



Reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in British and Nordic countries: Analytical perspectives and cultural meaning

Linda Hargreaves^{a,*}, Rune Kvalsund^b, Maurice Galton^a

^a Cambridge University Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ, UK

^b Volda University College, P.O. Box 500, N-6101 Volda, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This introduction presents the case, and sets the scene, for five reviews of research on rural schools and their communities, arguing that educational research in this field is relatively rare, and decreasingly visible despite the significant population of the world's children who live in rural communities and attend rural schools. After considering various interpretations of 'rural', of the purpose and function of rural schooling, and of the relationship between school and community, we present three basic research questions with relevance for researchers of schools and communities, rural and urban, the world over, and raise more specific questions which are addressed in the reviews themselves and pursued in the closing chapter. Finally we introduce the research reviews and justify our selection of British and Nordic countries, where, despite geographical proximity, there are wide thematic and methodological disparities in rural schools' research.

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1. Introduction

A high proportion of the world's children live in rural areas and attend rural schools, even in highly developed Western nation states. Despite this, educational and social welfare provision in rural areas often remains a low national priority. In this issue, we analyse and review research on rural schools and their communities in three Nordic countries, namely, Norway, Sweden and Finland, and two British countries, namely Scotland and England. Although these Northern European states might appear somewhat localised and in some ways similar, there are many geographical, cultural, economic and political differences between them which affect their rural schools and communities. There are differences too in the styles of research conducted in these countries. This special issue aims to bring not only the findings and implications of these bodies of research to the fore, but also to analyse the nature of the research itself, and identify trends and gaps in its coverage and methodologies.

One basic insight is the importance of understanding the local context in order to comprehend the processes and outcomes of learning, teaching and schooling, and this points towards reviewing research on communities and their schools at local level. This raises two matters: first that population shifts and schools closures are eroding the sources that can provide evidence concerning rural schools and their communities, and secondly, that a significant proportion of the evidence that is available, appears in the less visible area of reports to public bodies, local studies with limited circulation, and first-hand narratives, while its sources are slowly disappearing. We believe that because of the complexity of the phenomenon of education, we must take account of a wide range of research studies, and cannot necessarily rely on 'quality research', as

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1223 767600/767548; fax: +44 1223 767602.

E-mail address: lh258@cam.ac.uk (L. Hargreaves).

defined by national and international comparative surveys of pupil achievement. It is our hope that the reviews of research presented here might improve our understanding of the nature and effects of schooling, and enable educationists to compare schools and educational experiences that are inside and outside the mainstream.

In this introduction we make the case for our interest in research on rural schools and their communities, discuss various ways of defining 'rural', and consider how rural schools and their communities might relate to one another. We then state the basic research questions which underlie the research reviews and the analytical dimensions that are applied in the final chapter. Finally and briefly we introduce the research reviews and their national locations.

2. Why study rural schools and their communities?

Judging by the volume of educational research they generate, schools are an interesting and complex phenomenon. Much of that research, and, as we shall see later, the policy or theory that drives it, fails to differentiate between urban and rural schools. Some studies do, however, draw attention to the urban and/or rural locations of their participating schools, and some focus specifically on rural schools. It might be reasonable to suspect that those that do not differentiate are likely to be carrying out their research in urban or suburban rather than rural schools, the urban setting being taken for granted as the norm. In the paragraphs that follow, we offer several reasons why it is of interest educationally, economically, environmentally, politically and socially to conduct research in, on and with rural schools and their communities.

2.1. Rural schools—national luxury or local necessity?

Rural, and typically small, schools are an interesting phenomenon. Seen variously as a drain on the national economy, but vital to their local communities, as deficient in terms of educational provision yet performing at least as well as their urban counterparts, they present a number of paradoxes. In recent years, however, as the research reviews in this issue demonstrate, such perspectives have been challenged. In England, small rural schools are often seen by policy makers as costly and inefficient, yet there is a strong political lobby in favour of their retention because of the potential votes available from local populations. On the other hand, in Norway, while local and regional politicians work actively to retain small rural schools in order to capture seats on the municipality board, candidates at national level are more likely to act according to party policy on educational decentralisation.

The question of luxury versus necessity inevitably raises the question of sustainability, and research on small rural schools' contributions to educational, environmental and community sustainability is sorely needed. Arguments for closing schools in rural communities on the grounds of financial unsustainability may neglect the environmental costs of transporting children to neighbouring schools, as well as the threat to community sustainability (see below). Research on small rural schools that considers [Bassey's \(2002\)](#) arguments for the development of conviviality rather than reliance on economic growth to contribute to environmental sustainability, for example, is needed (see also [Sterling, 2001](#)). Thus, retention of a small school in a rural community, together with awareness of the need to focus on sustainability has a better chance of using local skills, produce and products, and of promoting local conviviality than would school closure and bussing children to other schools. Strategies tackling cost-effectiveness and community development are considered next.

2.2. Improving cost-effectiveness by amalgamation

One attempt to solve the cost-effectiveness problem has been to amalgamate small rural schools into clusters, in which a number of rural schools co-operate and share resources and expertise on a voluntary, informal basis, or into federations, more formal arrangements in which several schools share a headteacher and governing body. These arrangements are relatively easy for policymakers to justify in countries where neighbouring village schools are often situated less than 10 km from each other, as in England and Wales, but in Norway and Sweden, however, while clusters of small rural schools do exist, long inter-school distances and geographical features such as fjords and islands limit the use of such strategies. Whatever the strategy, there is considerable scope for clarification of the economics involved in retaining small schools, and how these costs should be set against the local costs of amalgamating schools, transporting children over long distances or the level of national subsidies often distributed to city areas under various urban aid and poverty welfare programmes.

2.3. Rural schools as 'hub' of the community?

As regards the social value of rural schools to their local communities, those campaigning against school closures argue that the loss of the school would take the heart out of the community. The veracity of this claim varies considerably from place to place. In the British countries, there is wide variation in the nature and strength of school and community links (e.g. [Bell & Sigsworth, 1992](#)), but relatively little published research in this area. In England, for example, the assumed closeness of the rural school-community relationship is a modern myth (see [Arnold, 1998](#); [Bell & Sigsworth, 1991, 1992](#); [Skinner, Kambytes & Derounian, 1995](#)). It has had an interesting twist, however, moving from groups of parents often recently moved out to the countryside campaigning against school closures in the 1970s and 1980s ([Bell & Sigsworth, 1987](#)), to contemporary calls for rural schools, like the pub and the post office, to be considered as 'hubs for the maintenance of community support' ([Bevan & Croucher, 2006](#), quoted by [Countryside Agency, 2008](#), p. 133). In the process, the aims for this

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