

Rural municipalities and change of the local school structure: Comparing rural municipalities' room of manoeuvre in Latvia and Norway

Inese Šūpule

(the corresponding author)

Institute of Sociology and Philosophy, University of Latvia

Kalpaka 4, Riga, Latvia

inese.supule@biss.soc.lv

+37126523656

Susanne Søholt

Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, HiOA

Susanne.Soholt@nibr.hioa.no

The article is prepared with funding from the EEA/ Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 under Project Contract n° NFI/R/2014/014.

A short biographical note for each author:

Inese Šūpule is a sociologist and researcher in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. Her fields of expertise are ethnic studies, migration, society integration, education, language use and knowledge, and ethnic politics.

Susanne Søholt is a political scientist and researcher in the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research at Oslo and Akerhus University College of Applied Sciences. During the last years she has been working with migration, integration and segregation in urban and rural areas. The main focus has been on integration and segregation in the housing market, but also in neighbourhoods and in the labour market.

The word count of the manuscript: 7983 (without references and appendices)

Rural municipalities and change of the local school structure: Comparing rural municipalities' room of manoeuvre in Latvia and Norway

Abstract

Rural depopulation, decreasing numbers of children and general centralization combined with high expectations to education, are factors that challenge rural communities and school structures in Latvia and Norway. The ambition of this article is to explore and compare the role of the municipality and other levels of governance in making decisions on school structure in rural municipalities. The research method is a multiple case study approach, supported by survey data. Through the lenses of multi-level governance theory, we have investigated how national frames like regulations and educational expectations are affecting local decision-making. Local politicians navigate between national frames and local expectations in their decisions on school reorganization and closure. We find that local stakeholders' perceptions of rural educational objectives and possibilities are embedded in their role(s) in society. Closing of schools causes conflicting pressures and dissension between different stakeholders. We find that local negotiations might generate better solutions and less contested decisions.

Introduction

Rural areas around the world are going through population changes affecting local school structure. While rural areas in Australia face population increase and need for more school facilities, rural areas in other Western societies like Canada and Europe have to cope with rural depopulation and decreasing numbers of children (Halsey, 2011; Harris, 2014; Karlberg-Granlund, 2011; Solstad, 2016; Wildy 2011).

In this article, we want to explore the possibilities and limitations for rural municipalities in governing the school sector in Latvia and Norway. Latvia is amongst the countries in Europe with the highest depopulation, due to outmigration. Norway is at the other end of the scale, and is experiencing one of the highest increases of population in Europe, because of immigration (Eurostat, 2013). At the same time, both countries are experiencing internal mobility patterns that increase centralization from rural to urban areas.

Rural depopulation and decreasing numbers of children affect the rural school structure. In Norway, during the last ten years, the number of primary schools has declined with 22%, from 3243 to 2867 schools (Udir, 2015). In Latvia, the number of primary schools has declined with 31%, from 527 to 363 schools, since 2006 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017).

The depopulation trend of rural areas occurs at the same time as there are changes in understandings of what is good education. Dominating, but contested arguments in Latvia and Norway support understandings that bigger schools could offer better social learning and teaching environments than small schools (for example, in Latvia, see Geske, Grīnfelds, Kangro, Kiseļova, & Mihno, 2015; Turlajs, 2017). Research from other European countries, including Norway, document no correspondence between size of the municipality and educational results, nor between urban and rural schools (Bonesrønning, Iversen, & Pettersen, 2010; Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009). However, in the latest Norwegian white paper on education (2015-2016), it is underlined that it is more difficult to get sufficiently qualified teachers in small schools after the new requirements of teachers' qualifications, because these schools have few teachers (Ministry of Education, 2015-2016).

Rural school structure can be valued as an educational question alone, or be valued as an important factor for sustainability of rural areas. Thus, the question of depopulation and how to govern and shape the local school structure, involves more factors and actors than those related to education (Assmo & Wihlborg, 2012). In most cases, rural depopulation means decrease of financial resources, and municipalities are forced to economize (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009). In many cases, rural depopulation decrease human resources and rural schools meet difficulties to attract qualified teachers (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). If schools close, families and schoolchildren who still live, or consider moving to a particular area, may be disadvantaged, especially if they lack reliable transport options (Assmo & Wihlborg, 2012; Lind & Stjernström, 2015; K.J. Solstad & Solstad, 2015).

Both in Latvia and in Norway municipalities are autonomous when it comes to decisions on public school structure. Still, they have to conform to national laws and regulations framing education. In the case of Latvia, municipalities receive earmarked state subsidies for teachers' salaries according to number of pupils in the municipality. However, municipalities have a right to reallocate the finances according to their education policy and provide additional financing for teachers' salaries. In Latvia, parents have the right to choose school, and they are not obliged to send their children to the nearest school. If the school chosen by parents is outside the home municipality,

there are mutual payments between municipalities. The municipalities are responsible for pre-primary, primary and secondary schools, whereas the state is responsible for colleges and universities. Private schools play a minor role in the education sector, and are almost non-existent in rural areas. Several national political initiatives push municipalities in Latvia to re-evaluate the current school structure: regulation on minimal number of pupils in class for secondary education; discussions on possible regulation also for grades 7-9; analysis of results of education in municipal schools; transportation issues, and teachers' salary reform. The current model "money follows the pupils" implies that schools with a small number of pupils has proportionally lower financing. If there are fewer pupils than 90 in the school, the financing is not sufficient for the maintenance of education in terms of teachers' salaries.

In a comparative perspective, extensive decentralization of implementation of welfare services characterize Norway (Loughlin, Hendriks, & Linström, 2011). At the same time, it is a national ambition that welfare services should be available and of good quality for all citizens, irrespective of where they live. However, many rural municipalities face challenges in providing high quality services, including education. In education, the municipality, the county and the state form integrated service chains. The municipalities are responsible for kindergartens, primary and lower secondary schools, whereas the counties are responsible for upper secondary education and the state for universities. Private schools play a minor, but important role, and their activities are highly regulated. The general block grant from the state includes the municipalities' obligations within the education sector. The municipalities are free to use the block grants as they prefer, as long as they fulfil their commitments according to national regulations.

Previous research has shown that the school structure is just about the only factor that the municipality may employ to influence costs in the education sector in Norway (K.J. Solstad & Solstad, 2015). Municipal needs for retrenchment measures might threaten the school structure, because other welfare services are more regulated. Private schools receive funding directly from the state in Norway, excluding municipalities from financial compensation for pupils attending these schools. For small municipalities, the economic consequences of pupils transferring from public to private schools may be considerable. In addition to budget balance, changing of the school structure is driven by an engagement to provide good education and learning conditions adapted to new educational demands and societal expectations to education. Another driver is the general tendency towards centralization of the population in rural municipalities.

According to Hargreave, Kvalsund and Galton (2009), the impact of changing demographics to rural school structure, and the relationship between school and the specific community are under researched areas. Many studies are concerned with decreasing number of pupils and the threat of school closure, and there is a robust body of work highlighting distinctive challenges encountered by leaders of small schools in pursuit of school improvement (Barter, 2014; Germeten, 2011; Harris, 2014; Tinkham, 2014; Wildly, 2011). Quite a few studies have focused on the school as a unit, and how to strengthen and govern specific rural schools. A study about the tensions connected to closing of rural schools in Canada, underline that small rural schools face their own sets of constraints like rural sustainability and economic development (Tinkham, 2014). In Denmark, there are studies showing that it is not school closure that cause negative development in rural communities, rather school closure in remote areas is a sign of a community already in the final phase of the death process, (Egelund & Lausten, 2006; Teknologisk Institut, 2008). There is limited research on local governance of school

structure in changing rural areas and the role of the district is often neglected (Wildly, 2011). In Latvia, several doctoral thesis in education science have been tackling the rural school issues under the conditions of depopulation (Katane, 2005; Laizane, 2012; Tūna, 2016). Katane in her research, has developed the conceptual model of the rural school as a system of educational environment (Katane, 2005; Katane, 2013), and treats rural schools as educational systems existing in multi-level ecosystems. Laizāne has focused her research on evaluation of rural schools as educational systems in the context of regional development and sustainable development possibilities both of rural schools and of rural societies (Laizane, 2012). Tūna's doctoral thesis reveals the linkage between the development of the school as a multifunctional community centre and transformation in the performance of and relationship among the school, teachers and community (Tūna, 2016). The ideas of Katane and Laizane to view rural school as “a multilevel, multicomponent and multifunctional system” (Katane & Laizane, 2012, p. 436) frame our study. However, our focus is particularly on the municipalities' role and room of manoeuvre when it comes to governing the rural school sector.

A most vital question in both Latvia and Norway is how to maintain and develop good rural schools under conditions of depopulation. The challenging consequences of changes in rural school structure invite to explore questions of rural governance of education. The main questions for the article are: What is the role and objectives of the municipality and other levels of governance in making decisions on school structure in small rural municipalities? More precisely, what is the municipalities' room of manoeuvre when it comes to governing the school sector?

Theoretical Approaches: Governance and Decision Making Processes on Transforming Rural Schools

Education systems in many societies, and, particularly, in Latvia and Norway are characterized by the complexity of their governance and decision making processes. The concept of multi-level governance is used as a tool to analyse the municipalities' room of manoeuvre when it comes to preservation or change of local school structure. Due to the decentralization of education systems, many studies (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014) have drawn the attention away from the role of central institutions in education, towards the very activity of governing. According to Bevir (2013, p. 1), governance refers to “all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization or territory and whether through laws, norms, power or language”. According to this understanding, governance of schools relates to the processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved. Different actors interact or cut across with one another in complex ways that are not always strictly hierarchical. According to the multi-level governance approach, decision-making competencies are shared between actors of different levels and sectors, rather than monopolized by national governments (Hooghe & Marks, 2001, p. 3).

Different levels of governance and different stakeholders can be identified influencing decision making on closing, opening or transforming rural schools. At supranational level, there are recommendations and obligations of different international organizations. For instance, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges both Norway and Latvia to ensure that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. However, in both countries, economic reasons and the results of the Programme for International Student

Assessment (PISA) and other tests, are framing arguments in the discussions on learning environment in rural areas. The performance indicators in the PISA are often compared between schools and between municipalities. General results in schools in Latvia show that the performance in rural schools are often lower than in urban schools. In Latvia, those who suggest closing of small rural schools use this as an argument (Turlajs, 2017). At national level, it is important to acknowledge that Ministries of Education (MoE) remain responsible for ensuring high quality, efficient and innovative education. The governance tools they commonly use are strengthening of stakeholders, encouraging better qualifications among teachers (Norway) and holding local authorities and schools accountable through performance indicators (Latvia and Norway).

In many countries, including Latvia and Norway, municipalities are the owners of primary schools, except private schools. The municipalities are responsible for implementing education activities, organizing and operating school services, and allocating resources. However, in democratic societies municipalities are encouraged to consult with other stakeholders, like headmasters, teachers, technical staff, pupils and parents' bodies, community and other local organisations, as well as national NGOs (trade unions, parent organizations, organizations of municipalities etc.). All these groups can actively voice their interests in the decision-making processes. The decentralization of systems for financing local education in many countries have changed the nature of the relationship between the central, regional and local levels, moving away from a hierarchical relationship to a division of labour with greater interdependence and self-regulation (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014). However, formally, municipal political bodies take the final decisions on primary rural schools in both Latvia and Norway. Their role, possibilities and limitations are the focus of this article.

Studies in different countries show that there is an inherent asymmetry between the various governance levels in multi-level educational contexts. This might lead to governance gaps in several areas like information, capacity, fiscality, policy, and objectives (Charbit, 2011; Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014). Our intention is to use previous studies and the governance gaps already identified as guidelines when analysing and comparing the complex multi-level and multi-stakeholder governing process of rural primary schools in Latvia and Norway. A short presentation of how Wilkoszewski and Sundby (2014) describe their findings on governance gaps in multi-level educational contexts, introduce our analyses.

The *information gap* emerge, when the central governance level has better access to educational quality information (e.g., comparative data on school performance) than the local level. We can talk about the information gap also when the central level has better capacity to use this information. At the same time, the local level has direct access to information on how policy reforms affect schools.

The *capacity gap* occurs when there is a lack of human capital and financial resources between levels of government. Within education systems, the capacity gap is often related to the information gap, the use of knowledge or the development of necessary institutional structures at the local level. In case of small rural schools, we can talk about a shortage of human capital, when there are difficulties to attract qualified teachers and/or qualified people to the municipal school administration.

The *fiscality gap* might be connected with the dependency of lower levels on the central level (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014). In the case of Latvia with earmarked grants, there is an intensive impact of state level priorities. In the case of Norway, state funding is in a form of block grants taking into account factors like population size,

population distribution and settlement structure. Primary education has to compete with the municipality's other welfare and service obligations.

The *policy gap* results from the incoherence between sub-national policy needs and national level policy initiatives. Such incoherence occurs when ministries take a purely vertical approach to policy issues that are inherently cross-sectoral.

The *objectives gap* emerges, when the various levels do not coordinate their aims to make them coherent across policy areas (Tinkham, 2014). This is particularly the case when objectives are prioritized asynchronously. For example, a national Ministry of education might look for strong accountability measures to foster international competitiveness of the system, whereas municipalities might look for necessary educational infrastructure and capacity building (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014, p. 10). Local communities might look for measures to keep the schools as vital parts of the society.

As in several other studies, the main assumption in our study is that there are different objectives and understandings of rural schools' role in society among involved stakeholders, and among different levels of governance (Hargreaves et al., 2009). Information sharing, capacities, ways of financing, policies and objectives embedded in stakeholders general understandings of the education sector, affect the municipalities' priorities and perceived room of manoeuvre. Levels of governance include the national, regional and municipal level as well as public and civic stakeholders like organisations, community associations, parents groups etc. on local level.

With these theoretical points of departure, we believe to be well equipped to study and analyse some features of the complex multi-level and multi-actor governance system, which frame the rural school structure. Our ambition is to analyse the municipalities' room of manoeuvre in a comparative perspective.

Methodology and Data Sources

To answer the research questions on the role of the municipalities and municipal room of manoeuvre, we collected data in comparative study of Latvia and Norway. The main research method applied for this article is a multiple case study. The data consist of documents and interviews in a selection of cases, and an electronic survey of rural municipalities in Latvia and Norway.

The intention with the survey was to map a representative picture of how school administration understand change of school structure in rural areas. During the active fieldwork stage, invitations to participate in the survey were e-mailed to 152 officials in Latvia and to 354 officials in Norway. The response rate of the survey was 103 (67%) respondents from local administration in Latvia and 159 (45%) in Norway. The intention with the case studies was to get further information on why and how rural municipalities go ahead with or oppose changes of rural school structure. Case studies are appropriate when the studied object is contemporary and deeply rooted in a real-life context (Yin, 2003; Thomas, 2011). In this study, we have a two level case approach. The two countries, Latvia and Norway are framing cases to compare the multi-level governance structure and the role of the municipality when it comes to school structure in the two countries. In each country case, there are a number of municipal cases. All these municipal cases are in rural areas with small rural schools. The intention with the selection of cases is that they could give information to the research questions on municipalities' room of manoeuvre in respect of local school structure. Within this

study, we understand small rural schools as schools with 100 or less pupils, located in rural areas.

Qualitative information from the municipal cases has been collected by implementing a complex set of methods: document analysis, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and telephone interviews. Interviewees were representatives of municipal administration, politicians, local stakeholders (NGOs, entrepreneurs, local farmers), representatives of schools (administration, headmasters, and teachers) and parents. The intention with the different methods and interviewees is to get an understanding of the specific local context and place, in relation to the manifold picture of possible gaps and concurrence when it comes to rural school structure and municipalities room of manoeuvre. There is an important characteristic about these rural cases. Most of the interviewees have more than one role and are affected by changes in local school structure in different ways. They have overlapping roles like politician, school administrator, parent, grandparent, neighbour, in-mover, part of local organisations. The mixing of roles might make the decisions-making process complex and difficult on individual level.

There are in total eight cases and 58 in-depth interviews carried out in Latvia. In Norway, there are three cases and 19 in-depth interviews, and one group interview with eight parents carried out. The fieldwork took place during March and April 2016, and in September 2016. Participation in the study was voluntary by all the participants and they were granted confidentiality.

To be able to compare the change of rural school structure in Latvia and Norway, the data collection has been synchronised. The survey to the school administrations in the two countries had almost the same questions. In addition, there were some questions adapted to the national contexts to capture the specific conditions. The case interviews in both countries followed a common guide. Common guidelines for the case studies and a common guide for case descriptions further facilitated cross-country comparisons.

The criteria for selection of rural municipalities in Latvia were a presence of the fact of closed schools, existence of ordinary schools and schools which have participated in the project (2009-2012) aimed to transform schools into multifunctional community centres by expanding their functions and reconsidering their role in local communities (BISS, 2011, 2013; Tūna, 2014).

Active local mobilization against closure of schools was a criterion for selection of the three Norwegian municipal cases. However, the cases have different timelines. In one case, the major change of school structure from eight to two public schools was conducted more than ten years ago. Local mobilisation resulted in the establishment of a private school, which is still operating. In the second case, a small school with five pupils closed about five years ago. Through negotiations with the municipality, the village got alternative solutions, namely, community house, kinder garden and after school activities in the former school buildings, all highly valued by parents and other villagers. In the third case, just finished, two grades from a village school moved to the school in the main centre of the municipality. The change fostered many protests. The different timelines gave the benefit of giving reflections and experiences to the unwanted changes in the local school structure. A most important experience and hindsight was a growing understanding of the distinction between local school and social community. On the other hand, it became more explicit what it takes to have a rural community in balance with new expectations to education, and to social life framed by general centralization in society.

Sufficiently comparable decentralized governance systems of the primary education in both countries allows analysing the decision-making processes concerning small rural schools out of the approach of multi-level governance. The following discussion is devoted to the question of the municipality's role, and analysis of the municipalities' room of manoeuvre in decision-making and governing of the rural school structure.

Discussion

The complexity of multilevel and multi-actor governance of education frames the decision-making role of rural municipalities on school structure in both Latvia and Norway. The governance systems face certain limitation due to several governance gaps, namely, information, capacity, fiscality, policy, and objectives gaps. The discussion focus on analysis of impact of asymmetry between the various governance levels in educational contexts and stakeholders' perceptions of the relations between school structure and rural educational objectives and possibilities.

Information

Based on other studies (Charbit, 2011; Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014), we had a hypothesis that there can be a certain asymmetry in the flow of information between governance levels in Latvia and Norway, and that this asymmetry affect municipalities' room of manoeuvre. In the survey of the Latvian municipalities, we asked about the exchange of information between the particular municipality and the following organisations: the Ministry of Education and Science and its institutions, professional associations and teachers' trade unions, school administrations, parental organizations and other NGOs and inhabitants of the town/parish. More than half of the surveyed municipalities evaluate the exchange of information between all mentioned organizations or groups as "rather good" (Table 1). 40% of respondents evaluate the exchange of information between the municipality and the school administration as "very good", and 52% as "rather good". Unexpectedly, 63% of the rural municipalities evaluate the exchange of information between the municipality and the Ministry of Education and Science and its institutions as "rather good", 12% as "very good", and only 5% mention that it is "rather bad". Nobody has chosen the option "very bad", but 20% chose the option "difficult to say". In general, the survey results are more positive than the attitudes expressed during the case studies' interviews. For example, a responsible for education in a big territorial rural municipality in Latvia, says that the current uncertainty on education policy hampers the municipality to plan their future development of the school system:

"[Talking about the planning document on school structure of municipality] This document has been prepared, bearing in mind the absurd situation with education policy at national level. Because now we are not aware what will happen. We don't know the amount of ear market grant for teachers' salaries we will have on September 1 [beginning of school year]. If we would have clear principles in long-term... But now we do not know what will happen. We can close all small rural schools, but it might appear that the state policy introduces some new formula in teachers' salary calculation with territorial coefficients and suddenly we have enough money for salaries for small rural schools. Therefore we are cautious."

A chairperson of the council in a small municipality explains the situation even more. The person evaluates the exchange of information with the Ministry regarding already made decisions as good. However, he characterizes the education policy as uncertain and populist:

„The officers of the Ministry are working hard to inform us and to explain how the documents should be prepared and hours of teachers' work calculated. There are no problems. However, in terms of policy making the Ministry is indecisive. They have populist aims to support small schools close to place of residence and to save money. Small schools receive less and less money every year”.

Attitudes and opinions expressed by many interviewees (principles of schools and representatives from the municipal administration) characterize the situation in education, and particularly in rural schools in Latvia by the “VUCA” factors (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), discussed in the literature on future management (Johansen, 2012). First, there are constant changes in education policy and in the population, because of circular migration (volatility). Second, the situation is characterized by uncertainty in respect of financial means available for teachers' salaries. Third, education services in municipalities are connected with different other services (complexity). In case of rural schools, one of the most important services provided by municipalities and directly connected with small schools, is transport to schools for pupils living outside villages and towns. Complex transportation networks are developed or corrected every September according to needs of every single pupil living in remote rural areas in Latvia. The schools schedule, interests of pupils, possibilities of interest education, and possibilities of parents – all are taken into account when developing transport routes for municipality and school buses. Fourth, external conditions like financial and economic crises in 2008 and 2009, and emigration have affected the population in Latvian municipalities. Municipalities recognize that there is a high risk and a lack of predictability for future developments. This uncertainty obstructs municipal decisions and they become reserved in making any manoeuvres.

In Norway, the uncertainty relates to prospects for population development, and how to adapt to and finance new national regulations and demands of education. Lack of information between national, regional and municipal levels of government is not expressed as a major problem in the case municipalities.

Capacity

The capacity factor in terms of human capital in rural areas is an important factor both in Latvia and Norway. Many rural areas face difficulties to find and attract qualified teachers and qualified people to the school administration. While Latvia employ teachers qualified for specific disciplines in primary schools, Norway has a model with generalist teachers until the 5th grade. However, there are new demands in Norway that teachers in mathematics and some other disciplines need good qualifications to be allowed to teach these disciplines. According to interviewees, these demands may hamper possibilities to attract qualified teachers to small rural schools and might challenge small schools with 2-3 teachers. By these new demands, the Norwegian generalist model is including more specialization, which is prevalent in the Latvian educational model. However, while the Latvian teachers teach only their discipline(s), the Norwegian teachers still teach in many disciplines. A school administrator held that the smallest schools are very clever in teaching basic

mathematics and reading, because they are used to adapt their teaching to different age groups and to individual pupils with different talents. In Latvia, because of how teaching is organised, it is quite often that small rural Latvian schools cannot provide a full-time job for the teachers. For the teachers, it is not attractive to travel long distances just for some hours in several schools. Employing teachers in several rural schools is not common in Norway and, according to interviewees, not valued as an attractive alternative. Difficulties to attract qualified and enough teachers in rural areas might affect learning environments and push towards fewer schools.

The former Norwegian generalist model was more open for a constructive relationship with the community, than the Latvian specialist model. The small Norwegian case schools and other studies underline the specific educational environment in rural schools where the teacher include local conditions and practical knowledge into a contextual, temporal and moral interpretive framework (Karlberg-Granlund, 2011; Tūna, 2016), as a way to make the specific learning environment meaningful.

Another capacity issue is connected to the municipal school administration. In both Latvia and Norway there have been difficulties to attract qualified school administrators on full-time. In the Norwegian municipality with only 1500 inhabitants, this job had been part-time until recently. After having a full-time employee, the other interviewees report about much better organisation and follow-up of educational questions.

Some cases of small municipalities with 2000-3000 inhabitants in Latvia show that these municipalities are too small to establish a fully functional dedicated education unit to process all relevant information circulating on regional and national levels. In these cases, the national agenda for education is perceived as pre-defined by the Ministry with no real opportunities for influence. In some cases, the municipality experience incapability to process the volume of incoming information, because there is only one person employed on part-time. In this way, the capacity gap is influencing the ability to process information, and thereby the municipality's possibility for good local governance of education. The municipality's room of manoeuvre is hampered when these gaps are affecting each other negatively.

Fiscality

Both in Latvia and in Norway, the municipalities are owners of primary schools and responsible for education. In both countries, the financing of primary and secondary schools and education is dependent on national economic transfers. The Norwegian financing of primary schools is through block grants, while in the Latvian system the money follows the pupil. In Norway, the municipalities are free to use the block grant as they prefer, as long as they fulfil their obligations according to national regulations. In Latvia, the number of pupils in the municipality define the amount of earmarked grants for teachers' salaries and thereby the teachers' income. Still, municipalities have a room of manoeuvre to distribute the earmarked grants to support smaller schools. In Norway, teachers' salaries are negotiated at national level and are independent of number of pupils and the economy of the municipality. In both countries, the municipalities' possibilities to maintain good education services depend on tax from the inhabitants in addition to the national transfers. However, tax levels are higher in Norway than in Latvia. Municipalities with few inhabitants receive less tax and less transfers in both cases. The total of financial means can explain differences in local education services. In Norway, local priorities affect local education. In Latvia, it has

been acknowledged that small rural municipalities suffer from limited financial means compared to bigger municipalities. Moreover, small schools suffer from too few financial means compared to bigger schools due to the principle “money follows the pupil”. Latvian municipalities apply different strategies to keep schools in the municipality as long as possible. One of the strategies is redistribution of state earmarked grants for teachers’ salaries in favour of small rural schools. As it is important for municipalities to keep the school premises and teachers as active inhabitants of the community, municipalities are more willing to re-distribute state grants, or to allocate additional funds from the municipality, than to close schools:

“From the municipal perspective: if we have to allocate additional money for two teachers’ salaries that is better than to lose the school. If the school will be closed, we have to hire two security guards any way [for guarding premises of the school]”. (Council chairperson. Latvia).

In Norway, it is not an economic strategy to keep the smallest schools, but sometimes a necessity to fulfil the obligation to serve all children with education. In Latvia, because of the principle “money follows the pupil”, a municipal economic strategy is to attract pupils from neighbouring municipalities. This is an issue because of two reasons. First, parents in Latvia have a right to choose school regardless of where they live. Second, municipalities have to cover the expenses of schooling if parents choose school in a different municipality. In Norway, there is no general rule to choose school, but two of the cases have agreed upon such an arrangement with their neighbouring municipalities. The principle for mutual payments is the same as in Latvia.

„For every child who lives in our municipality, but is attending the school in neighbouring municipality, even if it is just near the border, we are paying money to other municipality. Therefore, municipalities are maximally concentrated to keep children in their territory. If we close the school near the border, children living in this neighbourhood will choose the nearest school, and it is in another municipality”. (Education officer in municipality. Latvia).

More than a half of the Latvian municipalities (56%) reported in the survey that they implemented programs aimed at increasing the number of pupils in small schools on a regular basis (Table 3). The most widespread strategies for attracting pupils were: 1) free transportation, including from other municipalities, 100% compensation of travel expenses if the pupil attend school in the municipality where he/she is declared, including individually designed transportation solutions for every family; 2) material rewards for pupils: monetary awards, scholarships, grants, rewards for successful participation in competitions and outstanding grades; 3) provision of free meals at school; 4) provision of kinder-garden services, including free meals; 5) provision of boarding school services, including free meals; 6) diverse offers of additional education for pupils without charge (sports and music classes, visits to swimming pool etc.).

Because of the financing system, such strategies are less relevant for Norway. However, the county reimburse school transportation inside the municipality. This probably affects willingness to close schools since the cost of transportation is not part of the municipal budget, with some exceptions. When comparing Latvia and Norway, it is evident that the way the municipal school system is financed, affect local priorities and decisions on school structure in both countries.

Policy

The main discussions regarding the school system in rural areas in the context of depopulation in Latvia are determined by economic argumentation. However, different ways of economic argumentation illustrate the policy gap in Latvia, which results from the incoherence between municipal policy needs and national level policy initiatives. In Latvia, there is a rather strong political argument at national level that rural schools should not fulfil any social functions. Their obligation is only educational services. Still, informants stress that small rural schools fulfil an important social role in tackling the problem of early school leavers and the problems of risk families. In small schools, the relations between teachers and pupils is closer than in bigger schools. This is especially the case in Norway where the teachers are generalists and are together with “their” pupils most of the day. In addition to educational activities, rural schools in both Latvia and Norway are often fulfilling an important social role in the village or parish. In both countries, rural schools are often the arena for different activities and celebrations involving all community. Often, teachers organize such events with participation of schoolchildren. In both countries, local organizations use rural schools for their different activities. In this way, the school and the school buildings function as a kind of a community house.

In the context of depopulation, people often see the closing of rural schools as a sign that rural areas are “dying”:

“Closing school means that the number of inhabitants will continue to diminish, and rural areas are going to die. As one man said: “First, we close a school, then – a church, and then – a cemetery overgrown”. Closing school – it is a very sad decision”. (Education officer in municipality. Latvia).

In Norway, a headmaster sighed: “What is a community without children!” The surveys of the municipal administrations in both countries show that the municipalities realize that young families might not settle in small villages if there are no schools, which oppose other local political initiatives for repopulation. 58% of municipal representatives in Norway and 87% in Latvia agree with this statement (Table 4). There are different emphases on how to understand the role of education at national and local level. While the national level underscore good education as the main objective of the school, the municipal, and especially the village level understand local school and local community more often as a symbiosis, not disqualifying the argument of quality of education.

Objectives

When the various levels of governance have difficulties to coordinate their aims to make them coherent across policy areas, we can talk about the objectives gap in governance. This is clearly manifested in the case studies in Latvia. In the context of depopulation, rural schools are fighting for survival and municipalities are worried about how to maintain and reuse the school buildings. The Ministry of Education and Science is however concerned about how to foster international competitiveness of pupils and more effective use of resources allocated to teachers’ salaries and education.

In this context, municipalities’ room of manoeuvre is limited because most of them do not want to make unpopular decisions. Both in Latvia and Norway, the surveys show that decisions about closure was anything but easy for the municipalities, which have closed rural schools. In many cases (52% in Latvia and 37% in Norway), such

processes were accompanied by time consuming discussions and clashes of opinions, but not really conflicts. However, 7% in Latvia and 12% in Norway indicate that lengthy and sharp conflicts and discussions, which involved the whole municipality, have happened due to possible closure of a school. 12% in Latvia and 36% in Norway, mention that conflicts occurred only at the level of the local community with the school in danger of closing (Table 5). A representative of a Latvian municipality stated that the closure of a small rural school is connected with negative emotions, and in some cases this has been perceived as a collective trauma:

“In my opinion, this reform brought negative emotional environment, a lot of negative emotions. Every school is fighting for survival”. (Education officer in municipality. Latvia).

“The issue about change of school structure has been destroying. The dividing lines were between local people in the community. I believe there are many people in this place who won’t socialize anymore”. (Politician living in a community where the school structure was changed. Norway)

However, the surveys of the municipal administrations show that after some time, not all school closures have been evaluated negatively. 59% of respondents in Latvia and 50% in Norway mention that the school closure has not significantly affected the community life. In Norway, 16% mention that school closure has affected the local community positively. Only 23% in Latvia and 13% in Norway consider that school closure has affected the local community negatively (Table 6).

The case study analysis in Latvia shows that more positive attitudes can be observed in those cases where decisions on school closure were agreed upon in the community. According to survey data, 29% of respondents in Latvia and 13% of respondents in Norway indicate that in general there was an agreement about the decision to close a particular small rural school. The agreement cases are characterized by good exchange of information and promises of other improvements important for the community. For instance, in one Latvian case the decision to close a small rural school was accepted, because the school was not important for the local community. The parents preferred other schools, and the principal and the teachers were not living in the community. In another case, local community needs were addressed by building pre-school institution (kindergarten) in the village centre, in exchange for closure of a distantly located school.

In one Norwegian case, a community succeeded to establish a private school which is well functioning. Even though the municipality would prefer to have all the pupils in the public schools, they have an agreement with the private school to cooperate in educational matters when necessary. In another case, there was a massive mobilization against closure and different opinions among the local politicians. However, none of the parties had majority, and had to make compromises. The parents were involved and they succeeded to agree upon a deal, which included closure of the school, but opening of kinder garden and after some time also after-school activities. In several of the Norwegian municipalities, school buildings function as community houses after school closure. In two of the cases, interviewees with different local roles held that the former small schools are too small for today’s expectations to education. On the other hand, in the two municipal cases where there are still small rural schools, interviewees with teaching background held that these schools’ overall teaching and learning environments are attractive and often better than in bigger schools, but vulnerable because of few teachers and pupils. This supports former research about the

vulnerability of schools in sparsely populated Nordic countries (Germeten, 2011, Karlberg-Granlund, 2011). The different objectives and kinds of means at national, municipal and local levels affect the municipalities' priorities, and how they navigate the local educational system.

Mixing of roles – conflicting pressures

Local politicians, chief executives in the administration and school administration might have a strong perception of school from their role perspective, detached from community life. Their responsibility is good education for the local children. For villagers, parents and children the local school is a part of their everyday life rooted in the village. However, in both countries, most of the people living in the municipality have many roles. For example, municipal deputies have children in the school, relatives working in the school, and sometimes headmaster of a small school is a deputy or even a mayor of a municipality. Even though politicians and administrations of municipalities are obliged to underscore the importance of good education and economy, their many roles and responsibilities might result in conflicting pressures. Sometimes due to conflicting pressures, their positions might be blurred, and often municipal decisions on change of school structure are made with only a few votes. As members of a small village that might lose their school, they experience the relationship between school and local community, if the school in general is deemed to be a good school and a vital part of the community. Various local views of good education might conflict with stakeholders own experiences of community and local education. Their difficult role is to navigate between the assumed closeness of the rural school and community relationship as a myth (Bagley & Hillyard, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2009), and the actual local situation framed by their room of manoeuvre. As shown above, the rural school landscape is highly differentiated across countries and between municipalities when it comes to what is perceived as a good school in “our place”.

Change of school structure and spatial hierarchy

Our study sheds light on how the process of adapting actual school structure to number of pupils, national regulations and expectations to educational performance through merging or closing schools, also influence the local spatial hierarchy. In the process of reducing number of schools, schools most often are located in the main village and administration centre of the municipality, strengthening these places and the power at the expense of the smaller places. In this process, smaller places lose functions and become more vulnerable. In spite of such developments, there are Norwegian examples showing that in moving and growth in the population happens in these small places despite the general and local centralization processes. The processes of international immigration mostly explain this. In some Latvian cases, municipalities consider to maintain schools, which are close to the municipal border. This happens because the municipalities tries to attract pupils from the neighbouring municipality, driven by the financing model (the “money follows the pupil” and of mutual payments between municipalities) and parents possibility to choose a school. Mutual payments between municipalities are a structural feature, which hinders municipalities to cooperate. Instead, they compete actively, using different means to attract pupils to their schools and municipalities. The different navigations in Latvia and Norway underline that the room of manoeuvre shaped by national political intentions and legal and financial

frames, materialise in different spatial patterns for the survival of the rural school. In this way, change of school structure also affects the power balance between communities in the municipality.

Conclusions

Our ambition with this article was to investigate rural municipalities' role and room of manoeuvre when it comes to local school structure. Through the lenses of multi-level governance theory applied to education, the complexity of these decision-making processes has been explored. The approach allowed us to identify five areas, which frame the municipalities' room of manoeuvre. These areas or governance gaps became guiding for the comparative analysis. The five governance gaps include information, capacities, financing models, policy and objectives. In both countries, we found strong differences in objectives and perceptions of different stakeholders at the same and at different levels of governance, affecting the decision-making process.

Seen from the outside, it seems clear that cooperation between municipalities in Latvia would allow saving resources both for education and for transportation. This raises a question about the effectiveness of the current territorial planning in Latvia, and allows suggesting that the governance of education would benefit from the further merging of municipalities in Latvia. A deeper inspection of governance of education in relation to territorial planning and its impact on the spatial structure of the school system could be beneficial for the municipalities.

The tensions following rural depopulation, decrease in pupils and new expectations to education, have in many ways forced the municipalities to be innovative in how to secure good education as a response to or to coincide with school closure. One important side effect of changed school structure is a changed spatial hierarchy with increased local centralization, and less functions in small places. An important issue is to recognize the positive impact of local participation in how to secure good local education. Local mobilisation against closure of rural schools has been successful in both countries when it comes to innovative solutions. The establishment of rural private schools run by local people in Norway is one example. As important are the cases where village people have negotiated with the municipality to find sustainable solutions. Both in Latvia and Norway there are cases where the village and the municipality have negotiated to supply the village with other services important for families, like kindergartens and after school activities. In those cases, the closure of the school has become less negative over time and even been evaluated as an improvement. Our study enriches the understanding of how innovation through local negotiating among different stakeholders renew the very activity of local governing inside a multi-governance and multi-actor frame. The innovative governance activity reduced possible conflicts and opened for local targeted participation to improve the decision-making process and repertoire of locally supported solutions. The practices of participation and negotiations, of governance of education between municipalities and other stakeholders, the multifaceted and conflicting roles of stakeholders, could be an area for further research of how to enhance innovation in rural school structures in times of changing populations. By looking into the municipal room of manoeuvre, such research could help to secure and develop alternative and good educational services in rural areas with limited or declining populations.

References

- Assmo, P., & Wihlborg, E. (2012). Public services choices when there are no alternatives? A paradox of new public management in rural areas. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 7(2), 1–17.
- Bagley, S., & Hillyard, S. (2011). Village Schools in England: At the Heart of Their Community? *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 37–49.
- Baltic Institute of Social Sciences [BISS] (2011). *Pētījums: Sorosa fonda – Latvija iniciatīvas “Pārmaiņu iespēja skolām” ietekmes novērtējums*. [Research: The impact evaluation of the Soros Foundation Latvia’s initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools”] Rīga: SFL. Retrieved from: http://www.sfl.lv/upload_file/2011%20gads/Parmainu_skolas_ietekmes_novertejums.pdf
- Baltic Institute of Social Sciences [BISS] (2013). *Pētījums: Sorosa fonda – Latvija iniciatīvas “Pārmaiņu iespēja skolām” 2. kārtas “Skola kā kopienas attīstības resurss” novērtējums*. [Research: The evaluation of the Soros Foundation Latvia’s initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools” second turn “Schools as Community Development Centres”] (Unpublished report). Rīga: SFL.
- Barter, B. G. (2014). Education reform: The effects of school consolidation on teachers and teaching. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 60(4), 674–690.
- Bevir, M. (2013). *Governance: A very short introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Bonesrønning, H. J., Iversen M. V., & Pettersen, I. (2010). *Kommunal skolepolitikk etter Kunnskapsløftet: med spesielt fokus på økt bruk av spesialundervisning*. SØF-prosjekt nr. 7000: “Analyse av ressursbruk og læringsresultater i grunnsopplæringen”. SØF-rapport nr. 07/10. Commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Education.
- Charbit, C. (2011). *Governance of public policies in decentralised contexts: The multi-level approach*. OECD Regional Development Working Papers, No. 2011/04, OECD Publishing.
- Egelund, N., & Laustsen, H. (2006). School closure: What are the consequences for the local society? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(4), 429–439.
- Eurostat (2013). European Population Projections.
- Geske, A., Grīnfelds, A., Kangro, A., Kiseļova, R., & Mihno L. (2015). *Quality of education. International comparison. Latvia in OECD Programme for International Student Assessment*. Riga: University of Latvia.
- Germeten, S. (2011). The new national curriculum in Norway: A change in the role of principals. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 14–23.
- Hammer, P. C., Hughes, G., McClure, C., Reeves, C., & Salgado, D. (2005). *Rural teacher recruitment and retention practices: A review of the research literature, national survey of rural superintendents, and case studies of programs in Virginia*. Charleston, WV: Edvantia.
- Hannum, W., Irvin, M. J., Banks, J. B., & Farmer, T. W. (2009). Distance education use in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(3). Retrieved from: <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-3.pdf>
- Halfacree, K. (2007). Trial by space for a “radical rural”: Introducing alternative localities, representations and lives. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 23, 125–141.
- Halsey, J. R. (2011). Small schools, big future. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 5–13.

- Hargreaves, L., Kvalsund, R., & Galton, M. (2009). Reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in British and Nordic countries: Analytical perspectives and cultural meaning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 80–88.
- Harris, C. E. (2014). Schools that don't close: Possible places and spaces for progressive teaching, learning and research. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 60(4), 656–673.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2001). *Multi-level governance and European integration*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Johansen, B. (2012). *Leaders make the future: Ten new leadership skills for an uncertain world*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Karlberg-Granlund, G. (2011). Coping with the threat of closure in a small Finnish village school. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 62–72.
- Katane, I. (2005). *Lauku skolas kā izglītības vides izvērtēšanas modelis* [The evaluation model of the rural school as educational environment] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Daugavpils, Daugavpils.
- Katane, I. (2013). Changeable educational environment of rural school for sustainable development. In *Engineering for Rural Development: Proceedings of the 12th International Scientific Conference, Vol. 12* (pp. 616–622). Jelgava: Latvia University of Agriculture. Retrieved from: http://www.tf.llu.lv/conference/proceedings2013/Papers/114_Katane_I.pdf.
- Katane, I., & Laizane, A. (2012). The diversity of educational environmental models of Latvian rural schools. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Thought*, 2(1), 433–453.
- Laizāne, A. (2012). *Latvijas lauku skolu izglītības vides mainības un daudzveidības izvērtēšana* [The evaluation of fluctuation and diversity of the educational environment of rural schools in Latvia] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Latvia University of Agriculture, Jelgava.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974/1991). *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Lind, T., & Stjernström, O. (2015). Organizational challenges for schools in rural municipalities: Cross-national comparisons in a Nordic context. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 30(6), 1–14.
- Loughlin, J., Hendriks, F., & Lidström, A. (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of Education. Norway (2015-2016). *Meld. St. 28 (2015–2016). White paper on Education*. Ministry of Education, Norway.
- Ministry of Education and Science. Latvia (2017). *Publikācijas un statistika. Statistika par izglītību. Statistika par vispārējo izglītību. 2016./2017.m.g.* Retrieved from: <http://izm.gov.lv/lv/publikācijas-un-statistika/statistika-par-izglitibu/statistika-par-visparejo-izglitibu/2016-2017-m-g>
- Solstad, K. J., & Solstad, M. (2015). *Meir skyss - mindre helse? Skulesentralisering i eit helseperspektiv. (More transport – less health? School centralization in a health perspective.)* NF-report 7/2015 Nordlandsforskning.
- Solstad, K. J. (2016). Nedlegging av skular; grunnar og konsekvensar (Closing schools; reasons and consequences). *Bedre skole no.3*, 28–32.
- Teknologisk Institut (2008). *Skoler i laddistrikter. (Schools in rural areas)*.
- Thomas, G. (2011). *How to do your case study: A guide for students & researchers*. Sage Publications.

- Tinkham, J. (2014). We're small enough to close but big enough to divide: The complexities of the nova scotia school review process. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 60(4), 726–740.
- Tūna, A. (2014, May). Development of the school as multifunctional community resource in Latvia: opportunities and challenges. In *Proceeding of the International Scientific Conference May 23th–24th, 2014, Volume I*. (pp. 496–504). Retrieved from: <http://journals.ru.lv/index.php/SIE/article/viewFile/759/873>
- Tūna, A. (2016). Skolas kā daudzfunkcionāla kopienas centra attīstība pārmaiņu apstākļos [Development of the school as a multifunctional community center in the changing conditions] (Doctoral dissertation). University of Latvia, Riga. Retrieved from: http://dspace.lu.lv/dspace/bitstream/handle/7/31363/298-51663-Tuna_Aija_at11102.pdf?sequence=1
- Turlajs, J. (2017). *Optimāla vispārējās izglītības iestāžu tīkla modeļa izveide Latvijā. Pētījuma prezentācija*. Retrieved from: [http://titania.saeima.lv/livs/saeimasnotikumi.nsf/0/b4632f82ddc9c45ec225811c001fe03f/\\$FILE/IZM.MK.P%C4%93t.pptx](http://titania.saeima.lv/livs/saeimasnotikumi.nsf/0/b4632f82ddc9c45ec225811c001fe03f/$FILE/IZM.MK.P%C4%93t.pptx)
- Udir. Directorate of Education (2015). Facts and analysis of kindergarten, primary and secondary education in Norway. Retrieved from: <http://utdanningspeilet.udir.no/2016/en/>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. 3rd ed. SAGE Publications.
- Wildy, S. C. H. (2011). Improving the small rural or remote school: The role of the district. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 24–36.
- Wilkoszewski, H., & Sundby, E. (2014). *Steering from the centre: New modes of governance in multi-level education systems*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 109, OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxswcfs4s5g-en>