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## Chapter 4

# The Heart of the Small Finnish Rural School: Supporting Roots and Wings, Solidarity and Autonomy



**Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund**

**Abstract** The aim of this chapter is to explore the cultural, educational, and social environment and characteristics of small rural schools, laying a foundation for understanding the possibilities, challenges, and constraints that teachers and pupils may face in these contexts. Questions about what educational quality and equity mean in the rural context underpin the narrative. The inquiry builds on research in some of the smallest rural schools in Finland, schools that might not even exist anymore due to demographic and political reasons. A figure, in the symbolic form of a candle, sums up the pedagogical thinking of rural village school teachers. The candle also illustrates the double purpose of education for living well in a world worth living in. What the small village school teachers articulate as being important in their work and what they wish their pupils would carry with them from the school into their future lives, involves roots and wings, relatedness and autonomy, in coexistence. The culture and education of the small school comprises both the optimal development of the individual and social participation. The small rural school has got a double function as a mediator of education and of community life, i.e. pedagogy and culture.

**Keywords** Small rural schools · Educational quality · Values · Equity · Multigrade classes · Teaching

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## Introduction

In Finland, hundreds of small rural schools have been closed or consolidated during the last decades due to demographic changes and political decisions (see for instance Lehtonen, 2021). Small schools can even be called an endangered species in the Finnish education system. In 1990 the number of small<sup>1</sup> comprehensive schools with less than 50 pupils still comprised more than 60% of the comprehensive schools; in 2000 they comprised about 38%; but in 2020 they were only 16% of comprehensive schools (Statistics Finland, 2022). Analysing and documenting the educational, cultural, and social qualities of the diminishing number of these small rural schools thus seems an inescapable duty for a Finnish educational researcher.<sup>2</sup>

The structure of education, considering the location and size of the school, the size of the classes and the age mixture of the pupils, are all co-dependent with the possibilities of pedagogy, and influence the culture of the school and its cultural models, and, in the long term, even society as a whole (see Kvalsund, 2004). Structural changes in education can even be regarded as “hard” changes that have a concealed effect on the “soft” culture of the school (Hofstede, 1991). Previous research shows that there is also a difference between how changes are perceived on a macro and micro level. Processes of change are affected by complex mechanisms, but the perspective of the micro level is often neglected (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). As McLaughlin (1987, p. 174) indicates, “change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit”. Small rural schools can be regarded as “smallest units” of the Finnish school system.

In Finland, local municipalities have the responsibility for arranging basic education. Their different economic situations affect school network solutions causing increasing regional differentiation. Lehtonen (2021, p. 145) even asks whether it would be necessary to re-establish the state aid to small schools which were removed in 2006, to strengthen the vitality of rural areas. For children living in rural areas with very long travel distances to their so-called “neighbourhood school”,<sup>3</sup> the statutory right to equal basic education is endangered. According to Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020) there are 60 Finnish municipalities (out of 311) that have only one

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Small’ and ‘small-scale’ are relative concepts, always considered in relation to something else characterised as larger. When studying small schools, the number of pupils defines which schools are small. In an international context, a small primary school usually has less than 100 pupils (e.g. in Australia, Anderson, 2010). In Finland, schools with <50 pupils have been considered small (see Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). During the last decades, however, many schools with more than 50 pupils have also been considered to be too small, and thus they have been closed down.

<sup>2</sup> The reanalysis is building on doctoral thesis research exploring the plight of small rural schools in Finland, through listening to the voices of 12 teachers and contrasting their narratives into a wider societal context (Karlberg-Granlund, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> According to the Finnish Basic Education Act of 1998, a child should be assigned to a ‘neighbourhood school’ that makes school travel as short and safe as possible, to ensure adequate equity in education across the country.

comprehensive school left, while all the previous village schools have been closed and centralised into bigger schools in municipality centres.

The situation is similar in rural areas in many other countries. Debates about the future of small rural schools focus not only on local economic conditions but also on their educational and social qualities. Often, large urban schools are considered as the norm for what counts as good schooling, and centralised structures appear cheaper, although there is no empirical evidence that smaller schools are inferior (Solstad & Karlberg-Granlund, 2020). Considering differences in school size and grouping, several researchers question whether standardised tests can identify differences in pupils' development and learning between rural and urban contexts (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Bæck, 2016; Galton, 1998; Kvalsund, 2004). As also pointed out in Karlberg-Granlund (2009), differences are to be found by analysing more complex phenomena like school culture, cultural models, and relational patterns. Structures of schools affect school cultures and thereby also teaching and informal learning, self-esteem, and relationships. In the long term, this may have implications in terms of what values and competences the school transmits, which subsequently influences society (Kvalsund, 2004). These findings are similarly supported in a meta-ethnographic study in the Nordic countries, concluding that children and young people from rural, sparsely populated and peri-urban areas are "far more creative and capable of learning" than international and regional school evaluations and statistical comparisons may show (Beach et al., 2018, p. 9).

In a September 29, 2021 press release, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), together with the Ombudsman for Children in Finland, Rural Policy Council, and Island Policy Council, announced that they will start an independent and comprehensive evaluation of the consequences of school closures for children and for the local communities affected. The evaluation will focus on children's rights to equal basic education and healthy personal growth, with enough time for play and hobbies, in line with the UN Declaration of Children's Rights. It will also pay attention to the viability of rural and archipelago municipalities, and the cultural and social dimensions of small schools (Ombudsman for Children in Finland, 2021).

The rural village school contexts have long been characterised by tensions mirroring larger issues in society. There seems to be an inbuilt conflict in the intentions of educational planning to simultaneously achieve equality, cost efficiency, and quality. Analysing debate material in a Finnish municipality where several small schools in the periphery were threatened with closure, Karlberg-Granlund (2009) concluded that the rural village school has a double function as a mediator of both education and of community life, that is, pedagogy and culture. The village school symbolises a sense of belonging, ownership, and hope for the future. Defending the village school and fighting for the continuity of "the village school story" is a struggle for local space, for a sense of community, security, and coherence. The struggle is a defence of both local quality of life and of educational quality for the individual pupil. The defence of the village school, and people's identification with it, can also be seen as a countermovement in a globalised and changing world.

Analysing the small village school in relation to a larger societal context opens questions about what quality means and what values should be guiding long-term educational planning. Instead of focusing on urban advantage, Hargreaves (2020, p. 7) proposes that there is a need to focus more on “examples of rural advantage which could justify the investment to ensure adequate provision of qualified teachers, better material resources, and teacher education for smaller, multi-age classes.” Until now, rural research has been a marginalised minority interest, but recent research agendas presented in the book *Educational research and schooling in rural Europe* (Gristy et al., 2020) calls for those who live in rural areas to “assume agency” in relation to policies that affect their lives.

## Teachers in Small Rural Village Schools

This narrative study listens to the voices of 12 teachers in ten of the smallest of the small rural village schools in Finland: schools with less than 30 pupils. The smallest of these schools had six pupils and the largest had 29 pupils at the time of the study. The primary schools consisted of classes 1–6 (ages 7–12); some also had pre-primary school (for 6-years-olds). Of the 12 class teachers interviewed, five worked in so-called one-teacher schools (having only one full-time teacher) and seven in schools with two full-time teachers. Ten of the teachers were also teaching principals. All the schools were Swedish-speaking minority schools.<sup>4</sup> Some of the teachers had worked in the same little school for their whole career, while others had also worked in bigger schools. The teachers’ working experience varied from six years to more than 30 years.

The original research project additionally focused on cultural and political aspects of small rural school contexts, through qualitative analysis of media debates and policy documents. The results were presented in a doctoral monograph (in Swedish, with English summary, Karlberg-Granlund, 2009). Parts of the study were then enlarged in continued research about teachers in rural areas (Karlberg-Granlund, 2011, 2019; Karlberg-Granlund & Korpinen, 2012; Olin et al., 2016).

Although the small schools in the study might not even exist anymore, the results are valuable for understanding small school contexts. For demographic reasons, other schools have now become small schools, creating new challenges for teachers not acquainted with small school pedagogy. Focusing on small Swedish-speaking schools is also interesting since pupils in these schools often have a greater sense of well-being than their Finnish-speaking counterparts (Palmgren et al., 2021; Silverström et al., 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> The two official languages in Finland are Finnish and Swedish. In addition, there are also other languages whose users’ rights are laid down in law ([https://www.kotus.fi/en/on\\_language/languages\\_of\\_finland](https://www.kotus.fi/en/on_language/languages_of_finland)). In 2020, about 5.2% of the population were Swedish-speaking Finns ([https://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk\\_vaesto\\_en.html](https://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html)).

Focusing on teachers' voices is also motivated by the fact that the teachers constitute the principal embodiments of the pedagogy and culture of a school (Arfwedson & Lundman, 1984; Berg, 1991). By listening to teachers' voices, an understanding can be reached about what they value in their work and in their relationships with the pupils; in other words, an understanding of the teachers' pedagogical intentions and purposes, as well as of their sense of meaning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Narratives and stories can be seen as the core of human existence (Bruner, 1987, 1996). Culture can be described and analysed as patterns of thought and practices (Cole, 1998). Values are seen as the core of culture (Hofstede, 1991). A small school and its surrounding context can be compared to a cultural weave, which is interconnected, developed, and carried by narratives and values.

## Teaching as Praxis in a Small School

Smith (2008, p. 65) summarises the intentions of good education and teaching in the notion of *teaching as praxis*. The commonly used term "practice" generally refers to "one's actions and ways of being as a teacher". The term "praxis" goes beyond that and captures the competence of making wise and sensitive judgements in a particular situation that inform reflective, moral, and thoughtful actions (Smith, 2008, p. 65). Similarly, Carr (2011, p. 174) emphasises the importance of both teachers' own moral aims for "the pursuit of truth and justice, and their promotion of such attitudes, values and virtues to others". The characteristics of good teachers and good schools are not reducible to general rules, because teachers' work is contextually dependent. Teachers need capacities for contextually sensitive reflection and judgement, which can be called "pedagogical phronesis" or "practical wisdom", connected to professional virtues and professionalism. Phronēsis is the disposition for wider reflective understanding of the circumstances affecting the work (Carr, 2011; McLaughlin, 1999); it is the disposition that guides praxis.

Several researchers claim that teachers' *pedagogical thinking* (Kansanen, et al., 2000) and *practical knowledge* (Elbaz, 1983) are developed in interaction with their working contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Elbaz, 1983; Goodson, 1996; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009; Raggl, 2015). Although "the commitment to the ethic of care" brings many teachers to elementary teaching (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 22), different settings make it more or less likely that a teacher will manage to create trustful relationships (Noddings, 2001). Generally, the teaching profession is trusted and appreciated in Finnish society. Finnish class teachers (primary school teachers) experience wide professional autonomy. They have completed a master's degree at a university. A class teacher is a generalist, with in-depth pedagogical knowledge and broad knowledge of the curriculum and of different subjects (Tirri, 2014).

The constraints and challenges created by school closure plans make it hard for principals and teachers in small rural schools to plan their work and plan for school development. Challenging economic circumstances may however create a special

form of creativity, which produces innovative solutions in difficult situations (Halsey, 2011; Karlberg-Granlund, 2011). This innovativeness found in small schools should not be taken for granted, however. It is co-dependent with good relationships in the local environment, and the “freedom of action” (Swedish: *handlingsutrymme*, Berg, 1981) that may be found when the principals and teachers individually and collaboratively analyse the policies that guide their work in their small schools, to find good educational solutions with a focus on what is in the pupils’ best interests (Olin et al., 2016). The superintendent of a school district with schools of different sizes has an important consultative and supportive role in making small schools work and providing equal resources for all schools. As Kemmis et al. (2020, p. 108) state: “Only when teachers are well-supported, including by appropriate laws and policies for education, and by the provision of appropriate resources, do teachers have a realistic chance of actually doing good teaching.”

In my interviews with teachers in some of the smallest schools in Finland, it became clear that the work in a small school is characterised by a great amount of autonomy, that is, both freedom and responsibility. This can be rewarding and challenging, and sometimes even too arduous if there is not enough support (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). Teachers’ work in these environments requires contextual and local cultural knowledge, good planning and organisational strategies in the multigrade classroom, good communicative skills, and an ability to envision, anticipate and promote the holistic development of the pupils in the long-term (Karlberg-Granlund, 2009, 2011, 2019). The characteristics of these small rural schools will be further explored in the next parts of the chapter.

## Characteristics of Small Rural Schools

This section explores the cultural, educational, and social environment and characteristics of small rural schools, and thus lays a foundation for understanding the possibilities, challenges, and constraints that teachers and pupils may face in these contexts. Research about small rural schools tends to focus on cultural perspectives and the meaning of the school in the local society, or geographical and structural perspectives of school network planning and provision of educational equity, or educational and social aspects of teaching and learning in small schools (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). By paying attention to current research and connecting this to results from a qualitative study about teachers’ pedagogical thinking in Finnish small rural schools, the chapter aims to give an overview of different dimensions of rural school contexts.

## The Cultural Environment of a Small Rural School

As Lehtonen (2021) and Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020) indicate, small rural schools still have an important role in promoting community viability and encouraging new inhabitants to settle in a village. Solstad (1997) identifies three different kinds of educational and cultural school-community relations: a “community ignorant school” which becomes an isolated island in the community; a “community passive school” that takes advantage of the local community for teaching and learning; and a “community active school” which not only integrates teaching and learning into the local context, but also plays an active role in community life and culture. Researchers have acknowledged that positive school and community relations do not come into existence automatically. The principals’ and teachers’ roles are decisive for establishing flourishing connections between a school and its community (Anderson & White, 2011; Bagley & Hillyard, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019).

Being a teacher and principal in a small school requires certain skills of ethical responsibility and cultural sensibility. Cultural sensibility involves understanding the contextual possibilities, strengths, weaknesses, and constraints, and acting in an authentic, honest, impartial, and sensitive manner with respect for the individuals and families. Cultural sensibility also means that the teacher understands the background and culture of the students, and how this affects their learning, so that teaching can be designed in an appropriate way (Ingalls et al., 2006). One of the teachers interviewed expressed the delicate balance in small environments like this:

When something occurs that affects the children’s feeling of security, because of emotional or practical, real, or imagined reasons, then you need the courage to be present then, to maintain routines, talk about the things you can talk about without exposing anyone. This is always problematic in a small village like this, where everyone knows everybody. But still, you have to talk about something, and do it with respect and honesty. (Dan, teacher in a small village school)

The smallness of the school enables the teachers’ closer familiarity with their pupils and the families. When teachers teach the same pupils for a long time, they have an opportunity to follow and support pupils’ optimal development. Nevertheless, it may also create vulnerability. When recognised, however, this vulnerability can also be a strength. Kelchtermans (2005) explains that there is a vulnerability in all educational relations. Indeed, he thinks that vulnerability is a prerequisite for good pedagogical encounters. In the interviews, teachers in small schools said they feel a certain ethical responsibility for their pupils:

You have the responsibility for pupils for a long time, six years. If you teach the pupils only one year, you may think that another teacher will then take care of them, and you push the problems away. But here, you couldn’t live with yourself if one of the pupils goes to the next school with sub-standard reading or writing abilities. You know then that it is completely your own fault (Bo, teacher in small village school).

In an analysis of rural subject teachers’ implementation of local knowledge into their teaching, Autti and Bæck (2021, pp. 78–79) identified a gap between policies



affected by urban frames of reference and more practice-oriented rural perspectives. They found that teachers' interests in local matters and their views on local curriculum are key factors for successful teaching. Integrating local topics into teaching not only supports meaningful learning, but also increases pupils' sense of place and appreciation of their environment, helping them to realise that it could be a relevant choice in the future to return to the village after finishing their studies. Autti and Bæck (2021, p. 83) conclude that "knowing where you come from builds students' self-confidence, which in turn is an important base for success in life."

Active collaboration may make a small village school unique in its environment like a tree rooted to place. The village school can form an educational and cultural environment that is in a close symbiotic relationship with the village. Pupils, teachers and others in the school context are fostered into, and mediate, the culture of the small school. Each small school has its own distinctive school culture (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009).

When the relationship between a school and community works well, it is as if the walls of the school are transparent. The school is characterised by a welcoming and open atmosphere. One teacher interviewed explained that "the school is really open; no doors are closed even in the evenings." The school belongs to all the community, and many activities are arranged in the school after the school day.

## Teaching in the Multigrade Classroom

Teaching methods in multigrade classes are not very familiar to most teachers; some say more research into small schools is needed and the findings more fully integrated into teacher education (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Lindblad & Oksanen, 2021). The heterogeneity of a multigrade class can be seen as an asset rather than a deficit.

The research literature explores several concepts to describe multigrade classes where children of different ages are taught together. Veenman (1997) uses the concept *multigrade teaching* when this type of class is organised because of a diminishing number of pupils and resources, while he uses the concept *multi-age teaching* when the class is arranged with educational motives and benefits in mind. In small schools, multi-age groups are arranged when there are not enough pupils for *monograde teaching*.

In an overview of teaching strategies in Finnish and Austrian multigrade classrooms, Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015) call the method of teaching common themes to pupils of different ages *common timetable* or *spiral curriculum* (from Cornish, 2006; Kalaoja, 2006). Choosing other instructional strategies depends on subjects, group composition, and group size. In science, religion and art, whole class teaching of the same theme for all grades is common. In mathematics and languages, more individualised teaching is needed for each grade level separately but still in the same classroom with the same teacher. Teaching in multigrade classes thus needs

thorough planning so that the teacher can manage to instruct, guide, and help all the students at their different levels. As one teacher interviewed put it,

In the morning, when the school day begins, you need to have a clear aim for your work. It is your responsibility to plan your teaching well. In a multigrade class like this, encompassing all classes, you can't come in and improvise, you have to know exactly what to do. (Siv, teacher in small village school).

The interviewed teachers explain how they have learnt step by step to teach multi-grade groups, although they were not prepared for it in their teacher education. The pedagogical professionalism of the teachers in the small schools includes *practical knowledge*, striving for a pedagogical balance between planning and spontaneity, structuring and flexibility, as well as between guidance and student empowerment in the multi-age classroom. The small number of colleagues and teamwork promotes flexibility, but the structure in the form of planning and organisation seems to be a prerequisite for functioning pedagogical freedom and flexibility in practice.

Teacher professionalism in small rural schools also includes the ability to balance between recognising the pupil's actual competence and offering relevant challenges within the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978). Creating an optimal space for individual growth, learning, and development entails finding the educational balance and possibility for each pupil, which metaphorically can be described as finding the perfect balance between "holding someone by the hand" and "letting them walk on their own", that is, between guidance and accompaniment on the one hand, and encouraging independence, personal activity, and responsibility on the other. This delicate balance between safety and challenge in teaching exists in all types of schools and classes, but becomes especially evident in multigrade classes, where the pupils are of different ages. Differentiated teaching strategies and individualisation are very important, as the different age groupings give an added dimension for the teacher to continually acknowledge, compared to differentiation in monograde classes (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021).

The most important thing for me is the well-being of the pupil. I really think that this is most important. If you notice that a pupil feels bad, then you also feel bad. I meet each pupil on his or her own level and start there, and then I think it's a great advantage that I am allowed to have them for six years/.../I don't have to rush, or think that next year a new teacher comes, you have to learn this and that, but I can wait for them—and all of a sudden there is a change. (Siv, teacher in small village school)

These findings are quite similar to Raggl's (2015, 2020) findings in an ethnographic study exploring how Montessori pedagogy is implemented in multi-age teaching in mountain schools in Austria and Switzerland. Larger primary schools in German-speaking countries also implement multigrade classes especially for younger pupils, stressing the educational and social advances of multi-age groupings. Small schools can even be places of innovation, inspiring the teaching in larger schools.

According to Solstad (2003), approaches like place-based teaching and experiential learning enhance the connections between practical and theoretical knowledge, in a balance between the local and the global, and concrete and more abstract levels

of understanding. Autti and Bæck (2021, p. 82), though, consider that especially new teachers from urban backgrounds, who are not familiar with rural contexts and cultures, may at first have some difficulties in integrating local content into their teaching. Autti and Bæck (2021) thus ask for new projects and initiatives to help both prospective teachers and professional teachers to implement locally relevant teaching.

Likewise, Kalaoja and Pietarinen (2009) acknowledge that teachers working in small rural schools in Finland may lack professional self-respect, although they are valued in the local society and have got a special competence. Working in a school that is continuously threatened by school closure, may hinder teachers' professional development (Karlberg-Granlund & Korpinen, 2012). The educational and social benefits of multi-age teaching may therefore neither be fully explored nor developed in the multigrade classes in Finnish small rural schools.

## **Social Aspects of the Multigrade Classroom and Small School**

Sigsworth and Solstad (2001) point out that in a multigrade class, the composition of the group changes slowly year by year when older pupils move to the next class, and new younger pupils are integrated into the group. This creates a special stability and culture in the classroom. The older pupils are familiar with the routines and foster the younger pupils into these. Routines are important for the children, and they also co-create them together with the teacher. Not only the teachers, but also the pupils carry on and affect the traditions of the school.

For learning, it is most important that the environment is peaceful. It is not the big projects, but the continuous and familiar routines, that create security and well-being. You don't have to change your teaching all the time. When you want to do something new, then the pupils say: "We didn't do that last year" (Marianne, teacher in small village school).

In research about the social environment of rural schools in Norway, Kvalsund (2000, 2004) distinguishes between bigger and smaller rural schools, finding that there are differences although they are both rural. In the smaller rural schools, the social "mechanism of difference" is prevalent on recesses and in the playground (Kvalsund, 2000, 2004). This means that the pupils play with everyone, despite differences in age or gender. When the number of pupils is small, everyone becomes important. But in a small group of classmates, it may also be difficult to find a so-called best friend, with similar interests and hobbies. A feeling of loneliness may therefore occur, although the pupils belong to a community of peers and participate actively in the classroom and playground. The teacher needs to be aware of this, and actively create possibilities for collaboration and play over age boundaries.

In the bigger rural schools, a "mechanism of similarity" is prevalent instead (Kvalsund, 2000, 2004). Pupils stay together in small groups during the recesses, and older pupils think it is too childish to play with younger pupils. In bigger schools, pupils

more easily find friends with similar backgrounds, interests, and hobbies. There is also a risk that similarity becomes a norm, so that pupils may become afraid of standing out. According to Kvalsund, age composition impacts the culture of the school. Small rural schools with multi-age classes form a special learning environment that may have implications also for the future lives of the pupils, fostering tolerance and collaboration over age boundaries.

Another social aspect recognised by previous research is that it becomes very natural that everyone is working differently or may have special needs when children of different ages work in the same class. Differences become something normal (Sigsworth & Solstad, 2001). The heterogeneity of a multi-age group apparently makes individual differences legitimate and accepted, and the children learn to recognise and help each other (Raggl, 2015). One teacher interviewed explains:

We all know each other, and it is very normal that everyone is on different levels. I try to think, we are all different, and how can I support that difference. (Gabiella, teacher in a small village school).

Research about small schools and multigrade classes additionally stresses the educational possibilities of learners who are supporting each other, becoming helpful and attentive to each other's needs, and less dependent on the teacher. Pupils are also fostered to work independently, and they have to wait for guidance (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Lindblad & Oksanen, 2021). This can be intentionally integrated into the teaching methods, but is also something informal, affecting the school culture (Peltonen, 2002; Sigsworth & Solstad, 2001). As noted earlier, the teachers' awareness of pupils' differences and needs is essential for creating a good and safe learning environment and promoting optimal and balanced development.

## Visualising the Heart of the Small Rural Village School

Some common themes emerged from the analysis of these narratives from teachers in small rural schools in Finland; these were identified across cases. The findings were summarised in a map, where lines between different cultural, educational, and social aspects illustrate how different dimensions of the social reality of small rural schools hang together and interweave. A figure, in the symbolic form of a candle (Fig. 4.1), sums up the teachers' pedagogical thinking, parallel with mirroring the teachers' aims and values in previous research about teachers work in small rural schools.<sup>5</sup>

The candle can be regarded as a root metaphor for the small village school and the work of the teachers in these schools. In the Finnish historical context, the folk school teacher (class teacher, primary school teacher) has traditionally been called

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed presentation of the method, see Karlberg-Granlund (2019). An earlier version of the candle model (Fig. 4.1) has previously been presented in Swedish in Karlberg-Granlund (2009) and in Finnish in Karlberg-Granlund (2010).



The symbolic meaning of Fig. 4.1 should not be generalised to all village schools everywhere, but the figure captures some essential qualities that might be found in small schools in different contexts. Two other visualisations emerging from the same context have earlier been presented in *The Journal of Rural Studies*, focusing on hidden tensions that may exist in small environments (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). Like a piece of artwork, the figure may inspire different interpretations for different people, depending on their own backgrounds. An interesting question is whether only people coming from a similar cultural environment like the small rural school may grasp the inherent dimensions of the model, or if it has wider associations.

A lit candle has different parts, which in Fig. 4.1 are connected to different meanings. *The heart or wick of the candle* represents a line going from the pupils' homes through the small school in the community to their individual optimal development. *The atmosphere around the candle* symbolises the social environment of the small rural village school. Aspects in the outer sphere around *the bright shining flame* (the pupil) promote aspects in the inner sphere (personal characteristics and competencies that the pupil is fostered into through participation in a multigrade class and a small school and community).

In the interviews, the teachers reflected on what is important in their work and what they would like their pupils to carry with them from the small school into their future lives. Common aims expressed in the teachers' answers are condensed in *the candle holder*. The teachers stressed the importance of caring, and seeing each child's development and well-being holistically; recognising and supporting each child's uniqueness; following and waiting for the child's progress, as well as encouraging meaningful learning, and thus giving a good foundation for the rest of the students' lives. Some short excerpts exemplify the voices of teachers in small village schools (for a more extensive presentation, see Karlberg-Granlund, 2009):

I think it is important that every pupil is recognised every day. And in a small school I have the possibilities for that (Susanne).

In a small school you have an opportunity to support the development of the pupils and give them a good base. I hope this will give them a feeling of security and self-confidence, that "I can". You can also help the pupil to find his or her own strengths, and his or her right way to do things (Petra).

I need to focus also on the fast pupils, supporting their motivation (Pia).

There are so many things, but the most important thing is promoting the child's growth and optimal development, seeing the possibilities of each child, and giving them the self-confidence, that 'I am accepted as I am' (Stina).

These comments suggest that there is a harmony between the teachers' pedagogical purposes and the practical possibilities to realise them. The teachers appreciate that the smallness of the school enables continuity and a closer familiarity with the pupils. Their aims are reachable, while the school and the community are small. The school is close to the pupils' homes both geographically and socially. Sharing common values, establishing continuous formal and informal dialogues between the school and the families, and striving for continuity in the relationships are important in a small school and community (see *the environment under the candle holder*).

The aims and values that the teachers saw as important align well with Bronfenbrenner's views about proximal relations that support children's optimal individual development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Through cooperating, fostering, and connecting to the surrounding social environment, culture, history, place, and nature, possibilities are created for the pupil's sense of belonging (roots). Individual growth (wings) is promoted by the teachers' possibilities to think and arrange the teaching holistically and to create conditions for meaningful learning. The pupil experiences school as something meaningful and learning as joyful when teaching meets his or her individual needs and actual level, relating to his or her own life and experiences.

The air around the light of a candle is important, as it gives oxygen to the flame. Equally important are the atmosphere and the educational, cultural, social, and structural characteristics of the schools.

I think it is important that they get a feeling of belongingness and community, so that they may come back and settle down, even here in the village (Siv).

The small school may become a community of diversity, promoting co-operation over age boundaries and involving the traditions and competences of the local society (Bruner, 1996; Solstad, 2003). Individual growth, or wings, may be promoted by the teachers' arranging for teaching holistically and creating conditions for meaningful learning. The pupil experiences school as something meaningful and learning as joyful when teaching meets his or her individual needs and actual level and is connected to previous experiences and his or her own life. Through teaching common themes and topics, teaching may give the pupils positive learning experiences and help them find their own place and task in a classroom community although the pupils are of different ages. Involving pupils in planning their own objectives for learning is another important aspect of meaningful and active learning (Sigsworth & Solstad, 2001; National core curriculum for basic education in Finland, 2016).

The candle illustrating small village school pedagogy captures several dimensions of teachers' aims and values, connecting these to both *praxis* and the *practice* of teaching and learning in small schools (cf. Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 65). The figure does represent an idealistic view, however. The fact that a teacher is working in a small school does not guarantee that he or she automatically recognises and implements the distinctive educational possibilities of this environment. Neither is a pupil in a small rural school guaranteed the optimal development the idealised image may suggest. But, by becoming aware of idealised views, these can be compared with the actual situations in schools. Identifying gaps between ideals and reality can help and guide the future development of high quality and equal education for all children irrespective of place or background. In line with Hargreaves (2020, p. 7) "examples of rural advantage" need to be brought to the fore.



## Recognition of Rural Lifestyles and Futures

The rural backgrounds and values of families and pupils may not be fully acknowledged and recognised in educational policies, steering documents, and curricula. There may be a gap between the rhetoric of the political educational governance and the local and practical situations in the municipalities (Autti & Bæck, 2021; Solstad & Karlberg-Granlund, 2020). Recognition of rural lifestyles and countryside is a matter of sustainability for the future, in a world worth living in for all. In a report of a study of projects of Education for Sustainability in Australia, Kemmis and Mutton (2012) said

Education is a process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into forms of understanding, modes of action and ways of relating to one another and the world, that foster individual and collective self-expression, individual and collective self-development and individual and collective self-determination, and that are, in these senses, oriented towards the good for each person and the good for humankind. (Kemmis & Mutton, 2012, p. 204)

Edwards-Groves et al. (2016, p. 326) draw on Honneth's (1995) idea that "being recognised is a core human need. Mutual recognition (of each other) builds internal self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in people, which is necessary to become an agent or being agentic in society." Recognition of the uniqueness of the other, which is precisely equivalent to one's own uniqueness is essential in the culture of small rural schools, in learning to live and to work together.

What rurality is in today's world is not an easy question to answer, however. The concept of rurality has been frequently discussed in rural sociology but is not yet so much discussed in research about rural schools (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). In educational research, recognition and values instead are in focus, while schools educate for uncertain futures with an aim of creating stability and self-confidence, that is, both roots and wings, regardless of where the school is situated. An urgent question is how to help young people to simultaneously and metaphorically both stay and leave (cf. Corbett, 2007). And then also come back, create sustainable futures, respond to challenges, take responsibility, and believe they can make a difference.

## Educating for Living Well in a World Worth Living in for All

Capturing the essence of good teaching and good schools despite differences in context is a never-ending endeavour. Studying small contexts provides knowledge about larger issues of how to promote educational quality for each individual child through meaningful learning and holistic development, and local quality of life through community-oriented approaches in teaching.

In his classic work *The Culture of Education*, Bruner (1996) hoped schools would represent countercultures, and promote cultural mutuality, participation, and identity through a balance between the individual and the collective, and the smaller and larger society. Autonomy and solidarity are essential for pupils, for teachers, and for



society in general. According to Rothsbaum and Trommsdorff (2007), all societies have elements of individualism and collectivism, but in Western societies there has been a tendency to value individual autonomy more highly than relatedness, assuming that relatedness and solidarity in some sense reduce autonomy. But cultural research both in Western and non-Western countries shows that trust supports autonomy, self-esteem, and well-being, so that roots and wings complement each other.

As noted earlier, small rural schools have a double function: educational and cultural. It follows, then, that the local school has an extensive role in producing and maintaining social capital (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Edwards, 2019; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). Furthermore, as Kvalsund (2004) claims, the cultures and structures of schools have implications for the future.

Both educational leadership and teaching in small rural school contexts need to be pedagogical, reflective, and sensitive to context. Reflective leadership includes analysing the school in the broader society and finding and promoting sustainable ways of living together. Leading then promotes the dual purpose of education, “helping people to live well and create a world worth living in” (Edwards-Groves et al., 2020, p. 126).

*Education for living well in a world worth living in for all* involves teaching as both *praxis* and *practice*, which in the rural small school context includes teaching and lecturing in different groupings, and the management and facilitation of learning, development, and growth in holistic and locally relevant ways, where the pupil is a subject, not an object. According to Biesta (2016, p. 386), quoting Levinas, the freedom of being and becoming a unique person does not mean “freedom of being able to do what one wishes to do but being free as ‘simply [doing] what nobody else can do in my place’”, and finding one’s own place in life.

Having *roots* and *wings* means learning to know one’s own background, culture, and value, while at the same time learning to know and value the background and culture of others, as equals. This intrinsic aim of teachers in small rural village schools is also an aim of education in general. Educational ideas and ideals emerging from small rural school contexts may hopefully have wings into the future. The next task for Finnish educational research may be to focus on children’s voices, documenting their thoughts about their places and futures in different local and rural landscapes of a global world.

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