

Guest Editorial

Rural schools and rural communities in times of centralization and rural–urban migration¹

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Introduction

This special issue addresses the rural school-community relationship. It provides understandings of how this relationship unfolds and functions within some European contexts by focusing on social, cultural, and political landscapes of various nations and local communities. The rural school-community relationship is approached from different disciplines and theoretical perspectives which contribute to understandings on how this relationship may vary across space, place, school policy, economic structures, sociocultural aspects, welfare regimes and expressions of rurality.

Despite the call for more research on the rural school-community relationship voiced by scholars such as Kvalsund (2009) and Hargreaves (2009) more than a decade ago, recent studies within this research area are still scarce (Beach et al. 2018; Kvalsund, 2019). A core contribution, however, is the very recent work edited by Gristy et al. (2020). The present special issue adds to that of Gristy et al. and responds to, among others, Beach et al.'s (2018, 2019) critique of the metrocentricity within research on schools and education and to the skewed balance they point to between studies of schools along the rural-urban divide in favour of urban contexts. This issue incorporates perspectives from rural education provision,

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welfare studies and rural community studies and points to ways in which social and cultural aspects interrelate in times when rural-urban migration is escalating and when closure and centralization of schools are frequently on the political agenda.

Centralisation and rural-urban migration are important themes for rural studies as a research field (Milbourne, 2007). Local community studies are also concerned with the significance of rural schools on migration, depopulation, changes in economy and infrastructure, commuting, social integration/isolation and civic society. The rural studies' tradition has informed studies of discourses on rural communities and on important dimensions in understandings of rural change, migration, and settlement patterns. The rural school-community relation may look different from the perspective of different agents or actors, and this is also a focal point in this issue.

The rural-urban division is identified also within educational research (Downes and Roberts, 2015; Kvalsund, 2009). Bartholomaeus (2003), however, finds that while people and schools are differently located, much tension occurs as curriculum usually is the same in rural and urban schools. Attention in this special issue is drawn to the location, content and effect of the education provision in rural areas. Additional subjects are the extended role of the school in the local community and the question of whether the school motivates and qualifies young people *also* for a possible future life in the local community or region.

In this introductory article we provide a brief overview of the research field and of questions raised in the literature such as whether cultural homogenization within developed countries make the whole concept of *rural communities* superfluous. Do people living in certain places have distinct feelings of identity, belongingness, shared values, or perspectives, and if so, what kind of role, if any, does a local school play in such identity formation? The various perspectives indicate the importance of being sensitive to rural-urban discourses, and to the variety and complexity of rural communities. We also address challenges that many small communities experience as the local schools are being targeted for potential closures and pay attention to a generally precarious situation for rural schools and communities in a market driven globalized world. We conclude this article with some brief comments on the content and contribution of each article included in this special issue.

Under the sword of Damocles

In industrialized countries such as the Scandinavian ones (Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund, 2020), Finland (Tantarimäki and Törhönen, 2020), the UK (Hargreaves, 2009), Poland (Bajerski, 2020), New Zealand (Kearns, et al. 2010) and the US (Mc Donald, 2007) rural communities have experienced the loss of schools at a steady pace during the last 20-30 years. Most often school closures affect small rural schools, and by this, many rural communities have experienced loss of an institution having been present in their midst for a century or more (Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund, 2020).

The decision to close a school may take several years. A Norwegian study showed that the process of reaching the final decision for removing the school from the local community was going on for at least three years in around half of the schools and communities (Solstad and Solstad, 2015). Another study, also Norwegian (Solstad, 2009), revealed that fighting for the local school is demanding for the local people, and quite often arose tensions and conflicts between neighbouring communities and/or between local communities and the municipal centre. Several negative consequences for the running of the school during the period of struggle to keep the local school were observed: disappointment, weariness and aggression among teaching staff; the feeling among headteachers and teachers of being squeezed between the municipal school administration and politicians, on the one side, and parents and local people generally, on the other; frustration and energy sapping deflecting staff from their main purpose – to promote learning; and minimum attention and support from the local education authorities resulting in unsatisfactory maintenance of equipment, school buildings and playing ground (Solstad, 2009). Conflicts related to school closure processes also contributes to distrust in politicians and local democracy and to deter people from local engagement (Båtevik et al., 2013; Cedering, 2016).

The ways in which rural school closures affect education provision, seem to vary. Available research indicates that rural schools, whether relatively small in a decentralized school structure or relatively large because of centralization measures being taken, are all potentially acceptable in terms of providing traditional academic learning (Åberg-Bengtson, 2009; Hargreaves, 2009; Kvalsund, 2019). Nevertheless, several scholars have expressed concern about whether changes of school structure compromises conditions for place-based learning (PBL) or a locally relevant curriculum. In PBL-programmes the content of compulsory schooling is made more responsive to local conditions to mitigate the gap between the national curriculum and the local culture and circumstances generally. One intention has been

to counteract the 'learning to leave' - effect which Corbett (2007) speaks about when analysing Canadian data. In his arguments, Corbett adds to Solstad's (1978) claims from a Norwegian context in the mid-1970s. To meet a school which does not expand on the knowledge and experiences the children already have, may be educationally disadvantageous and hamper identity formation and the build-up of self-confidence (Solstad 1978; 1981)

Public debates on school quality have tended to focus solely on the pupils' performance in a few core subjects. Despite no new international evidence showing small schools and multi-grade teaching to represent a risk for the pupils' academic progress, several researchers have observed a reoccurring trend both in political debates and among people generally to view small rural schools as inferior to larger ones in terms of learning outcomes (Hargreaves, 2009; Kvalsund, 2019; Solstad, 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). Concerns for the social development of pupils of small schools are also voiced in support of school closures. Such concerns may, as previously (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987), be related to a perception of small multi-grade schools as an anomaly and in conflict with prevailing norms based on urban standards (e.g. Amcoff, 2012; Berg-Olsen, 2008; Downes and Roberts, 2015; Kvalsund, 2009, 2019; Roberts and Green, 2013). Therefore, in these debates the challenges of the small schools are often stressed, whereas specific qualities of multi-grade teaching, and small schools close to pupils' homes, are overlooked (Hargreaves, 2009; Little, 2006; Sigsworth and Solstad, 2005).

Among documented such advantages are: pupils more frequent interactions across age and gender (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987; Kvalsund, 2004); the many natural situations for being seen and for taking responsibility (Berg-Olsen, 2008; Johansen, 2009; Karlberg-Granlund, 2011); the school-home contact generally being better in small schools near pupils' homes (Berg-Olsen, 2008; Karlberg-Granlund, 2011); pupils' more common experience of social equality and mutual respect in small multi-grade schools (Berg-Olsen, 2008; Hargreaves, 2009); and in small schools near the pupils homes place-based learning and the school playing an active role in the local community are more easily carried out (Solstad, 2004; Rønning et al., 2003).

The increased skepticism as to the suitability and quality of small rural schools across countries referred to above, may be seen in the context of the neoliberal and new public management's stress on accountability, competition, free choice, deregulation, the individual rather than the collective, etc. (e.g. Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Sjøberg, 2019, Smith, 2016). Measures to reduce per pupil costs in the running of compulsory schooling were taken in most European countries resulting in massive school closures in rural areas (Kucerová and Trnková, 2020; Sigsworth and Solstad, 2005). As to the educational content, the globalized market driven test regimes such as PISA and TIMSS effectively discourage school leaders and teachers from practicing place-based learning and from involving the school actively in local community activities (Lundgren, 2011; Sjøberg, 2019; Solstad and Andrews, 2020; Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund, 2020). Again, as before the 1970s, the implemented policies - if not their intentions - may result in the 'learning to leave'-effect, already alluded to. Recent developments within teacher education may also reflect a kind of disregard for the needs of small schools. For instance, in 2010 the long tradition in Norway for a general teacher certificate for the whole compulsory schooling, was broken (Østerrud et al., 2015), and curriculum for student-teachers' education at university level reveals little attention to small schools and multi-grade teaching (Villa and Knutas, 2020). Such developments make the recruitment of teachers qualified for working in small rural schools more difficult.

Taken together, the situation of many rural schools and their communities referred to above may be compared to that of Damocles seated with a sword hung in a single hair over his head. In the first place, the immediate threat of school closures appears to have an adverse impact on the running of the school as well as for the wellbeing of the local communities involved. Secondly, as old beliefs of rural schools being qualitatively inferior to urban ones seem to gain ground ones more, and as neoliberal inspired stress on efficiency, deregulation and competition make small schools and sparsely populated areas less viable or sustainable, rural schools and rural communities are more or less generally at risk of being wiped out.

Spatial justice and equitable education

The ideal of an equitable education, i.e. an education which is just and equally available for all individuals and subgroups (Kymlicka, 1990; Rawls, 1971), have had – and has - a high standing in most developed countries. Efforts to improve rural education could also be understood as a struggle to achieve *spatial justice*. Generally, downtown urban areas and

sparsely populated rural areas (SPA) are targeted for educational interventions to achieve spatial justice in education. As will be elaborated in one of the articles of this special issue (Solstad and Andrews, 2020) it was long taken for granted that the kind of provision which was established in urban areas was the best model for all. In Norway, for example, this *equity through equality* (or same treatment) doctrine was over a long period of time, up to around 1970, guiding developments within compulsory education. As a result, rural areas were given a standardized urban biased curriculum and as big schools as geography and infrastructure for school transportation could possibly permit (Kvalsund, 2019; Solstad, 1978, 1997). Towards the second half of the 20th century, the faith in this principle of *equity-through-equality* was challenged from several corners. First, research and theory building on socialization and learning gave reason to question aspects of traditional approaches to school learning and to what is relevant school knowledge. Second, research in several countries concluded that learning in small schools and multi-grade classes was as good as in bigger ones (see above), and indicated a number of negative consequences of lengthy school journeys for the pupils' physical development and wellbeing. Third, popular resistance to harsh centralization measures made the necessary political decisions to close down schools demanding.

Reflections on equity, diversity versus equality ideals, resemble recent conceptualization of *spatial justice* by Soja (2010) and other scholars. Soja locates spatial justice as a theoretical concept as well as a mode of empirical analysis and a strategy for social and political action. He offers ways of understanding the unjust geographies in which people live: Spatial justice involves fair and equitable distribution of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them, and is seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns, in themselves just or unjust, are producing outcomes. Soja's main attention is drawn to urban settings. Yet, the concept is of relevance at all geographical scales from the local to the global, and it has been applied within studies of education for instance by Auitti and Bæck (2019), Beach et al. (2018), Gulson and Symes (2007) and Williams (2018).

Geography of welfare

School closures do not only affect education provision. Several studies have focused on the extended role of the school in local communities. The school often represents independence, attractiveness and identity (Auitti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Kearns et al., 2010; Villa, 2016; Woods, 2005), and it may physically and socially be the major part of the "social glue"

that keeps the local population sufficiently in touch to function as a community (Kearns et al., 2010). The role of the school might also be understood as both a producer and maintainer of local social capital (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Bagley and Hillyard, 2014). This will particularly be so if the school serves as an arena for network building (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) or as the only social meeting place as is often the case in many rural communities when the local shop, the bank, the post office and other public services are gone (see e.g. Kearns et al., 2010; Solstad et al., 2016). Halpern (2005) points to ways in which the degree of social capital in a community affects both the physical and mental health of its population.

Increasing numbers of rural communities without schools, have also rendered the proportion of pupils having to endure lengthy school journeys much larger (see Gristy, 2019). As we have already drawn attention to this daily long-distance transport has several negative implications for pupils, such as insufficient sleep, less time for leisure activities, and various physical health complaints (Sjølie, 2002; Solstad and Solstad, 2015; Solstad and Thelin, 2006). To have the local school closed might in other words be experienced as a welfare loss (Gill, 2017; Kearns et al, 2010; Solstad, 2009). The lack of school might also result in fewer local jobs, especially for people having higher education, undermine the viability of the community, speed up depopulation (Amcoff, 2012; Cedering 2016; Kearns et al., 2010; Svendsen and Sørensen, 2018), deter young families from settling down (Hagen, 1992, Solstad et al., 2016), and, in turn, aggravate ageing of rural populations (e.g. Bliksvær et al. 2020; Milbourne, 2012). Although this kind of research, observations and professional reasoning generally nourish the idea of school closures as detrimental to the prosperity and sustainability of the local community losing its school, the direct empirical documentation of such effect is relatively scarce as hinted at by Slee and Miller (2015).

As indicated above, the local school contributes to making the local community richer and probably also the general wellbeing of its population higher. A central question is whether geographical differences in school structure leads to geographical differences in welfare. Kearns et al. (2010:220) point at nearby access to school as a welfare benefit or a welfare “good”. Because of the salient physical, social, and geographical properties of schools, local school closure potentially leads to geographically unjust distribution of welfare. In his conceptualization of ‘geographies of welfare’, Milbourne (2010) touches on similar understandings of justice and injustice to that of Soja’s (see above).

Place, space, and the rural-urban discourse

The rural school-community relationship is also part of a wider socio-political context where various understandings of the concepts 'rural' and 'urban' and the difference between the two, are involved. Rural, as seen from Woods' (2011) point of view, is a complex and contested category, and rural and urban places and spaces are intertwined both in practices and as imaginations. A spatial dimension is therefore important to take into consideration for the purpose of providing a profound picture of the rural school-community.

Scholars tend, however, to vary in their views on the spatial dimension where *place* and *space* are key concepts. Bradford (2012), on his side, stress the importance of understanding people's lives in general in the context of locality because essential aspects of their life are always emplaced in social, material, discursive and, increasingly, virtual spaces and places. He also points out that life histories have been described as fundamentally shaped by the experiences associated with different spaces and places: the home, the classroom, the street or the workplace, and individuals and social groups can gain a sense of belonging from the sharing of spaces. Coffey (2004) is concerned with the dynamic of places and spaces and how these aspects are subject to shift and change: Within them people can, for example, act to include or exclude, to alter, consolidate, appropriate, and source belonging. The concepts of space and place can also be understood as referring to different aspects of spatiality. Place can be understood as an aspect of space invested with cultural meaning, which becomes significant at certain times and for certain participants (Bradford, 2012).

Certain camps within the social sciences have argued for the irrelevance of place in a globalized modernity and have tended to erase geographical differences without addressing the implicit or potential metrocentricity inherent in their standpoint (see e.g. Farrugia, 2014). The interplay between local and global processes also varies across local spaces (Urry, 1999), and this makes it important to be sensitive both to micro and macro level processes working on the local level, and the ways in which these processes contribute to shape people's everyday life. Living geographically close, even in a small place, does not necessarily mean that people hold much in common, or that they constitute a 'community' (Urry, 1999). Along these lines Hillyard and Bagley (2015) indicate variations in the school-community relationship. They argue that due to a highly differentiated countryside there is a substantial difference between rural schools concerning their socio-spatial properties. Schools fulfil

different roles within their communities, potentially including *not* being a central producer and reproducer of communities. A sensitivity to the schools' role in rural development and viability includes being aware of the complexity of communities. This complexity incorporates rural areas as different locations representing different place attachments (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014; Hillyard and Bagley, 2015). In their reflection on societal changes, Giddens (1990) and Corbett (2014) underscore that the feeling of community, of integration, or of attachment to the place may be weak or strong, or weaker than before.

Woods (2005) argues that rurality continues to be a powerful cultural concept, and ideas of rurality impact upon social, economic, and political issues. Also, competing discourses of rurality refer to the rural as a safe, healthy, and best place to grow up, and to the rural as retarded and contrary to the dynamic urban (Pratt, 1996; Villa 1999, 2012). These discourses are found embedded in public and popular debates as well as in policy. Cruickshank et al. (2009), for example, identify in Norwegian parliamentary debate a discourse on rural places as justified by their ability to grow. The authors find this to match general societal changes within the neoliberal period, which coincide with increasing school closures in rural areas (see above).

The articles in this special issue

The articles in this special issue present research on rural schools and local communities within Nordic and European contexts. The research represents perspectives from within sociology, pedagogy, cultural geography and political science and draw on a variety of methodological and analytical approaches such as ethnography, interview studies, surveys and literature reviews.

Magdalena Cedering and **Elin Wihlborg** apply a time-geographical analysis of the closing of rural schools in Southern Sweden. Their study maps families' everyday activities before and after school closures in two local communities. While local policy makers considered the school closures to be beneficial to the community, the families expressed a loss of life quality due to longer travel distances after school closure. This leads the authors to conclude on the school's significant role as the hub of local village life. **Cath Gristy** questions us to prompt more into the bus journey itself and its implications. She finds that although life for children living in rural areas typically include much time spend on the school bus, this aspect receives little attention from policy makers, researchers and school leaders. She argues that the bus

ride does more than bring the child to school. Long travelling distances impact on children, their families and communities, but these journeys to school lie in the shadows of schooling and in the spaces between government departments, research disciplines and between children, their families and schools. Gristy discusses the neglected space of bus journeys to school through theories of assemblage, where both human and non-human actants are understood to have agency.

Three articles focus on teachers' experiences of working in rural schools and on school-community relations. In the first of these articles **Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund** analyses how teachers and principals experience work in small environments. Her study is based on interviews with so called marginalized professionals in Finland, that is, teachers working in some of the smallest primary schools in Finland. These teachers expressed positive work-related wellbeing, but implicit in their narratives, Karlberg-Granlund identified negative experiences. By visual mapping and drawing lines between different aspects of the interviewee's narratives, Karlberg-Granlund creates new narratives which explore hidden tensions in the teachers' experiences of working in small rural schools and communities. This is elaborated on as tensions of social proximity and the author encourages the use of multidimensional models to capture the spectra of different experiences in school-community issues. **Mariann Villa** and **Agneta Knutas** analyse how local inhabitants (parents and grandparents) and teachers in four Norwegian rural school districts value their schools and cope with threats of school closure. Based on group interviews the authors explore how people argued to keep their schools open and how this links with valuing and reproducing local communities and cultures. Both teachers and parents reported on school-community activities and relations which extended schooling and enabled them to deal with and give integrity to their lives in the local community. **Sam Hillyard**'s ethnographic study points at the possible insignificance of a school for its village. Research evidence shows that not all schools so readily add value to their communities and this varies over time. Hillyard applies Bourdieu's field theory to understand the nuances of this within one English village, and finds that local conditions informed a distinctive economic and social history that inhibited strong school-community relations.

Two articles explore school closure from the perspectives of policy and administrative leaders at the municipal level. **Sigrid Kroismayr** addresses the kind of agreements and arrangements that political leaders engage in with local communities to minimize potential conflicts and preserve social cohesion during and after the closure of local primary schools. Though not

able to appease all local resistance, political leaders offer a range of friendly gestures in return to populations that are affected by closing processes. Based on interviews with mayors from across Austria Kroismayr applies Mauss' concept of the gift, to explore the dynamics of processes of school closure. Local school administration is also drawn attention to by **Aadne Aasland** and **Susanne Søholt** in their study of perceptions of and main concerns with school-closure processes in Norwegian rural municipalities. The authors base their analysis on an online survey among school administrators and on case studies where school closure was or had recently been high on the agenda. The primary concern for municipal school administrations is to secure a good learning and social environment for pupils, within the defined budgetary constraints. This often leads them to side with politicians favoring closure, even though they acknowledge the school's value to local communities. Aasland and Søholt find that a multi-level governance model opens for considerable variation in local outcomes, but economic arguments remain decisive for school closure.

The two last articles draw historical lines in the development of rural schools and local communities. While school centralization and school closures in rural areas are currently widely discussed in many countries, centralization was basically completed in Czechia during the 1970s. **Silvie R. Kučerová**, **Dominik Dvořák**, **Petr Meyer** and **Martin Bartůněk** discuss dimensions of the centralization and decentralization in the rural educational landscape of post-socialist Czechia. Based on spatial analysis of main school characteristics they categorize educational landscape processes into three groups: 1) the centralization of educational function, 2) the centralization of curriculum development, and 3) the centralization of educational governance and organization. The authors find that state socialism enforced school centralization and control over curriculum, whereas the post-socialist era opened towards decentralized approaches to school governance. The latter introduced, however, schools to an educational market competing for pupils, which was again disadvantageous for rural schools. **Karl Jan Solstad** and **Therese Andrews** explore the relationship between the school and the local community in Norway from early 18th century to the present. The authors outline the historical development as 1) political struggle for an equitable education provision during the first half of the 20th century which gradually resulted in rural schooling approaching the urban version as to school size and content; 2) popular mobilization against extensive school centralization, new research on the functioning of small schools, and new perspectives on learning during the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for rural schools to be allowed and able to serve rural pupils and rural communities; and 3) various

aspects of globalization which, since the 1980s, have impacted on rural education provision in ways which makes it less responsive to the specific conditions of rural communities.

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