

Rural communities and schools – valuing and reproducing local culture

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Highlights

- The school represents self-sufficiency and integrity to local inhabitants and communities
- The extended school-community relations frame local life from birth to death and across generations
- Gender ideologies in school-community-nature relations are to be further researched

Abstract

School closures are frequently and widely discussed and provoke debates both at the local community level and in national arenas. Our study was inspired by the local resistance to school closures in Norwegian rural areas, asking how local inhabitants cope with threats of school closure. The study is based on seven group interviews with parents, grandparents, and teachers in four rural communities which have experienced recurring threats of school closure. In this article we explore how they argued to keep their schools open and how this links with valuing and reproducing local communities and cultures. The teachers and parents reported on extended school-community activities involving local populations and next of kin across generations. Through the school the inhabitants possess resources enabling them to deal with the activities and ceremonies that belong to life in general, and which frame and give integrity to their lives in the local community. When introducing village activities at school and school activities in the

village, multi-generational learning and socialisation become part of the rural community's viability and continuity. The school imports and transfers knowledge related to the curriculum (natural science, math, history, geography) through practical events and exercises. These practices and activities potentially also inspire and create new generations of hunters, fishermen and mountain hikers giving them a sense of belonging to and being affiliated with the local community. The gendered aspects of rural life and how this is reflected in the teachers' practices and local inhabitants' participation in school activities became evident when analysing practices toward hunting and fishing. Whether the school-community-nature practices preserve or explode traditional gender ideologies is to be researched further.

Keywords

Rural Norway; School-community relations; School closure; Local meaning

1. Introduction

During the spring months of 2018 a series of articles were published in Norway's leading newspapers, reflecting concern about the prevailing trend of school centralisation and closures in rural Norway.(1) Headings such as 'the silent school destruction' with school closures portrayed as an 'economic battlefield' focused on the massive school closures in rural areas in recent last decades. Local populations' frustrations when there have been threats of school closures found new and inventive expressions during summer 2019, when a rural village in Western Norway advertised their community at FINN.no - a digital market place for goods and services offered to private persons and enterprises. By advertising for new families and young people to settle down in their community, local inhabitants hoped to raise the number of children in the school district and hence save their primary school. As Solstad (2009) already indicated, school closures are frequently and widely discussed and provoke debates both at the local community level and in national arenas, and these were recent examples of local and popular responses to centralisation, rationalisation, and the consolidation of the school structure.

School closures, or threats thereof, might be experienced in different ways depending on the resources in different rural communities and the actors and interests present in such processes (Egelund and Laustsen, 2006; Cedering, 2016); or, potential differences and disagreements might be eclipsed by an overall common interest in keeping the school (Villa, 2016), but school centralisations are international trends forcing local communities throughout Europe to fight for their schools just as they fight each other as rival communities (Amcoff, 2012; Pettersen et al., 2001; Simola et al., 2002). In Norway, increasingly more schools have been consolidated

(merged) and today there are about 300 fewer primary and lower secondary schools compared to ten years ago. (2)

Our study was inspired by the local resistance to school closures in rural areas, asking how local inhabitants cope with threats of school closure. The study is based on interviews with parents, grandparents, and teachers in four rural communities which have experienced recurring threats of school closure. In this article we explore how they argued to keep their schools open and how this links with valuing and reproducing local communities and cultures.

2. Rural schools and communities: policy and discourse

Rural schools have been identified as arenas where social capital and community engagement, cooperation, and reconstruction of local history and culture are managed (Berry and West, 2010).

According to Kearns et al. (2010) school closure and centralisation are not only a threat to children's education but also a threat against the very fabric of the community itself. This finds some support in Autti and Hyry-Beihammer's (2014) study on social capital as closely intertwined with and sustained through the local school. They note potential negative consequences for social capital in local communities in cases of school closure, in that this results in there being one less place for locals to meet. But they also argue that viable local communities with strong social capital are able to create new social places and local institutions and hence uphold social life in their local community.

As stated in Beach et al. (2019: 20, Bagley and Hillyard, 2014), rural communities and their schools differ from one to the-other and might be affected differently by national education

policies. In this section we outline some overall perspectives on Norwegian rural and school policy and explain how school closure in rural areas links with wider rural-urban discourses.

This provides a backdrop to understand the way rural inhabitants and teachers position the school in the local community, and how school closures are experienced as threats to rural life.

Policy and paradoxes

People living in rural areas are affected by a whole range of policies for which many government departments are responsible, such as education, health, transport, justice, welfare, planning, housing, agriculture, and others (Shucksmith, 2019: 314). In Norway there is a statutory right to keep villages and rural areas thriving and growing and to ensure that people living there have the same life opportunities as those who live in the cities (Shucksmith, 2019: 320). This is echoed in the Nordic welfare model with compulsory schooling implemented to support social justice and equal opportunities for all citizens (Knutas, 2017). Culture, socialisation, identity and democracy are supposed to be supported by the interconnection between community and the local school (Blossing et al., 2014; Telhaug et al., 2006). “Local communities and schools”, Kvalsund argues, “are social units and institutions for developing, delivering, implementing, and maintaining services within the welfare state (Kvalsund, 2019: 179; 2009: 89). It follows that the school exists to educate individuals and prepare them to be citizens living meaningful lives in local communities and regions; this in turn supports the argument that living in sparsely populated districts can have intrinsic value (Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009: 141).

Despite Norwegian regional policy's overall aim to ensure equal living conditions for people in all parts of the country and to maintain the existing sparse population pattern (Haugen and Lysgård, 2006), depopulation and the consolidation (merger) of institutions and services are general trends which challenge rural life in different arenas. Changes in the Norwegian municipal income system has been highlighted as one significant driver toward increased school consolidation and a rise in closures in recent decades (Kvalsund, 2019, Solstad, 2009). Until 1986, the Ministry of Education earmarked money for the municipalities to run their schools. This was then changed to a block-grant transfer, which gave some flexibility for strategic calculation in the field of schooling (Kvalsund, 2019: 187). Municipalities, then, could save money for other sectors by closing small rural schools. From then on there was an acceleration in school closures and increasingly more and larger schools have been merged. Budgetary concerns are the most often reported reason for school closures in rural areas and for expecting further school closures, though disguised by pedagogical arguments since the national consensus was against the closure of rural schools on financial grounds (Solstad, 2009: 21). According to Solstad this is a paradoxical development: When Norway was poorer, the state endeavoured to provide for its schools, while a wealthier Norway seems financially unable to keep rural schools open. Also, Kvalsund (2019) argues that the closure of small rural schools represents a contradictory practice changing what rural schools were meant to be. The tradition of having a relatively decentralised school system across the country is based on educational qualities associated with place-based schooling. Solstad and Kvalsund find that the wave of school mergers was and still is challenging the connection between children's life experiences in the local community and school learning (Kvalsund, 2019: 187; Solstad, 2009: 31–33).

Rural – urban discourses

Issues of school closure and education are intertwined with wider rural-urban discourses.

Norwegian rural areas represent cultural heritage, tradition, the building of national identity, and an idea of the rural way of living as ‘the good life’, and on which rural and regional policy has been founded. Parallel to hegemonic norms of rural living as the good life, there are other and dominant narratives such as of cities and urban areas as the only source of innovation and economic dynamism and of rural places as backward and marginal (Shucksmith, 2019). These stereotypes are found in competing discourses in Norwegian parliamentary debates on rural development (Cruickshank et al., 2009). One discourse regards rural values as intrinsically good and values rural settlements and cultures in their own rights. The other focuses on rural living and places as justified only by their economic sustainabilities, and their ability to grow and become profitable and competitive (Cruickshank et al., 2009; Knutas, 2017).

This has parallels in the field of schooling and education. Dominating educational discourses are found to reflect an urban and cosmopolitan worldview, which marginalises rural children and rural education (Downes and Roberts, 2015; Corbett, 2007). This is exemplified at a structural level in Norwegian teacher education, where multi-grade and hence rural education appears mostly invisible or insignificant. In the national requirements for teacher education, multi-grade education and teaching are ignored, and teacher students at university level experience little focus on how to teach and educate in multi-grade schools, which most often are rural schools. (3)

Researchers have called attention to urban biases in educational research. These are understandings of rural schooling as disadvantaged compared with their metropolitan counterparts (Roberts and Cuervo, 2015; Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009; Solstad, 2009), rural schools as different to and deviant in terms of current educational norms (Berg-Olsen, 2008), and small schools, which most often are rural schools, thought to be characterised by low achievement when compared with larger schools (Amcoff, 2012). This is contradicted, however, by research finding that the performances of children in rural schools resemble and even outclass those of their urban counterparts (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Solstad, 2009). A review of the research literature finds little evidence of simple causal relationships between school size and school quality or of findings supporting the idea that small rural schools are systematically less successful than larger schools (Villa, 2015).

Still, rural inhabitants frequently experience being assessed in accordance with urban norms or standards, typically finding their schools and local communities generally less valued by the larger society. This is a polarisation evident in processes of school closure. At the same time, rural people might emphasise an exclusive and outstanding quality in living in a rural community (Villa, 1999, 2016). This is discussed by Beach et al. (2019: 28) who identify how people especially in schools in sparsely populated rural areas adhere to discourses of urban inability to cope with or understand nature, political metro-centricity and urban middle-class self-assumed sense of superiority. This recognition varied with different localities or economies, but in some way or another rural schools in Beach et al.'s study seemed to position themselves explicitly in an urban – rural comparison. Such issues frame our study, in the way that fighting against school closure in rural areas is intertwined with fighting against de-valuation of rural living.

Calls for research

Constant threats of school closure were a backdrop to our study of how local inhabitants value schools in their communities. There has been little research on the consequences of school closure for local communities and rural settlement (Egelund and Lautsen, 2006; Båtevik et al., 2013) and it is problematic to point at causal relations between school closure and rural depopulation (Amcoff, 2012; Egelund and Laustsen, 2006). From a local perspective, however, it is commonly feared that communities will decline or even die if local schools are closed (Solstad, 2009).

Across nations, there have been calls for a better understanding of rurality and rural experiences in educational research, for research on small rural schools' contributions to educational, environmental and community sustainability, and on the impact of school closures on the economic and social viability of different rural communities (Corbett, 2015; Roberts and Cuervo, 2015; Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009). In Norway, the invisibility of multi-grade and rural education in teacher education is followed by a lack of research funds which reinforces the gap in the rural school and community research field.

In this article we examine how inhabitants in four Norwegian rural communities threatened by school closure fight to keep their schools in their communities. We pay attention to the qualities and practical and symbolic meanings that local actors put into having a school in their local community and how the culture of the community is valued and reproduced through the school. Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2009) apply a life-world perspective to rural educational research. We

aim at adding to this by revealing how the rural school is seen ‘from within the local arenas where the everyday interplay between actors, conditions and processes of place – nature, production, culture – and education takes place’ (op.cit.: 141).

3. Material and methods

Information was collected in order to study local experiences of (threats of) school closure processes in rural Norway. The material consists of seven group interviews with teachers, parents, and grandparents in rural communities in sparsely populated rural areas in northern and mid Norway, all at a distance from a larger city but varying in distance from their municipality centre. The local economies are mostly based on agriculture, construction building, and public health services, while many inhabitants are commuting to the municipality centre or nearby for work.

We had some knowledge of the schools or of our contact persons at the schools through accidental meetings and enquiries, but overall criteria for selecting cases were that the schools had been experiencing processes and threats of closure or merger. The challenges to local schools vary from threats of school closure the following year to recently having lost classes to neighbouring schools. In all cases, the local populations have been repeatedly found themselves engaged in processes of resisting school closure.

Contact was established with the schools through employees at the local authority’s administrative office, which introduced us to the headmaster, or by directly contacting teachers’ and parents’ representatives at the schools, who were asked to invite teachers and parents/people

from the local community to take part in interviews. This resulted in a total of seven interview groups: three with teachers, three with parents/grandparents, and one with parents and teachers interviewed together.

The schools are located in communities of 240-500 inhabitants, and, in the event of school closure, children in the most peripheral areas would depend on three hours per day of school transportation, which would involve buses back and forth and time to wait for and change buses. The size of the schools varied from 39 to 51 children, 1-7 and 1-3 classes, and four to six teachers. All schools were practising a multi-grade system (several grades in one classroom).

We conducted our interviews over a period from November 2013 to October 2014. The persons interviewed were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point in time. They were informed that the material would be treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines governing research, including a guarantee of both confidentiality and anonymity. The focus group interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. All but one interview were audiotaped and transcribed, and the responses were encoded so that no person or school would be identifiable.

3.1 Parents and grandparents

In recruiting interview subjects from the local communities, we established no restrictions other than seeking a diversity among local inhabitants. We made no changes after our contact persons had gathered volunteers. ‘Local inhabitants’ were all inhabitants in the district of the respective school under study and they all appeared to be either parents or grandparents to children enrolled

at one or another school. Some had worked as teachers, some were engaged in NGOs and in various forms of cooperation with the schools (e.g. outdoor activities, handcraft), and some had been active opponents to school closures in their local communities. In total, 16 women and seven men approximately 30 to 70 years of age participated, and each interview group consisted of two to six parents/grandparents.

3.2 Teachers

The schools included in the study are small, and almost all the teachers at each school signed up to participate. The reason why was not discussed, but one explanation might be that we generally asked for four to six participants in each group – and the schools had between four and six teachers. It could also be that they were eager to have the chance to talk about their experiences of working in a multi-grade school in rural areas, especially in light of the frequent closing of rural schools in Norway. The 20 participating teachers were of both genders and various ages and had worked with various subjects in school. At one school, a couple of teachers did not participate, apparently because they did support school consolidation. At least this was what the respective parent group supposed. In this case, from the teachers' group interview we recognised that there were some disagreements among the staff on the topic, but we did not speak with the dissenting teachers. However, this is of relevance to a bias in the material, as will be discussed below.

3.3 The focus-group interview

One argument for the choice of focus-group interviews in the study was that the researchers had little previous knowledge about the theme of multi-grade educational practices in rural settings, and local populations' experiences of school closure in rural communities. The participants were asked to talk about their understandings and experiences of the given school's contribution to the local community and the local community's contribution to the school. Focus group interviews have a formal character, as the interaction is arranged within a certain frame and theme. We aimed at an informal conversation propelled through the participants' commitment and interest in the topic/theme, and arrangements and activities at school and in the villages, educating across ages, school transports, recurrent school closure processes, and relations to neighbouring villages and larger schools were some major issues at stake.

Minimal involvement on the part of the researcher might be desirable in order not to interrupt the interview group's conversation (Bjørnlund, 2005), and as there were two to three researchers present in each group we ran the risk of having too much influence on the situation. Being aware of this, we prepared one researcher to take the responsibility to ask questions, and the others to take notes and, if needed, ask follow-up questions. In some cases, this practice was more consistent, in others the interview became more of a dialogue including all participants and researchers. In all cases, the conversation generally was informal and allowed for spontaneity, though follow-up questions were asked by the researchers to secure that our main focus was discussed. We did not consider the presence of two or three researchers significantly disturbing for the participants. However, this might have been perceived in different ways by the participants. As for the research process, the presence of several researchers proved to be an

advantage, with each having the ability to alternate listening, writing, and conducting the interview, as well as discussing the research outcome afterwards.

3.4 The interests of the interviewees

The contact persons acted as gatekeepers by inviting interview subjects engaged in or supporting the effort to retain the school, and this form of self-recruitment produced a seemingly homogeneous sample. We asked for ‘variation’ and ‘different interests’ when recruiting persons, but for the contact persons this might not necessarily have meant disagreement in school and community issues, and they might have invited persons whom they perceived as good spokesmen and –women for the issue.

Our interest was to ‘dig deeper’ (Bjørklund, 2005) into experiences with school closure or consolidation, and we hoped to explore different attitudes as these might become visible when members of a group voiced or contradicted certain opinions (Puchta and Potter, 2004). We cannot say that the interviewees were inclined to agree in all aspects of the discussions, but they seemed to agree in resisting school closure and consolidation, and as such expressed unanimous sentiments.

Some participants were less active in the discussions but seemed to meet out of general interest or to be supportive in the case, uniting around the effort to ‘keep the school’. It could, however, have been difficult for individuals in the group to express disagreement or divergent views on school closure processes. Group pressure to conform might be a general problem with group

interviews, and especially when there seemed to be a ‘voice of the group’ in favour of keeping the local school.

This is not to say that there were not underlying or hidden conflicting interests among the interview subjects. One parent explicitly referred to the coherence of the group by saying, ‘we disagree in many issues, but on school issues we agree’ (Villa, 2016). And, there were most likely persons in these local communities with divergent perceptions of school issues, who maybe for that reason were not invited to the interview. There might be severe conflicts on school closure issues in local communities, and small schools are not always perceived to be the best for children. In one of the teachers’ groups, we sensed some disagreement on the qualities of transparent communities, and childrens’ alternatives in making friends. The sensitivity of the issue also was demonstrated when one of the women in a local population group did not agree to allow the interview to be recorded, and when local population representatives expressed dissatisfaction when teachers supposedly in favour of school closure in their opinion did not dare to volunteer or were not invited to the interview.

The feedback then is to be analysed as stories of how the school is appreciated by the local community and how local community and school mobilise against school closure. There was, however, an obvious bias in our material as it represented one of possibly several parts or aspects of the rural educational debate -- those who argue against school closure. Those more or less indifferent to the issue or those arguing for school closure were not present in our study. With the groups restricted to parents and grandparents to children currently associated with the schools, the material neither provided any insight into the school’s meaning for inhabitants of the wider rural communities, youth or local inhabitants without children, nor suggested how schoolchildren

themselves think of the school. Where such voices were present, experiences were reiterated and underlined by the parents and grandparents whom we interviewed.

4. Results and Discussion

In all interview groups at all schools we visited, the importance of the school to the local community and the local community to the school was a major theme. In this section, we explore how the teachers and parents/grandparents argued for keeping their schools by reporting on their ‘best practices’ in school-community relations across age, generation and local institutions (organisations and activities).

4.1 Activities across age - beyond multi-grade education

Multi-grade school practices might be driven by pedagogical ideas or by necessity due to demography and population in a local area. In our cases multi-grade or age mixed classes were a structural adaptation to the demographics of the school districts. The schools were all continually threatened with closure and consolidation due to small populations, and multi-grade teaching naturally was one way to preserve the school in the district. The teachers were conscious of some challenges due to multi-grade teaching, as when struggling to alternate and teach several curricula in one lesson. But they more commonly praised this structure, as well as the small schools per se, to promote a broader social and cultural learning environment across ages.

In the mountainous region, teachers worked across ages in arranging overnight mountain hiking where ‘the younger children need support carrying their backpacks and the older ones got to help out’ (teacher). In another case, multi-grade schooling meant working with physical education across at least three age groups. Here ‘the older children have created special rules to make sure the young ones can participate’ (teacher). In the teachers’ opinion the organising of mixed classes encouraged caring practices between the children. Similarly, when new children were introduced to school, older children were assigned responsibility to take care of newcomers. Such a buddy system is practised across schools in general. At one school in our study, however, the teachers took the opportunity to enhance local community issues and culture when new and older children were getting to know each other. This was an introduction-to-school activity where children across ages worked together writing poems, which the school dedicated as a book of poetry to the local community and people living in the village.

The teachers view small schools as ‘giving the children a secure environment’ and a place where they ‘become close across age’ (teacher). Working across ages was experienced as promoting self-reliance and responsibility, with older children learning to help the younger ones. But while the teachers at these schools could not themselves choose to approach learning outside a multi-grade context, their arguments could also be explored as less related to support for a multi-grade school structure per se. Age-mixed classes can be coping-strategies for schools in local communities in demographic decline. Arguments and the activities of a pedagogical conviction or learning environment, then, could simply be strategies to keep the school in the local community.

Previous research points out that working across age groups promotes self-reliance and enhances social development and cooperation (Little, 1995) and interaction across generations is found to benefit the community as such and to support the (re)construction of democracy (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2007). As will be explored at greater length below, the practices at school both depend on and promote cooperation across ages as well as across generations in the villages.

4.2 The economy of school-community relations

The teachers and parents reported on extended school-community activities involving local populations and next of kin across generations. School activities were financed as the school (the teacher and the class) arranged local events to collect money. In one case, such an event was a quiz walkathon in the village involving grandparents, parents and ‘everyone’ else, both as participants in the walkathon and in serving soup to participants. Or alternatively, a local NGO could invest in machinery with money raised from a school-related arrangement. This was exemplified by a local community café arranged in the school building, which ‘filled up’ with guests at every open hour:

Income from the café is put into a machine to prepare for ski trails. (...) Yes, it coheres – it’s the sports club that benefits from this (...) everything – it’s so closely related. (parent)

Parents and grandparents assisted in teaching when their special skills were requested, and in organising excursions and events at the school. Outdoor and game areas were built and renovated by volunteers under the motto ‘people do help’. At school arrangements families donate pastries,

‘we hand them over to the school kitchen, then we buy coffee and we provide our own pastries, and we sell lottery tickets for cakes that we ourselves have brought there. In that way we keep it going,’ a woman told us, supported by another who claimed that strong local community belonging generates contributions to the community and the school. And, as was confidently underlined by the parents, this could not have happened elsewhere than in a rural community (see Villa, 2016). Also, parents in our study emphasised rural-urban differences when discussing teachers’ involvement, as arguing that rural teachers are more engaged in local affairs. This contradicts previous research, which generally indicated that the teacher’s role is changing toward being less involved in local affairs (Hargreaves et al., 2009):

‘The teachers attend at local arrangements outside class. *No one* does at larger schools.

When not getting paid they don’t attend in the evenings’ (parent).

A lot of voluntary work was done among local inhabitants in favour of the schools. In the interviews, local inhabitants barely supported voluntary work in this context as a potential burden, as could well be the case. Instead, interviewees portrayed voluntary work in positive terms, noting that it was characteristic of small places.

Investment in a ski-tracking machine with money raised at school events underlines the relationship between the local community, the NGOs, and the school. These relations were perceived to represent coherence in the local community. One of the women in the local population’s groups viewed voluntary work related to school simply as a value in its own right: It represents and generates a sense of belonging. In this way participation and belonging were

understood to reinforce each other and the effort put into school activities by local populations was justified by this attitude. This conviction also might mitigate potential dissatisfaction in these situations.

When introducing village activities at school and school activities in the village, multi-generational learning and socialisation become part of the rural community's viability and continuity. School, local communities, and NGOs are interrelated in ways that reveal self-sufficiency through cooperation. They all depend on each other's input whether it involves labour or capital. The 'closely related'-ness of activities and economies between or among local institutions represents a kind of exchange economy within the local community. The school then becomes an important buttress in the architecture of the local community, which local populations fight to retain.

4.3 The intersections of school and life circumstances

The school was portrayed, in our interviews, in ways that make it an 'all inclusive' institution, hosting activities during both day and evening, throughout the year, across age and generations and throughout life. This reveals that the school building is a place for activities outside school hours. The buildings host fitness studios and sport centres, dancing classes, NGO meetings, and an indoor shooting range, and there is room for large gatherings such as national day celebrations, Christmas parties, and reunion gatherings for locals and those who moved away. It felt easy to use the school for arrangements during evenings, because the building is

continuously heated as well as equipped with a commercial kitchen. The school gathers inhabitants for sundry ceremonies, such as christenings, confirmations, and funerals:

I should say, you start with the kindergarten and then you round off with a reception after the funeral, in the same building. (parent)

In one case, the school gymnasium was used for receptions after funerals and the children had to do their gym in the outdoor area during the ceremony. This represents a practical flexibility in school-community relations, which enables the local community to take care of important and central rituals for the inhabitants.

Elder og Shanahan (1997: 26) use the concept ‘interwoven lives’ to explore how people across ages are interwoven in relations of relatives, friends, and others. The local inhabitants’ relationship to the school could be analysed in similar ways: The school represents an interwoven local community life, where activities at school or related to school bind inhabitants together across generations and through life courses. Through the school, whether directly or indirectly, the inhabitants possess resources enabling them to deal with the activities and ceremonies that belong to life in general, and which frame their lives in the local community. These become resources providing local communities with authority, competence, and self-sufficiency to conduct everyday- and ceremonial activities.

4.4 Self-sufficiency and integrity to local communities institutionalised through school

Local inhabitants in our study viewed their school as intrinsically valuable for their local community. The school was seen to provide ‘integrity’ and build ‘self-esteem’ for both the local community and its inhabitants:

Man: It supposedly increases our integrity living here.

Researcher: In what way do you think, then?

Man: It has to do with....it literally has to do with self-esteem. To be a community keeping a school.

Through the multiple social and organizational arrangements related to the school or a school building, we might understand this value as being a community able to take care of its inhabitants and being able to do so in several respects over the course of their lives. During school hours and in school-community arrangements, the inhabitants’ resources are exhibited, such as handicraft and hunting skills, network, machinery and equipment. Arrangements also reflect and build competence to manage local life.

The parents, grandparents, and teachers show insight into the practices of school – community cooperation, and how these are performed across age, generations, and throughout the course of life. The community’s integrity is underscored by having a school display past and present activities and manage community concerns. Furthermore, the school – community association nexus might underpin social networks for years and generations ahead, and thus support the reconstruction of the community (see also Bagley and Hillyard; 2014; Woods, 2006).

The school's central position, experienced by our interviewees as 'the glue' of the community, is in line with earlier research characterising the school as the hub of the local community, a service centre, an arena of social community, and a link between individuals, families and the local community, as well as a culture bearer with importance for the economy and for people's welfare in rural and small local communities (Cedering, 2016; Kvalsund, 2004; Rønning et al., 2003; special issue AIJRE, 2017).

The school might not be the only local institution able to have a glue-function in local communities (see e.g. Oldenburg (2001) on pubs as social places) and local communities might be able to create new local institutions as hubs in the community or otherwise compensate for their losses (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Svendsen and Sørensen, 2016). But what is central to local inhabitants fighting for their school is not only a discussion of whether they will be able to replace the school and uphold the local community in one way or the other. It also concerns a right not to fight for what is taken for granted, such as structures in society in general. The school represents children's and citizens' equal and democratic rights in the welfare state - the rights to schooling in communities where one live. As a father in our study put it: 'That is what we pay our taxes for.' By this, threat of school closure becomes an existential fight against the larger society, to which the local and rural communities make their contributions.

4.5 Place and local culture in rural education

When the teachers at one of the schools located in a valley area, talk about the importance of having a school in a small community, they refer to the advantage of being close to and able to utilise local cultural and natural resources in education, such as taking the pupils hunting in the fall. They go reindeer hunting, have reindeer slaughtered, and sleep over in lavvo (a Sami tent) put up in the mountain area. Crucial here is the (male) teacher's competence and role in the local hunting organisation. As the board chairperson in this organisation, he has been able to gain support within the local community for the school's hunting project. Afterwards, the school arranges a dinner for the villagers with the meat from the hunt as the main course, and with more than 100 people from the local community attend and dine.

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.
(teacher)

Similarly, another teacher emphasised how they have been able to collect funds for fishing gear to go fishing with the children in the mountain lakes. This activity was organised in cooperation with the local mountain fishing board and was beneficial for the fishing industry as one aim is 'to contribute to thinning out the fish stock in the lakes.' (teacher)

The teachers cooperate with skilled local inhabitants, and transfer knowledge of local nature, traditional industry, outdoor and recreational life to the children at school. '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'

(teacher). By doing so, they also satisfy demands in the curriculum, as they ‘combine practical studies with science. We measure the fish, we calculate average weight and length.’

The children were introduced to outdoor activities and trained in survival in the mountains; the teachers say that this shows how the school is interacting with local community. Here, local village culture is transferred in school through hunting and fishing organisations. The school imports and transfers knowledge related to the curriculum (natural science, math, history, geography) through practical events and exercises. These practices and activities potentially also inspire and create new generations of hunters, fishermen and mountain hikers giving them a sense of belonging to and being affiliated with the local community.

One of the teachers in our study described local community inhabitants as living close to nature and in cooperation with the school, eager to support social, cultural and practical traditions (Knutas, 2017). Inspired by Bourdieu (1999) we would say that the necessary knowledge, and local cultural capitals, are constituted through practice carried over and across generations. It is objectified through fishing practices, hunting gear and cabins, and made relevant for the curricular textbooks.

The gendered aspects of rural life and how this is reflected in the teachers’ practices and local inhabitants’ participation in school activities were not discussed explicitly in the interviews but became evident when analysing practices toward hunting and fishing. The expected socialisation and future recruitment inherent in these practices adhered to what have been male dominated areas of rural life, though the meaning of gender performances changes over time and in different contexts (Brandth and Haugen, 2016). Whether the school-community-nature practices preserve or explode traditional gender ideologies is to be researched further.

5. Concluding discussion

From the perspective of the parents, grandparents, and teachers, their local communities and schools were viable, enjoying resources to educate the children in ways that put local culture at the fore. The schools were seen as maintaining the local communities, and local inhabitants and organisations were central actors in activities that supported a community-oriented school. The culture of the community was valued and reproduced through the school, and by having a school the local communities experienced to gain in symbolic capital. Threats of school closure hence represented threats to the entire local community.

At school, formal education requirements and local community knowledges were merged and concerned with nature, production, and cultural and social life. The interviewees felt self sufficient and felt that having a school was important for the integrity of the local community. This relates to both practical and symbolic issues and allows the school to become an institution serving local and rural life as taking place from birth to death and across generations. The analysis reveals how important the community is for the school and the school for the community. It shows how cultural and social capital is reproduced through school and how the school is used as an arena for doing culture. This might be further explored as extended school-community relations; a mix of teaching, education, local community work and school buildings, where the importance of the one to the other is difficult to calculate other than being essential to maintaining the rhythm of local life.

Such experiences might, however, when placed in public discourses on school policy and rural development, be contested and silenced. Information perceived as politically relevant to decision-makers in school closure processes may include economic or demographic calculations (Taghizadeh, 2016; Solstad and Kvalsund, 2010). In our study, local inhabitants and teachers were concerned with the social and cultural aspects of school-community relations, and the social and cultural value of the school in their local community. These are issues and assets more difficult to calculate in economic terms. The interviewees also discussed the potential economic gains or costs involved in school closure (new versus old buildings, transport and busing, etc.). But by asking the urban settled researchers ‘have you ever in the city felt such threats as we experience?’, one of the parents literally and rhetorically placed the issue in an urban-rural discourse. Above all, the parents understood the present fight for their school as a struggle against an overall lack of public concern for sustaining rural communities and a lack of valuing what rural communities gain from and give to their small, rural schools.

The local communities were able to raise money for school activities and the schools themselves were participating in fundraising activities for the local community. Teachers and inhabitants made use of a variety of skills and social relations in order to conduct these arrangements. Cultural capital is institutionalised through the teachers’ academic qualifications and the comprehensive school’s duty to foster the next generation of democratic citizens (Bourdieu, 1999). Further, cultural capital and knowledge were embodied and transferred through activities (hiking, hunting, fishing, fundraising, supporting the youngest, performing at school-community events) and objectified e.g. through the book of poetry issued to the local community and the skittrack machinery to the local NGO.

The local inhabitants confessed to exhaustion with the constant and recurring processes of school closure or consolidation, as well as in some cases lack of teacher staff. But overall, they claimed that the school-community relations and arrangements in their local communities were approaching an exceptional level impossible to find in cities or larger communities (Villa, 2016) and as such held that an urban environment was ill suited to mobilise the local community (see also Beach et al, 2019).

Being aware of the risk of stereotyping a mutually beneficial relationship between rural communities and schools, we interpret such statements as experiences in dialogue with rural development where local communities are committed to resist population decline and in dialogue with discourses on rural communities as inferior communities. Across the study's cases, the interviewees were engaged in fighting a superstructure in politics and public discourse on rural communities placing rural communities generally deficient to urban and larger communities, and which made their small rural schools inferior when seen from the centre's perspective.

The interviewees' insisting on the advantages of the school and local community relationship might stress how small, rural communities and schools are constantly being surveyed and compared to larger places or urban communities. The local inhabitants experienced their resources as highly valuable while at the same time they were aware that they were often viewed as inferior by others (school politicians, municipality administration, larger and urban societies).

5.1 New questions of gender and class in school-community relations?

Parents and grandparents felt that a school was essential for their rural community, and the teachers likewise viewed the local community as a resource for the school. This generally confirmed implied assumptions of a particularly close connection between schools and communities in rural areas (Pini and Mayes, 2015). Pini and Mayes argue that the nature and extent of relationships between parents, community members, and schools are likely to be highlighted and uncritically presented as mutually beneficial (op. cit: 29). But McPherson et al. (2017) found that, while community members and schools regard sustainability as very important, the different understandings of its meaning and implication for communities potentially creates conflict. Local inhabitants in our study expressed the desire to coalesce on ‘school issues’ (Villa, 2016), but potentially conflicting issues could relate to more problematic areas such as reproduction of gender and class differences.

Following Corbett’s (2007) argument in favour of a local community-oriented school that challenges local norms and values, both counterculture and sustainability in the school-community practices could be further examined. Interactive school-community practices in our study rely on traditional cultures and economies, which most likely adhere to traditional gender systems. The practices of passing on traditional culture through school activities might promote local identity and knowledge which in partly reflect the life space of the children’s own local community.

Dominating discourses assume a natural connection between education and the consolidation of schools and support the exodus of young people from rural areas (Corbett, 2007; 2015:14) whilst the parents, grandparents and teachers in this study work and argue against this trend. But what are the rural or local gender ideologies expressed through school-nature educational practice? Do

practices reproduce or challenge gender as well as class identities, and how is this related to local youth's preferences for rural living or rural leaving?

The school – nature relations outlined in this article seem to be based on traditional men's arenas in rural areas. The interviewees pointed out that they considered these relations important for socialisation and for local and rural settlement in the future. In previous studies of rural environments, masculine rural cultures (Aasbrenn, 1989) have been critically examined, in particular to probe whether they discourage women from staying in or moving to rural areas (Grimsrud, 2012; Little and Austin, 1996). Rural and place-specific gender ideologies are becoming increasingly fluid and practices vary among and within nations, though still influencing young people's education and work (Berg and Forsberg, 2003; Stenbacka et al., 2017). The community-school practices as found in our study then might contribute to anchor children in the local community, but also to reproduce traditions and gender ideologies which are generally found to promote an exodus from rural areas.

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Footnotes

(1) Klassekampen 13.03.18, Nationen 14.04.18, VG 25.04.18, TV2 05.11.19.

(2) <https://www.udir.no> Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

(3) <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/meld.-st.-16-20162017/id2536007>

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