focus-group interviews with teachers of three multi-grade schools of rural Norway.<sup>3</sup> In reference to structure and culture, I concur in line with Trondman et al. (2011) it is at the crossing of structure and culture that we can reveal questions of interest, such as, for example, the political incentive of social justice in the Nordic welfare model. Thus, I understand that questions of cultural practices and the answers we find can unveil knowledge of political relevance – such as, for example, equal opportunities built on the argument of social justice (Trondman et al., 2011). Turning to theories of Bourdieu,<sup>4</sup> culture indicates symbolic order and culture embodies power. The logic between structure and agency is illustrated by Bourdieu's concepts, *habitus* and *field*. *Habitus* is a system of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures or, in other words, principals generating and organizing practices and representations. As for the power of words, following Bourdieu, they do not reside in the words themselves but as symbolic power in the social, political and institutional realities of the field where the words are uttered

(Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). If we look at the agenda in Nordic welfare of education, I understand that the hierarchies of domination in the field of education are the principals generated in practice. As mentioned, (symbolic) power stands at the hearth of social life and successful exercise of power requires legitimation (for example, economy in favor of social justice). Within a given field, we will, therefore, find struggle over various valued resources, including how actors pursue their interests (Bourdieu, 1989; Swartz, 1997).

On the topic of habitus and field, I am interested here in investigating diversity as cultural variation, focusing upon the cultural socialization of individuals/groups. The focus in this article is given to schools in the countryside. The schools involved are multi-grade schools with less than 70 children in the age group between 7 and 13 years of age. Referring to habitus and field, focus-group interviews have been carried out with teachers at three schools to help answer the research question: *which/what kind of principals are generated, organized in practice and expressed in focus-group interviews with teachers in the local school?*

In the following, I will give a brief background to the Nordic welfare model enhancing compulsory education. I will then look closer upon the changes of steering and decentralization influencing Nordic welfare. Thereafter I will give an account of the disparities between diversity based on economy and efficiency and diversity as cultural variation. Next, a presentation of Bourdieu's theories on habitus, culture, social and symbolic capital will be explored, and afterwards, the method, results and analysis are presented. The article is concluded with a discussion.

## **The Nordic welfare model and compulsory education**

The Nordic countries are characterized by comparatively advanced organizational frameworks for the provision of a wide range of services known as the Nordic welfare model (Kvalsund, 2009). One point of departure from which to view the establishment of the welfare state is the Cold War. The Nordic countries were situated between the two superpowers, the United States in the west and the Soviet Union in the east. When the Cold War came to an end, the welfare-state model of the Nordic countries was weakened (Wahlström, 2011).

Looking back at the introduction of the Nordic welfare model, the idea of comprehensive education was launched as an essential cornerstone of this model (Telhaug et al., 2006). As given account for in the introduction, locally anchoring the comprehensive school was understood as creating a democratic society in miniature (Blossing et al., 2014; Lundgren, 2010; Telhaug et al., 2006). In reference to the Nordic welfare model, Karlsen (2006) reminds us that from the time of the Enlightenment (18th century) an ideology posited that each individual is considered capable to think rationally. We also find that organizations mainly developed through a bureaucratic hierarchic-system process. Economically, society went from nature and household to a market and monetary economy. In the Nordic countries, we find a political concept that grew out of these changes: government with political institutions connected to juridical law, regulations and practice. Also known as the democratic parliamentary system, it is recognized for its popular sovereignty. The political system is required to put forward its cases through rational arguments, while it is also pointed out that the political system (as it is created by human beings) is at times influenced by irrational and sometimes collective emotional expressions (Karlsen, 2006). Connecting to Bourdieu (1989), we can, with the terms habitus and field, illustrate the logic regarding structure and agency. Habitus, as previously mentioned, indicates the

structures of the social forces that produced it – as well as gives form and coherence to various activities across spheres of life (Bourdieu, 1989). Looking back, when it comes to education (based on egalitarian philosophy) the habitus and field of the political system has seen its duty to be to provide equal educational opportunities regardless of social background, gender or place of living (Blossing et al., 2014). In a country such as Norway, with its isolating fjords and mountains, the state believed in supporting small communities and locally anchored schools well in to the late 1990s (Kvalsund, 2009).<sup>5</sup>

### *Market logic and decentralization of welfare*

From the 1960s, the comprehensive educational system in Norway regularly underwent new reforms. During the 1990s, the idea of local freedom was added to the national governance agenda. This local freedom was related to a market model, thus shifting the governance of the school from regulatory intervention to a management-by-objectives approach. One argument behind the changes was to secure the welfare state's economic resources by becoming more efficient (Karlsen, 2006). The local authorities were assigned the responsibility for financing schools (through state funding) and for the learning objectives of the comprehensive school. With the transition to goal orientation, competition and market ideology gained in prominence. The transference of economic responsibility from the state to the community places increased demands on budget management at the municipality level (Aasen, 2003; Wahlström, 2011).<sup>6</sup> The market has its own logic and will not easily adjust to the priorities a political administrative system ought to have – at least if one considers equal opportunities for all (Karlsen, 2006). As pointed out by Scott (1998), a lack of context and particularity is necessary for any large-scale planning. Subjects are treated as standardized units, the power of resolution in the planning is enhanced where questions must give definitive, quantitative answers. The discipline of economics achieves its power by transforming qualitative matters to quantitative issues, where the bottom line is stated as profit or loss (Scott, 1998).

Globalization is also making the world a smaller place, at least when it comes to forms of communication, travel, transfer of capital, and contact and cooperation. Moreover, satellites monitor the comings and goings on this earth – from this point of view, the world could be considered to be a global village (Albrow, 1996). The word globe, from a semantic point of view, refers to the earth. Air and water are considered global elements that concern our mutual existence (Giddens, 2001). Globalization in terms of economic, political, cultural and social aspects indirectly concerns us all. A relatively small group, the elite, are setting the agenda while the others are left to watch. Consider in this context the extremely poor; they are poor whether or not the stock market goes up or down (Bauman, 1998).

Based on the idea of the global influence of the market (economic, political, cultural, social concerns) it is argued that there is an increase in demand for diversity on the local level. Diversity can be understood in the light of a decentralized school system. The assumption is that competition between schools will give a boost to quality – at least with respect to the testing and ranking of schools (Karlsen, 2006). Another understanding is also suggested when referring to the Nordic education model. Diversity refers to the political duty the municipalities and local authorities have to enhance social justice and equal opportunities in the reconstruction of democracy, especially when it comes to the Nordic model's aim to promote the Norwegian schools throughout the country and to foster the next generation of democratic citizens (Wahlström, 2011).<sup>7</sup>

As proposed above, supporting local schools points to diversity in terms of culturally diverse schools. Regarding the Nordic welfare model's agenda of reinforcing the comprehensive local school, the concept of hegemony indicates changes in social structure. What new public management brings to the table is a legitimization of a dominant economic discourse in the Nordic welfare states (Fairclough, 1995). The dominant agenda is held by the strongest alliance, not in terms of being legitimized by the best arguments, but in terms of having operational capability within the discourse of participation (Johansen and Chandler, 2015).<sup>8</sup> In relation to an economic hegemonic discourse, we see that the language of education has changed. Efficiency regarding "what works" and a rhetoric that focuses on results, quality, skills and competition is underlined (Biesta, 2009). Thus, as previously mentioned, another problem when it comes to globalized educational policy is its generic character.

### **On the topic of education – rural, local, cultural**

As mentioned, the focus here will be on the local school in the countryside. A common term used in research connected to the countryside is the word *rural*. In the following I will look more closely at definitions of rural, and I will give a brief overview of research on rural schools. This will be followed by Bourdieu (1989) and his concepts of habitus, and cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) to give the reader a theoretical analytical frame which will later support the interpretation of the focus-group interviews.

In the Nordic countries (except Denmark), the countries have, as mentioned, vast areas with low population density. These areas have been the focus of Nordic regional policy in most of the post-war period. Similarly, the research field of regional development has also been regarded as almost synonymous with research on rural development (Berg and Lynggård, 2001). In Norway, the discourse of new public management on the one hand looks upon rural life from an economic and industrial perspective. The only legitimate argument fighting for the survival of small places is long-term economic sustainability and growth and how to make rural areas "profitable" and competitive (Stortinget, 2002: 2563). With this said, rural life understood as the intrinsic discourse places the value of rural settlement and culture as its nodal point. Rural areas ought to be preserved and a decentralized settlement pattern in Norway is understood as an important part of national tradition and cultural heritage – and a contribution to the building and rebuilding of national identity (Cruikshank et al., 2009).

As noted by Murdoch et al. (2003), the discourses are a simplification and, as noted, the intrinsic value discourse involves a mixture of modernism and preservation acknowledged in, among others, cultural research (Murdoch et al., 2003). In spite of structural ideas regarding "the rural" as noted by Scott (1998), state initiatives will only partly succeed in shaping the social environment. Human resistance prevents monotonic schemes initiated by the state from being fully realized (Scott, 1998). Turning to Bourdieu (1989), it can be said that symbolic power requires legitimation and within a given field we will find struggle over various resources, and how actors pursue their interest (Bourdieu, 1989).

In reference to rural schools, Berry and West (2010) point out that the rural school is considered to be a source of social capital and community engagement. The school functions as a connecting point for collaboration, bonding and the reconstruction of local history and culture (Berry and West, 2010). The contact between school and the local community also promotes identity for young people. The interaction across generations benefits the community as a whole and supports the reconstruction of

democracy (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2007). Cedering (2016) discusses changed patterns for children and families when it comes to school consolidation. She finds that children's freedom to act decreases when they spend a certain amount of time commuting on school buses (Cedering, 2016). The smaller school can neutralize the effect of poverty with respect to a pupil's achievement levels (Howley et al., 2011). The local school's educational qualities satisfy key goals for schooling and are in accordance with the main curriculum (Solstad and Thelin, 2006). Lyson (2002) points out that levels of social and economic welfare are higher in small communities with a "local school" (500–2500 inhabitants; Lyson, 2002).

### *Theory on culture: Bourdieu*

I turn to Bourdieu (1995) and the concepts of habitus, field and cultural, social and symbolic capital to further support my theoretical understanding. Following Bourdieu (1995), the terms habitus and field illustrate the logic between structure and agency. Habitus, as mentioned, indicates a system of durable transposable position/principals generating and organizing practice. With Bourdieu, the symbolic power of words reside in the social, political and institutional realities of a field. The exercise of symbolic power requires legitimation and within a given field we will find struggle over resources (Bourdieu, 1995). An example, in my case, would be the field of education under change. Here we find, on the one side, the structural system of bureaucracy enhancing economy as a social field in contrast to the local community and their cultural and linguistic contribution to education representing another field (Bourdieu, 1995). Bourdieu's research demonstrates how social elites utilize education systems to consolidate their own position and how domination in the field is found in the principals generated in practice indicating symbolic order and embodied power (Bourdieu, 1995).

As previously mentioned, within a given field there will be struggle over various resources. As Broady (1998) maintains, it is important to realize that the situation in France and Bourdieu's research are not compatible with the Nordic context. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's concepts might still prove to be fruitful in this context. One reason for this, according to Broady (1998), is the fact that the Nordic societies do not have just one existing dominant authorized culture. Nor are they as hierarchical as France. Therefore, any application of Bourdieu's concepts will need some modification for the Nordic context. In education, the Nordic countries also do not have a strict hierarchical system as in France. Therefore, it is wise to employ other understandings where certain assets are promoted, formed, legitimized and tied to long-lasting relations (Broady, 1998).

I have taken these suggestions to heart. I understand *culture capital* as *embodied* through dispositions of mind and body and symbolically transmitted in the local context – for example, through the teachers' and the school's work. Cultural capital is also *objectified*, both through economic capital and through symbols – for example, through books, instruments, tools, machines and buildings. Cultural capital is *institutionalized*, for example, through academic qualifications and/or through (local) organizations. One point is that institutionalized cultural capital can be exchanged for economic capital – for example, local hunting clubs (organizations). Using Bourdieu, I also understand *social capital* to be the durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships and mutual acquaintances and recognition in practice or in symbol (I know him/her well). It could be said that social capital is important for securing material and symbolic profit. Furthermore, the concept of *habitus* deals with the social context and the interaction between dispositions

and structures that shape practice in the local context. Habitus relates to the socialized norms guiding behavior and thinking. Habitus tells us something about the way in which the local society is embedded in people in the form of lasting dispositions or trained capacities – to think, feel and act in determinant ways. Habitus can thus be considered embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1995).

## Method

In the following I will give the methodological background for the findings. First, I introduce the participating schools. The explanation of the methodology will be followed by a presentation of the ethical guidelines, followed by an explanation of the analytical process, including the theoretical framework and hermeneutic interpretation.

The schools in this study are situated in geographically sparsely populated areas, and have less than 70 children, all of whom are in the multi-grade system (several grades (years) in one classroom). Local community school A had three female and three male teachers, and had 39 pupils in the years 1–7 class. The village of 240 inhabitants is situated in a valley in the north-east region of northern Norway, and the village school is dependent on several other surrounding small villages for its catchment area. Locality school B has four female and two male teachers. This school had 51 pupils in the years 1–7 class (local community school B). The local village of 500 inhabitants is situated in a mountain region in the central-east region of Norway. Community school C had two male and two female teachers. The school had 30 pupils in years 1–3 (local community school C). The village of 400 inhabitants is situated in a valley in the central-east region of Norway.

Contact was established with the schools through an employee at the local authority's administrative office who introduced us to the headmaster of each participating school. The headmaster invited the teachers to take part in the planned focus-group interview, and they participated on a voluntary basis. Since the schools in the study are small, all the teachers at each school signed up to participate. The reason why they all signed up was not discussed, but one explanation might be that I asked the headmaster for four to six participants – and the schools had between four and six teachers. It could also be that they were very eager to have the chance to talk about their experience of working in a multi-grade school in rural areas, especially in the light of the frequent closing of schools in Norway. The teachers were of both genders, various ages and worked with various subjects in their school. The focus-group interview was carried out in the afternoon at each school (Kvaale, 1997). The teachers taking part were informed that participation was voluntary and they could request to not participate at any point in time. They were informed the material would be treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines governing research, including a guarantee of both confidentiality and anonymity. All the focus-group interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in full. The data material was encoded so that no person or school was identifiable (Forskningsrådet, 2017).

### *The focus-group interview*

One argument for the choice of focus-group interview in this study was that the researcher did not have any previous knowledge on the theme of multi-grade educational practice in rural settings. To choose a focus indicates the researcher wants to enhance a theme for the participants to dwell on – thus, the way one formulates the focus will have to be broad.

Within this background, the participants were asked to talk about *their understanding of the school's contribution to the local community and the local community's contribution to the school*. In accordance with qualitative research, the interest here lies in “digging deeper” (Bjørklund, 2005). The nature of the conversation is informal and propelled through the participants' commitment and interest in the topic/theme. Participants in a dialogue with each other have the opportunity to air their views, feelings, values and ideas (Bjørklund, 2005). Puchta and Potter (2004) say the method is ideal when the researcher, in addition to exploring a theme, also wants to explore experience, meaning, worries and attitudes. Attitudes become visible when members of the group voice certain opinions. Opinions draw other members into the conversation to express their point of view. On the other hand, if no response is given, focus-group interviews still inform us about how a group member's expression (of his or her point of view) is received by the other participants (Puchta and Potter, 2004).

As for the researcher's role, Bjørklund (2005) points out that minimal involvement is desirable. The argument for not getting involved is that the aim is to refrain from changing the way the group's conversation is developing. Nonetheless, a follow-up question can be asked by the researcher to move the dialogue along. One such question could be, “can you tell me a little more about this/that?”. Focus-group interviews have a formal character since the interaction is arranged within a certain frame/theme. But within this stated theme, the conversation is fluent (informal) and allows for spontaneity, especially when considering that the researcher's role is to have minimal involvement (Halkier, 2010).

### *Process of analysis*

I commenced to interpret the transcribed material. For support, I returned to my aim of exploring habitus and field, cultural socialization and valued resources. I could also use the research question: *which/what kind of principals are generated, organized in practice and expressed in focus-group interviews with teachers in the local school?*

The theoretical support for this work has been taken from Bourdieu's theories (1995). Working with the transcribed material I have interpreted the texts through a hermeneutic process according to which I have rejected and accepted interpretations. As pointed out, the hermeneutic circle indicates limits since the researcher does not have complete access to his/her preconceptions (Kvaale, 1997). Having said this, the process of interpretation was supported by my pre-understanding from reading earlier published research on the topic of the rural school, from the research question and from the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu (1995).

Questions based on Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field were formulated as follows: “*how is the cultural capital embodied through disposition of mind and body?*” “*Is there anything stating that institutionalized cultural capital is exchanged within the collaboration between school and community?*” And, “*do the social contexts that interact between dispositions and structure shape practice?*”

The process of analysis revealed the occurrence of mutual themes from the three group conversations. One recurring theme was about embodied cultural capital.<sup>9</sup> It was stated that older and younger age groups collaborated *across ages*, both inside and outside school. In the deeper analysis, Bourdieu (1995) contributes an understanding of cultural capital as embodied through practice.<sup>10</sup> This capital contributes to both socialization and identity.

When it comes to the institutionalized capital, a recurring theme was the multi-grade school's way of working and the way it planned activities. Here the *cultural materiality* of ideas on how to practice and arrange the teaching is highlighted as the habitus of maturing. The deeper analysis using Bourdieu indicates that social interaction points towards a habitus<sup>11</sup> of practice which understands that maturing takes time.

Another theme occurring in the collected material was the interaction between social contexts and the cooperation between the school and local citizens. The schools saw themselves as important contributors to the renewal of the local community where *place and social relationship* were important. With a deeper analysis inspired by Bourdieu, an understanding of social capital<sup>12</sup> is pointed out, where place and social relationship are interpreted as social capital in terms of durable networks.

## Findings

### Across ages

The teachers at school B express that working as a teacher in their multi-grade school means working with physical education across at least three age groups. The school also arranges outdoor activities every other week after lunch. The activities, involving four different age groups, are arranged during the pupils' free time out in the schoolyard. They arrange games and all age groups participate; the youngest and the oldest. The older children have created special rules for the youngest children so they can participate. The teachers also work across age groups to introduce the newcomers into the games every year. The oldest have responsibility for at least one newcomer each. They are given tasks to work on together – for example, writing a poem. The oldest can write and so they work together with one newcomer to find a theme for the poem. Afterwards, the school produces a little book of poetry that is issued to the locals living in the village.

Another task is the field trip with the new arrivals each fall. We hike about 10 kilometers into the mountains (not in one day). The younger ones will most likely need support carrying their backpack and here the older ones get to help out. (School B, Female teacher b)

Similar stories are heard from the teachers at school A, where one teacher says she takes her multi-grade class on a hike in the mountains every third year. To finance the hike, the teacher and the class arrange a local event, a “walkathon” involving the whole village with grandparents, parents and “everybody” in the village. The focus of the walk is presented as a quiz. The locals in the community are also involved in serving soup to participants. Through this initiative the school class collects money for the trip. In relation to this story, the following is one of the teachers' comments (similar to school B) on the pupils' cooperation across ages:

Another thing that I noticed is that the multi-grade concept and the size of this school give the children a secure environment. Here you can see a year 7 pupil racing down the hill on the toboggan together with a year 1 pupil. The pupils become close across age groups and so we have found the older ones, without us telling them to do it, care for the younger ones. (School A, Female teacher a)

*Cultural capital of socialization and identity.* With Bourdieu (1995), habitus links social structure and individual agency where the cultural socialization is found in the social norms that guide

behavior and thinking. I suggest that the teachers relate to social norms (as told from their practice) which promote cooperation across age groups. The pupils are socialized through different activities in ways that, independent of age, are based on cooperation across ages. The cultural capital contributes to cooperation and is embodied through the repetition of activities performed by the teachers (hiking, fundraising, supporting the youngest). Previous research points out that working across several age groups promotes self-reliance and the cross-over in age enhances social development and cooperation (Little, 1995). The cultural capital is also objectified through the school building and the subject curricula. Two examples of this are the production of poetry books issued to the local community and the fundraising to cover the costs of the hiking trip. As Bourdieu reminds us, symbolic power stands at the hearth of social life and requires legitimation. For one, the cultural capital is institutionalized through the teachers' academic qualifications and the locals' recognition of the comprehensive school's duty to foster the next generation of democratic citizens (Bourdieu, 1995). As for habitus linking social structure and agency, we find that social capital comes into play. The teachers talk about durable networks, which are recognized in and through the school's practice. Grandparents, parents and other locals support the school's activities. The village networks are an investment in securing material and symbolic profit in the reconstruction of the local community's tradition and culture (Bourdieu, 1995).

In reference to the previously mentioned disparities between political incentives of social justice, equal opportunities and new public management in the Nordic model of education, the results indicate a cultural resistance to a dominating economic efficiency discourse (Fairclough, 1995). The symbolic power of social life is legitimized through the cultural socialization and valued resources which are pursued – in the teachers fostering identity with place and the sharing of cultural patterns (Jones and Woods, 2013; Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009). In reference to new public management, one problem given account for by Tesar (2016c) is that in Western policy discourse, there is a “non-time” and a “no-history” in regards to policy and its futures. Utilizing the cultural theories of Bourdieu in this paper contributes a “materialized” and “historicized” perspective towards policy (Tesar, 2016c). As explained by Cruickshank et al. (2009), in the new public management discourse the link between culture and local community has no content, whereas cultural values continue to reproduce a range of qualitative links between the local habitus and culture. Thus, it can be said that if settlement fades out due to new public management, budget-efficiency local culture will, within a longer perspective, be lost (Cruickshank et al., 2009).

### *Cultural materiality: ideas and practice*

A female teacher in school A says working at a multi-grade school is a completely different way of working in a school compared to bigger schools that often have many pupils and age-divided classrooms:

If I sit and plan math, I can't just use one book but maybe I need three different ones since I'm preparing for different levels. And still there's room for the pupils in years 5–6 to advance even higher, let's say up to year 9 in themes we are working on. So my conclusion is that there is room and possible support for a wide variety, both those who need a slower pace and those who can advance faster. Another advantage is working with math from the standpoint of themes that

pupils get to practice three years in a row. Working with a multi-grade classroom – if you did not understand or catch everything about a theme in math in let's say year three, there will be pupils next year who will also be working with that theme and level. This means you get a chance to repeat what you might not have understood at least three years in a row. (School A, Female teacher a)

Here we get a glimpse into how the multi-grade school works and how the teachers plan activities for the multi-grade classroom. The teacher plans for the subject by taking several years and levels into consideration. The teacher also sees the advantages in this, where pupils, for example, have the opportunity to revisit past levels and experience future levels.

*Habitus of maturing.* The principles generated and organizing the practice here give us information about the teachers' social norms and their practice in math. The school building and the classroom represent certain ideas, practices and traditions (Biesta, 2011; Kvalsund et al., 2009). Using Bourdieu (1995), we can talk about habitus and trained capacities with respect to how to think and feel about math. This also concerns norms which guide behavior and thinking on the topic of math in a multi-grade classroom where the cultural capital is embodied in the teacher's way of acting and thinking (Bourdieu, 1995).

It is suggested that the cultural capital is institutionalized through the recognition of the academic qualification of the teachers, working with math across age groups over a planned time of three years. The cultural capital is objectified through the school building and the teacher's work with math; not from one book that caters to one age group, but from several books in math and the thematic approach (plus, minus, division). Within the educational field we find that habitus of the teacher(s) at this school gives the pupils the possibility to renew their understanding over a period of three years, independent of age or performance.

With Bourdieu (1989) I suggest that the results show how teachers within competitive-status hierarchies (educational fields) value the resources at hand and pursue their interests (Bourdieu, 1989). It does not seem that the new public management of testing, best practice and efficacy stand at the hearth of the school principals in the guiding of their practice (Biesta, 2009). Instead, the choices made enhance the teachers' possibilities to support variety and have a difference in pace in regards to pupils' progress. Sennett (2008) argues that learning a skill (for example, math) takes time and many hours of practice. The cultivation of knowing math is a process of maturing. The point made, and as revealed by the planning of themes that allow for repetition and renewal, indicates a habitus and cultural capital that understands that *to mature means long; one takes lasting ownership of the skill* (Sennett, 2008: 295).

### *Cultural meaning, place and social relationship*

A teacher at school C talks of the importance of having a school in a small community. One example he mentions is the activities they include in their teaching. For example, they usually take the pupils hunting in the fall. They go reindeer hunting; they shoot a reindeer and have it slaughtered. The teacher is the chairperson of the local hunting organization board. He has been able to gain the support of the local community for the hunting project. Not only do they go reindeer hunting but they also sleep in a *lavvo* (a special kind of Sami tent) overnight. Afterwards the school arranges an evening's dinner for the whole village where the main course is the meat from the hunt. Over 100 people from the local community attend and dine.

The local people take responsibility and contribute; this is a school but it's also the mutual common ground for the whole community. I found that the idea of hunting was a brilliant way to learn in relation to many subjects in school. For example, where does the food come from? And here we also involve the ice age and its connection to animal life. And in addition we connect to the history of food. (School C, Male teacher a)

Another teacher at the same school (C) says they also work on the topic of fish and fishing. They have been able to collect funds for fishing gear for the pupils and they take the children up in the mountains to fish in the mountain lakes.

This is a project in cooperation with the local mountain fishing board where our aim is to contribute to thinning out the fish stock in the lakes. The school here means a lot to the community so everybody tries to help out for the best of the school. We do get invited into projects like the project to thin out the number of fish. We combine practical studies with science. We measure the fish; we calculate average weight and length. This is a community where a lot of the locals spend time hunting and fishing, and things connected directly to mountain outdoor life. We find it important that the pupils learn this kind of knowledge too. (School C, Male teacher b)

The teachers state that the outdoor tradition is what characterizes their village and claim this kind of knowledge tradition is found in the countryside, especially in areas where recreational life, the mountains and fishing are part of everyday life.

*The social capital of durable networks.* Habitus is illustrated by the logic between structure and agency and refers to dispositions, trained capacities, thinking, feeling and norms that guide behavior (Bourdieu, 1995). As one of the teachers said, the people live close to nature, and in cooperation with the school they are eager to support social and cultural traditions (for example, hunting and fishing). In line with Bourdieu (1995), mutual responsibility is important for the reconstruction of knowledge for the next generation. The power of words understood as symbolic power resides in the social and institutional realities of a field. The successful exercise of power as mentioned earlier is legitimized through the social network, the durable “who-knows-who” networks supporting the teachers and school in their interaction with the surrounding community. The mutual relations between school and village are built in a network across and through generations. This can be looked upon as an investment that yields both material and symbolic profit since hunting, fishing and hiking are recognized as important investments in the village traditions.

In reference to the habitus and the principals generating and organizing practice, the school is able to impart knowledge related to the curriculum (natural science, math, history, geography), and contribute to the reconstruction of the network of hunters, fishers and hikers for the next generation. The cultural socialization here gives us a picture of the valued resources and how the agents involved pursue their interest within hierarchies of the educational field. In reference to the symbolic capital, since individuals/groups in this context work at strengthening the social group of hunters and fishers, the village will most likely be able to profit from being known to have good hunters and fishers in their region (Bourdieu, 1995). Furthermore, the social capital of durable networks relies on its cultural capital expressed through the stories of hunting, fishing, hiking and knowing the mountains as part of the village culture (habitus). It is also taken into consideration that the local village and the teachers at the school have knowledge about and equipment for

camping outdoors and surviving in the mountains. The teachers (and probably several local villagers) have licenses for guns, fishing gear and camping equipment.

Inspired by Bourdieu (1995), it can be said that the necessary knowledge, and the cultural and social capital, are constituted through *embodiment*; a practice carried over across generations through body and mind. It is *objectified* through hunting gear and hunting cabins, through fishing gear and even textbooks related to several curriculum fields. They are also *institutionalized* through the local school, curriculum and local hunting and fishing organizations (Bourdieu, 1995). In reference to a market logic of new public management and the belief in steering and controlling of education, I find the results here indicate that human resistance to different forms of (generic) straitjacketing interrupts rational agendas from being fully realized (Scott, 1998).

## Discussion

In reference to diversity in terms of cultural variation, this paper highlights the rural school through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1989). The result informs us of the disparity between the structure of new public management steering and context-related variables of diversity through the logic of habitus and field. The results give examples of the cultural socialization of individuals/groups, their valued resources and how they generate and organize practice to pursue their interests. In reference to new public management and the steering of education, the findings indicate complexity between the contingent social and cultural influences and dispositions. From the results, we find that the principals that generate and organize practice demonstrate the enhancement of equal opportunities, identity building and fostering in democracy. The valued resources (across ages, community engagement, cultural knowledge – hunting, fishing) are pursued in the practice of the teachers in cooperation with the surrounding community. The results give account for the complex power relations that penetrate society and how (symbolic) power in the educational field produce dynamics (Tesar, 2016a).

As given account for by Scott (1998), a lack of context and particularity is necessary for any large-scale planning, such as, for example, new public management market ideas of efficiency in politics and policy in education. As mentioned, state initiatives will only partly succeed in shaping the social environment since human influence points in the direction of resistance (Scott, 1998). The interlocking of a hierarchic struggle over resources in the educational field gives us, in this study, an example of how individuals/groups create spaces to pursue their interests (Tesar, 2016b).

Concurring with previous research, it would appear that the rural school supports cooperation across generations and benefits the community as a whole (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). A symbolic relationship (school) reinforces identification with the village. The village, on the other hand, reinforces identification with the school. The associations underpin social networks for years if not generations ahead, and thus support the reconstruction of the community (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014; Woods, 2006).

### *Undermining cultural variation*

Due to the state's decentralization of responsibilities (economic resources moved from the state to the municipality), the local rural school has become part of a complex economic system that demands rationalization. At the same time, from an international point of view

globalization increases the demand for diversity (diversity as competition) (Karlsen, 2006). But as noted, diversity, at least in reference to rural areas and declining population, is undermined by the need the local authorities have to satisfy economic bottom lines. Diversity as suggested in reference to the Nordic model of education also regards social justice and the municipalities' responsibility to uphold compulsory education in terms of equal opportunities for all (Wahlström, 2011).

Diversity brings me back to the “holes in the bucket” and ethical dilemmas in the Nordic model of education vis-à-vis the disparity between social justice, equal opportunities and new public management. The disparity mentioned can be reflected upon in reference to values (Tesar, 2016a). Regarding values, we can ask what is fair and/or what is right for whom? The material and historical conditions presented in the results of this paper pinpoint “holes in the bucket” of policy in reference to what might be fair and right for whom. Other examples from research that can be connected to what is fair and/or right in policy comes from Cedering (2016) who finds that the closing down of schools in rural areas has consequences for the entire village. Closing schools leaves a “gap” in the local residents' everyday lives, both spatially and socially. Socialization, where it was common that it was age-mixed before school closures, has become more age-homogeneous. The social pattern of a village changes and organized leisure activities in the village decrease. Due to the commuting time to and from centrally situated schools, the recreational time for school children shrinks (Cedering, 2016). Another concern in reference to the new public management of public welfare is that experts with no social ties (either to local politics or the local community) are assigned (consultants, policymakers, architects) to express their opinions on rural qualities from an urban perspective (Johansen and Chandler, 2015).

As given account for by Scott (1998), one challenge for human institutions involved in the composition of policy is to what degree they can stay open to potentials – and promise to enhance the knowledge and responsibility of individuals who will be effected. Scott suggests that the answer is found in how (deep) values and experiences influence “any” policy shaped by human institutions. In reference to policy, Scott suggests that the practical intelligence of citizens (in mediated form) continually ought to influence and transform the laws and policies at hand. As given account for in this study, diversity and complexity could, for human institution, yield flexible, multipurpose social forms (Scott, 1998). The distribution of resources and the responsibility to support diversity according to cultural-context variables instead of rationalization and efficiency measures ought to be a topic of discussion for the Nordic education model – as well as for any welfare state discussing education and democracy. Diversity, I suggest, also rests on a moral idea of democracy where, in line with the social justice of Nordic welfare and the intrinsic values of culture, it is valued as an asset (Blossing et al., 2014; Lundgren, 2010; Telhaug et al., 2006).

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## Notes

1. In reference to the Nordic welfare model, the Nordic countries are Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland (Blossing et al., 2014: 2).
2. Regarding culture in line with Gupta and Ferguson (1992), difference is taken as a starting point and not as an end product. Difference becomes part and parcel of how we think about the relations between culture, power and space (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992).
3. The material has been collected in cooperation with colleagues Ragnhild Liland, Mariann Villa and Karl Jan Solstad.
4. Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a French researcher and educator. His work was primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society, and especially the diverse and subtle ways in which power is transferred and social order maintained within and across generations. In clear opposition to the idealist tradition of much of Western philosophy, his work often emphasized the corporeal nature of social life and stressed the role of practice and embodiment in social dynamics.
5. Schools with less than 90 pupils are regarded as “small schools” in Norway. The majority are found in local communities on the coastal islands, in the fjords, or in the remote valleys. Here pupils are organized into two mixed-age groups for teaching and learning with a maximum of 30 pupils (“two-divided” schools). The first age group historically has included children aged 7–9 years, but 6-year-olds have been included since 1998. The second age group includes children aged 10–12 years. There is also a smaller number of “three-divided” schools (55–90 pupils, Kvalsund, 2009).
6. In Scandinavia we find that under the influence of neoliberal rhetoric, the social democratic commitment to promote school as a cultural canon for fostering attitudes for living in a democracy (as a public good) has given way to the individual’s right to be rewarded for “input” – democracy as an individual good (Aasen, 2003).
7. Democracy relates to representative democracy. At public elections, we choose politicians who are then given the mandate to talk for us both with respect to national and the community political work.
8. Johansen and Chandler (2015) find that the facilitators of (participatory) processes are consultants, researchers, policymakers, planners and architects with no local ties. Moreover, these groups of experts are trained in an academic understanding of what rural qualities are from an urban perspective (Johansen and Chandler, 2015).
9. I understand and analyze cultural capital in terms of being embodied through long-lasting dispositions of mind and body – symbolically transmitted. Cultural capital is also objectified, both through economy and symbols; for example, through books, instruments, tools, machines and buildings. Cultural capital is institutionalized; for example, through academic qualifications and/or through (local) organizations. One point taken is that institutionalized cultural capital can be exchanged for economic capital.
10. *Cultural capital* in terms of being *embodied* through long-lasting dispositions of mind and body is thus symbolically transmitted.
11. The concept of habitus supports the analysis and deals with social context and the interplay between dispositions and structures that shape practice in the local context. Habitus relates to the socialized norms that guide behavior and thinking. Habitus tells us something about the way society is embedded in people in the form of lasting dispositions or trained capacities – thinking, feeling and acting in determinant ways. Habitus can thus be considered embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1995).

12. I also look further into social capital, seen as the durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships and the mutual acquaintance and recognition in practice or in symbol (I know him/her well). It could be said that social capital is important in securing material and symbolic profit.

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