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## **Rurality and Education relations: Metro-centricity and local values in rural communities and rural schools**

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**Abstract:** The present article has used ethnography to make participant observations in six local neighbourhood schools in rural parts of Sweden. Together with interviews and the collection of local documents it shows three things in particular that also relate to how rural education is described in other European educational research. These are firstly how rural communities and their schools are very different to each-other and are differently affected by global processes, to which they are nevertheless distinctly related, and differently positioned and affected by national education policies. Secondly what the visible effects of this seem to be on schools, education and educational experiences, motivations and behaviour in local communities. Thirdly, what the possible policy implications of this can be for a more generative theory and politics of rural schooling today.

**Keywords:** Rural, Urban, Education Markets, Ethnography, Multi-sited ethnography

### **Introduction**

The present article has used ethnography to make participant observations in six local neighbourhood schools in rural parts of Sweden. Together with interviews and the collection of local documents it shows three things in particular that also relate to how rural education is described in other European educational research (e.g. Hargreaves, Kvalsund & Galton, 2009; Michalak, 2009; Poikolainen, 2012; Vigo & Soriano, 2014). These are firstly how rural communities and their schools are very different to each-other and are differently positioned and affected by national education policies (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014). Secondly what the visible effects of this seem to be on schools, education and educational experiences, motivations and behaviour in local communities. Thirdly, what the possible policy implications of this can be for a more generative theory and politics of rural schooling today (Corbett, 2014). The presentations of ruralities and rural education to a degree lacks subtle nuances that we try to address in this article by employing three different research corrections.

The first correction is one that addresses a key imbalance in rural and urban research on education and youth experiences. It departs from the recognition that although there are many investigations about urban youth and their social involvement and marginalisation in education and wider society (Michalak, 2009; Poikolainen, 2012), research on rural youth is scarce (Öhrn & Weiner, 2007). There is a prevalent focus on urbanities based on what

Farrugia (2014: 293) describes as an “unacknowledged metrocentricity”. The second addressed imbalance is that, perhaps because of this, notions of rurality and rural education tend to be uniform, abstract and rather simplistic (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014). Within society as it is today, spaces form clearly distinct realities (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994) and individuals construct their identities in relation to the different possibilities and contexts for inclusion, social participation and agency that these places provide (Trondman, 1995; Vigo & Soriano, 2014; Waara, 2011). Educational politics seem to currently deny rural populations this kind of recognition of the rights and possibilities of active agency (Hargreaves et al, 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009), with this corresponding to the third point of imbalance we try to address. This is the passivity that is often accorded toward rural spaces and their agents and the passive object status that is often given to the concept of rurality (Balfour et al, 2008). We agree with Corbett (2015) when he states that rural schools can and should be politically discursively and expressed in educational policy and practice as places where the complex work that deals with local and specific rural problems is done but that this kind of recognition is not what characterizes present educational policy making.

In the article we will thus attempt to showcase the different conditions that can characterize rural places and their schools. When doing so we attempt to address what is meant and understood by the concept of rurality in education and rural education policy. We bind these perspectives together with the help of an analytical understanding of space in accordance with Massey (1994) and Lefebvre (1991), and metrocentricity from the work of Farrugia (2014). We identify how education policy works through different rural areas differently and we do battle, like Bagley and Hillyard (2014) and Corbett (2015), against a uniform image of the countryside with roots that are identified from urban research and notions of a problematic, marginalized youth from passive and poor environments who lead deprived lives (Öhrn, 2012). What we identify is far from passivity and deprivation. We recognize instead how place is actively attended to in some respect in every rural school in our research. But it is also attended to differently as the different places provide different possibilities and contexts for addressing the local community from in education, not the least due to the predominant economic conditions and production relations and the burgeoning globalization of a specific form of capitalism and economic production with new conceptualizations of margins and centers of influence and power. This is the era of finance capital. It is a state of empire according to Hardt and Negri (2001) of relevance for

everything, including global educational politics and conditions as well as research on rurality and links between identity, context and education in this sense (Balfour et al., 2008). This is also our main address later in the article.

Thus, although they are rarely given much attention in rural educational research globalization and the organization of economic production in the age of empire have had significant effects on rural communities and their schools as they have affected the aspects of the local that are available to and selected for inclusion in teaching and learning content. This becomes very obvious later in the article when we for instance (i) identify and show what content from the local environment (material, physical, cultural, economic) is given space in the formal school in different types of rural area, (ii) in what way, (iii) what the variations and patterns are, (iv) what effects seem to develop from this and (v), what conclusions can be drawn up for rural educational policy. We are in this sense trying to make a contribution to an understanding of the educational needs and possibilities of rural youth in relation to place by exploring how the local perspective is brought up and discussed in different kinds of rural educational contexts and by problematizing the current emphasis on metro-centric values.

## **Theory**

Theoretically the project draws on materialist spatial geographic theory as represented in the work of Doreen Massey (1994), where space is understood as continuously in process and shaped through socio-spatial and material practices in forms of interaction that both produce and contextualise the relations of production and historical social relations. There is a close connection between space, place and the construction of social relations and spatial identities from this theoretical position (Lefebvre, 1991). Rurality is a transformative signifier in our research not a passive object. Ruralities and experiences and understandings of them are capable of changing teacher and pupil behaviour and affecting education motivation and performances, and any research or theory of rurality in education needs to take this into account, in its attempts to ground ideas about a rural- place-conscious education and its possible and actual roles in and relationships to rural life (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014). Such place conscious theories of education are rare but they are also of greater value to educational stakeholders, including teachers, pupils, their parents, local businesses and educational politicians and policymakers, (Corbett, 2015). As Corbett (2015) has suggested, education is as significant in and to local lives as is labour or production, and as are community and

production relations, it and experiences and understandings of it are formed in concrete space and time contexts (Balfour, Mitchel and Moltsane, 2008).

A certain place at a certain time shows a particular mix of social relations, but the identity of a place is meaningful according to Massey and Lefebvre also in the sense of it largely deriving from the specificity of its interactions with spaces outside (Johansson, 2017; Vigo & Soriano, 2014). As Massey (1994) and others, such as Chandler (1990), point out the growth of industrial capitalism saw the massive reorganisation of vast areas in (former/then) rural spaces in Europe, with this creating pockets of semi- and peri-urban industrialisation and settlement in these areas. Yet at the same time other areas were left relatively untouched by industrialisation and there settlements remained quite sparse there. Thus, the effects on rural areas on rural areas vary between being centrifugal and centripetal forces; i.e. either pushing populations out of a rural area or drawing them in, depending on assumed economic needs and current economic climate (Balfour et al, 2008). Education relations in local communities are formed at least in part in relation to the conditions of economic and cultural production, the convictions of value that agents generate, and the push vs pull forces they may exact.

Rural spaces are depicted as simple but they are in fact complex and multi-layered social constructions in respect to which understandings of local educational needs and possibilities and their manifestation in educational policy and practice are dialectically related (Balfour et al, 2008). This can also be seen through previous research. For instance, research shows youth in marginalised, poor urban areas to describe their neighbourhood in contrast to the more prestigious, wealthy areas (Öhrn, 2012), and there are indications that hegemonic understandings of urban living appear to be vital for the identity constructions made by rural youth (Johansson, 2017; Svensson, 2010) concerning for example understandings what a good life is, which in turn has implications for young people's thoughts about their future and chances of social inclusion and influence now and in the future.

### **Research sites: Researched schools and their location**

There are many different forms of rurality and to avoid stereotyping rurality as one category, we chose to include both sparsely populated areas, tourist municipalities and small industrial (and 'de-industrialised') communities from different parts of Sweden in our research. These locations each represent an official category in formal definitions of rural palces (SKL, 2011). Within them Sweden is currently politically divided into 290 municipalities and 20 counties.

One of the main towns in the municipality will be its seat and the site of the municipal offices. The six schools selected for the study were chosen to provide a variation in terms of area, location in the north or south of the country, distance to the municipal seat, and classifications of the local labour market. The characteristics of the schools and their municipalities is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 about here

All the researched schools come from one of three broad types of area and all of them except Forest and River school were the only secondary schools in their municipality. The areas are (a) intermediate rural areas with diversified employment situated at some distance from urban centers or having some moderate difficulties of access to them and having low- to-medium income levels in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, (b) peri-urban rural areas with an increasing population and a predominance of employment in the tertiary sector with medium-to-high income levels and (c) sparsely populated areas with small settlements and lower economic activities that are principally confined to the primary sector and sometimes tourism.

## **Methodology**

The chosen methodology for this research was ethnography. Ethnography focuses on the study of cultural formation and maintenance in particular places through multiple methods for the generation of diverse forms of data based on the direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher(s) as the main research instrument (Atkinson, 2005; Hammersley, 2006). The intention is to provide accounts of how the everyday practices of those engaged in educational processes are implicated in broader social relations and cultural production and to highlight the agency of educational subjects in these processes. Five weeks of continuous fieldwork was planned for one class from each school (grade 8 or 9) to these ends to be carried out by three individual researchers in 2015-2016, one at each site, with occasional visits from others in the research team (i.e. the five co-authors of the article).

Temporally compressing fieldwork in this way is one of several ways of using research time ethnographically (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). However, being able to accommodate five consecutive weeks in the field at each site was in the end found to be problematic. Due to other commodified labour at their different workplaces, the three field researchers were not able to accomplish five consecutive weeks of fieldwork and three to five one to two week

visits were carried out at each site instead. As Jeffrey and Troman (2004) write this represents and intermittent time mode. It is meant to allow a flexible approach to the frequency of site visits and progressive focusing in relation to the participant observation and general data production. It involves the development and continual evaluation of a characteristic ethnographic spiral of research planning and reflection, data production and analysis, new planning, and further data production and analysis along the lines of the collective ethnography developed by Tuula Gordon and associates (Gordon et al, 2006). It involved the team members doing the following:

- Reading each individual researcher's fieldwork narratives carefully to identify the main concepts and ideas and their possible relationships and general implications
- Checking the relevance of the concepts within the scope of the project
- Identifying patterns in the field terms of the cultural processes that may be evident

In our collective ethnography each individual project researcher has thus concentrated on her or his designated research site but the investigations are also strongly jointly planned and collective discussions are used as a means to help to develop reflexive interpretations. This is common in multi-sited ethnography and vertical case analysis, where joint discussions and analyses are used to identify tentative themes and questions about the emergent ideas, practices, discourses, tools, and institutional arrangements between and across our various sites over time (Eisenhart, 2017).

Altogether 340 hours of classroom observation were conducted. They focused on presentations of place and on participation, pupil influence, and conflicts in the school, as well as how places and their relations were presented and positioned in the curriculum and interactions. The observations included field conversations but we have also employed formal interviews with pupils (with 136 pupils; 68 boys and 68 girls) and staff at the schools, which were also supplemented by observations in the neighbourhood and some document analyses. By placing emphasis on learning from informants we have been particularly strong at providing details from interactions inside everyday life contexts and settings.

### **Analysis and results**

In line with our aims and theoretical positioning, whether and how teaching relates to place

was inquired into, as was young people's views of inclusion, fellowship and conflict, and their positioning of the local school and community. The analyses point to considerable differences between the researched schools and the results are organised under a series of thematised subheadings that try to express this. These are: (a) differences when presenting the school: Local or national/global relations, (b) the local context and its resources and (c) urban estrangement as an educational interpellation and a policy dilemma.

*Differences when presenting the school: Local or national/global relations*

One obvious characteristic of education is that the input in the classroom is not only meant to produce knowledge and skills that are specific only to the particular (scholastic) context, they are meant to have value also to what is practiced outside of the classroom and for the future. In addition, an important part of school life also includes the opportunity to experience a range of activities outside of the classroom in extra-curricular activities. Some schools are explicitly connecting to local characteristics and themes in these ways, thus strengthening their relations to the outside world and recognising values worthy of curriculum inclusion, whereas others seemingly related very little to the local context, choosing either to specialise on scholastic codes only or to valorise global world content not local.

Forest School exhibited tendencies toward weakening boundaries of insulation through the inclusion of local content. It had paintings of the local landscapes and images of local, often historic, social/labour relations on walls and message boards that explicitly positioned the school in the local geography and the community members' local history. It also had large glass display cases in the hallways with animals, trees and background sceneries from the local area as well as wall decorations with local handicraft and posters with local sayings and jokes in the local dialect. Wall paintings from pupils from the 1970s were also present.

Coastal school was at the other extreme. It had few visible signs showing a recognition of value of the local neighbourhood. In fact, cultural and physical geographical imagined closeness to parts of the world other than to the local were stressed instead. An example was when a politician during an interview and in public talk recurrently stressed that the Swedish capital 'Stockholm was only an hour away by air'. Another was when an official in the municipality stated that 'you can live here and still be part of something bigger' and there were also references to ideal identities as 'citizens of the world' and to the advantages for young people of moving away from the area to widen their perspectives and opportunities.



References to the global context were used regularly to highlight the local community's closeness to the wider world:

When you look at this (points to the map) you see that we are citizens of the world. That goes for language as well, almost all of us in the world speak English, we are global citizens and we have a global language. Identity today is less connected to... where we were born. We travel an incredible amount. It is often cheaper to fly to the Mediterranean than to Stockholm. (Coastal School, 27 January)

The predominant representations from outside the school were from the world beyond the local neighbourhood, but this does not mean representations of the local were totally absent. They weren't! They were different. Whilst Forest School lifted the value of the local positively. In Coastal School the reverse was apparent. The view of the local community was typically one that was seen as needy and the local community was presented as benefitting from linkages to other places. There were few examples of the value in the local context for global conditions and no forms of interdependence were described where the local community was also actively contributing.

These findings relating to Forest and Coastal School were also looked at in respect of the data that have been produced at the other sites. What we found was that the differences in the spatially contextualised relations expressed about the local and the global seemed to relate to type of rural area. The schools that positioned themselves in the local neighbourhood through material and social references that valorised local conditions, values, practices and conditions positively, were typically from the more sparsely populated areas (Forest, Inland and Mountain School), whilst schools with few or negative references were from small industrial (and deindustrialising) communities (Coastal, River and Sea School).

The positive representations of the local took place through various poster or other forms of displays and by recurrent references to the local community and its traditions, values and history. One example came from Mountain School when the history teacher took the class to visit the local museum. Another came from Forest School and the present local labour market and the competences it required. Pupils in these schools were regularly given assignments that targeted local values or traditions.

The museum pedagogue held a lecture about local events during the Second World War, showed a film of local woman (with a heavy dialect) who was imprisoned in a Nazi camp in Norway, and we walked through the museum to see the local artefacts from the war. After this I ask some pupils about their... visit to the museum. They said that it was interesting and that they knew of some of the individuals presented, and that they got new information about them that they did not know before. One pupil said that it was especially thrilling that a path she to take in the mountains had been used by refugees and had even died there. (Mountain school, 21 October).

A local garage owner visited the pupils to talk about human interactions and communication ... to show that you must be able to communicate with tourists who arrive here and need to have their cars fixed. You should actually be able to accept 30 000 people each summer and provide good service and be able to communicate... (Forest school, March 26)

These local examples contrast with those from Coastal, River and Sea School in that the value of the local context is emphasized. This was also found at Inland school, where all pupils were to work with various aspects of the local trade and industry by focussing either on the local small industries (Tourism, Trade, Farming) or working with 'The Forest', in relation to different sub-themes like 'The forest and the economy', 'Biodiversity in the forest', 'Cultural environments of the forest', and 'The social values of the Forest'. The forest was a compulsory component on the curriculum and the teacher emphasized the importance of highlighting the favourable aspects of local forestry. The pupils also visited a local national park and worked with tasks related to National Parks in several subsequent lessons:

As a final written account of the work, the pupils are supposed to write an essay where they discussed why National Parks are important and what makes particular National Parks special [...]. They were given a booklet with information about National Parks and ...a recently published newspaper article about their local National Park. (Inland school, 14 October)

The unique assets of the local contexts that should be acknowledged not only by the locals, but also more widely were characteristically made into central parts of various assignments at Forest, Inland and Mountain Schools, where it was also common to ask pupils to learn about and highlight what was valuable in the area. In Forest School forestry and associated small industries were highlighted. In Mountain School tourism, culture and local history were highlighted, and in Inland School the region being ‘unique, biodiverse and rich in natural resources’ (Teacher) was stressed, along with a notion of the value and challenges of an untamed nature and sustainability.

These interactions seemed to leave their mark on pupils and were often also reworked by them in terms of their life objectives, which were more often oriented than in River or Sea School toward a local future. Local value was seen also in other ways. In home economics in Mountain School for instance the teacher made a point of (the locally accessible) moose meat being a more sustainable meat choice than (the nationally widely bred) cow, pig or chicken, and this theme of the value of local game was repeated also by pupils. In Forest school a special sports event in school ended with a joint banquet with moose meat provided by the local hunters and when the pupils were to observe an animal dissection in biology class, they were provided with a moose head, not a more common pigs head:

The teacher continues that the next lesson they will start a new theme in biology. ‘We will dissect a moose head. We will start with the eyes and then continue with the brain.’ The teacher however makes a reservation because she is dependent on the luck of hunters: ‘I have some contacts and hopefully they be able to put a moose down for us’. (Mountain school, 12 November)

The presence of themes of local nature in the sparsely populated areas accords with previous research. Rye (2006: 410) for instance concludes from a review of empirical research that there is a coherent structure of how people conceive of the rural across Europe. He wrote that “Nature/natural seems the most prominent feature of rurality and that rural life is conceived as being more ‘natural’ than life in the cities”. The pupils from the areas also took up this kind of positioning and identity, including interestingly also new arrivals (Rosvall, 2017).

*The local context and its resources: The material value of nature in education*

There is a strong joint theme of nature and the good associated with it in the schools in the sparsely populated areas. Rural life is presented as close to nature and natural, and both classroom observations and pupil interviews point to the strong appreciation of nature through tales and poems about access to forests, mountains and rivers, and the feeling of freedom associated with being in nature. Similarly to Stenbacka (2012: 70) there was a common language for expressing aspects of rural living such as peace, quiet and freedom.

These are also features that figure in the representations of rural in other schools, though less so and less spontaneously in the schools in the peri-urban industrial and deindustrialising areas like Coastal, River, and Sea School. But nature in the sparsely populated areas is also presented as important for material survival. Hunting in particular is referred to in the researched schools as part of rural people's livelihood, and is frequently put forward by pupils as a prominent activity in local adult society that is also central to their own leisure time preferences:

The pupils discuss the benefits of the forest, emphasising its peace and quietness, the clean air, and the fact that everyone has access to it. They also emphasise... how important hunting is in Sweden... One boy also talks about driving a snowmobile in the forest, saying that the best places to go snowmobiling are in the mountains and that driving snowmobile is less controlled in Sweden than in many other countries. Sports activities to practice in the forest are also mentioned. They include orienteering, horse-riding and running, spending time in the forest with the family and just having a cup of coffee or going fishing. The teacher asks the pupils to elaborate on the meaning of hunting more specifically. One boy answers: It provides food. Another boy answers: It limits the moose population. (Inland School, 9 October)

Nature is presented here as materially, culturally and socially important. But the economic and social values are also intertwined and the economic value of hunting is recurrently highlighted in relation to people's often rather modest incomes. The pupils have learnt about the different economic conditions in sparsely populated areas compared to the ones found in other spaces, where commodity forms of labour value proliferate through industrial

production (mining, forestry, woodpulp). Also the pupils from the peri-urban and intermediate rural areas do not seem to consider the value of the rural in the same material terms as those from sparsely populated areas do. They rather adopt the fetishized economic form of value of nature characteristic for metrocentric politics as identified in Farrugia (2014).

*Urban estrangement as an educational interpellation and a policy dilemma*

Understandings of the value, materiality, demands and realities of life in sparsely populated areas and the dependency on, rewards from and responsibilities toward nature that develop and are communicated in schools are sometimes put in contrast to urban life and its estrangement from nature. An urban inability to understand rural life and to fathom the complexity and potential harshness of it is present in the comments from informants. There is they suggest an inadequate urban relation to and understandings of nature in general and in the capital of Stockholm in particular, whose citizens; and politicians in particular; are regarded as not really having a serious conceptualisation of what nature really is.

Urban estrangement is also coupled to an urban romanticising of nature. For instance in Forest school there was frequent mention of urban misconceptions of how to handle the growing wolf population in Sweden. Those in power are said to argue for the preservation of wolves and decide accordingly, without knowing about the ‘reality’ of their presence. A comfortable and urban middle class who have never seen a wolf or the damage it causes take a stance on what the acceptable size of the wolf population should be ‘without understanding the dangers that rural people and domestic animals are subjected to’ (Pupil, Forest School). The double economic value of hunting is also misrepresented. ‘Urbanites only see this as sport or cruelty... but we don’t have so many shops here.... We hunt to get our food and what happens if the wolf takes it all’ (Pupil, Forest School).

Within the common emphasis on rural closeness and dependence on nature in school content in the sparsely populated areas a rather striking difference could be noticed with the schools in the peri-urban and rural intermediary communities. These schools made, as mentioned earlier, far fewer references to the local surroundings and their particular merits and impact, but in addition there were also fewer explicit challenges to the urban norm of for instance restricting hunting and closing small schools in sparsely populated areas. These come only from the sparsely populated rural areas. As one teacher there said, ‘I am very tired of city life values being taken as a norm and schools being seen as better just because there are more

pupils' (Teacher Mountain School).

Political decisions are clearly understood and communicated as having been steered by a metrocentric ideology, not scientific facts, local experience, or a well-grounded familiarity with rural life and rural spatial variations (Massey, 1994). Indeed according to Åberg-Bengtsson, (2009) scientific research seems to have only been heeded when it was in line with government ideas to globalise and urbanise the curriculum and its value base, or to close rural schools rather than keep them open. This seems to be detrimental to the educational opportunities available to and availed of by local youth in sparsely populated rural areas. If there is an upper secondary school in their local town or at commuting distance, it often has only a limited selection of programmes (Rönnlund, Rosvall and Johansson 2017). They also have fewer private supplier independent schools to choose from than do pupils in these other areas (Dovemark and Erixon Arreman, 2017; Lundahl, 2011). So even the new education politics of the education quasi-market seems to be failing rural areas, which seems to affect students with shortage in economic, social and cultural resources more than other (Rosvall, Rönnlund and Johansson 2018).

## **Discussion**

What the present article makes very clear is that sparsely populated areas and rural intermediary and small industrial communities do not express the same kind of relationships through school content to the national and global context nor the same relations to their local environment. Neither rural areas, the people in them, or their curriculum contents are in any way homogenous. There were some similarities though. Youth in both sparsely populated areas and in rural intermediary industrial and peri-urban areas related positively to the local context and their lives there in school. However, teaching in rural intermediary industrial and peri-urban areas also tended to buy into and reproduce aspects of the predominant urban discourse that emphasises global interrelations as important and that represents rurality as a needy problematic context. There was for instance often a clear encouragement from agents of the schools to pupils to leave the area for a better educational future and life opportunities and this was also picked up on by these young people.

To our knowledge this did not happen in the three schools in the sparsely populated areas, where both teachers and pupils positioned themselves more distinctly in relation to their neighbourhood through curriculum content selections, and presented their neighbourhoods in

rather appreciative terms that highlight the presence of resources above the difficulties of living in a dwindling industrial economy. This did not mean that these agents failed to see advantages with young people getting a good high school education that allowed them the opportunity to study further, if they wish to, and they also realized that young people might have to leave the local place, at least temporarily, to fulfill this ambition. But nature itself was a point of value and this was represented in school in curriculum content and everyday interactions. Nature was associated with material value, pleasure, survival, leisure, freedom and a natural way of life. It was however definitely not an idyll that was described. In fact local voices almost always presented the notion of the idyll in relation to a *critique* of an urban estrangement from nature that had gained global precedence above the more realist local portrayal. Economic life was described as harder than in other areas and decisions by politicians from outside the region were described as being dislocated from local consciousness and problematic for local life-style and survival.

Coming from a rural community was thus described in all six areas in relation to an urban discourse. But there were two different urban discourses with distinctly different valorisations that were related to: one by the schools in more sparsely populated areas (Forest, Inland, Mountain) and one by the schools from the three other areas (Coastal, River, Sea). The first discourse is a discourse about urban failure, either in terms of urban inability to cope with nature or to understand it, as with regard to its romanticising of nature, or in terms of political metro-centricity and urban middle-class self-assumed sense of moral and intellectual superiority. Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) also pointed to this problem. Politics are being made based on distanced and inaccurate misrepresentations of rural needs and conditions through a middle class metrocentricity that works against the interests of communities not for them (Balfour et al., 2008; Leyshon, 2008).

In the sparsely populated rural areas individuals perform and describe a way of life, a culture, where nature is a link between people and their surroundings that is fundamental to the physical and cultural survival of the place and the people in it. These things are given a place in school content too and can be seen in interactions, in local school interiors, and in the curriculum (Vigo & Soriano, 2014). Individual pupils, school practices and content differ within the sparsely populated areas with respect to type of local conditions and local activities in this respect. There is a generally closer relationship expressed to local conditions and a reliance on them is described in school content. In the more populated per-urban rural areas

there is a different interdependence expressed in relation to economic production. More extended levels of differentiation are expressed based explicitly a more complex local division of labour and the fusion of markets. A value is described too in relation to the growth of cities and interdependency in social and global economic bonds and these things are also specifically reproduced in the local curriculum.

Some key themes can be identified as intertwined within the disclosures of the article in these respects. They include a global urban middle class hegemony and a policy inaccuracy for sparsely populated rural areas and their people that is related to it. As Corbett (2015) describes things, the global middle class urban hegemony also creates and then uses a negative imagery and pre-associations of place and space against the interests of a concept of an active rurality as a value in its own right in and in relation to schooling processes there. Idealisations are produced on the one hand and discourses of cultural deficit concerning the people from rural places on the other, both of which lead to a politics that can add weight to a further economic and social hollowing out of these regions. As described by Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) this kind of hollowing out includes the merger and closure of schools and increases in fiscal and temporal costs for rural youth to gain an academic education with a high exchange rate value. Thus, official politics not only fail to make positive identifications of rural conditions, they actually significantly misrepresent people, the characteristics of the places they live in, and their interests, skill sets, and commitments (Corbett, 2015).

Productive capital in rural areas in Sweden has historically been associated with agriculture, forestry, mining, and timber and woodpulp manufacturing, and what we have identified is that whilst these productive forces remain important in any given rural area, spatial vitality seems to be identified in terms of the local production economy and its position within a global network of capitalistic relations, and examples of the local production economy will often be found in school content. However, when there is an absence of agricultural, mining, or production industry other foundations of spatial value need to be found to maintain an understanding of local places as being vital social and cultural spaces and we have identified different features in these respects.

The identified features include tourism, recreation and hunting (sometimes in combination), supplementary economic activities (sometimes also connected to hunting) and they challenge typical ideas of rurality as concerned with isolation, poverty, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, racism, exclusion and, and in particular, passivity. Moreover, we



also identify different educational content inclusions corresponding to them and, as Åberg-Bengtsson (2009), we also begin to suspect that the negative valuations of rurality are semi-fictional hegemonic products of modernity and postmodernity that are ideologically imposed on rural spaces. They represent in this sense another aspect of industrial and post-industrial political metrocentricity (Massey, 1994; Farrugia, 2014) that seldom construct rurality as constituting dynamic possibilities that have their own values independent of urban conditions (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014). What we indicate is that local people can both transcend this hegemony and construct a positive concept of the value of rural spaces and carve out a meaningful place for education in relation to these local value sets (Balfour et al, 2008; Hargreaves et al, 2009; Vigo & Soriano, 2014).

The ideologies of the big school as better and the urban middle-class as cleverer are part of this problem (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). But also other complex difficulties that face the rural reach have emerged among the indications and implications from our research. The first of these involves the continual need to consider and counter current historically structurally formed forms of class cultural superiority that can work as a hegemonic force to help sustain the social reproduction of ideologies of difference with material consequences. These cultural practices are ingrained in our political, institutional and legal structures and are almost quite literally taken for granted (Öhrn, 2012). They are embodied in our schools through the content, structure and workings of the official curriculum and their presence and current domination of official educational codes make any claims toward educational justice and fairness in our educational system questionable.

These things can be sensed very easily from the present study. Ideology and social representations/discourses have been identified that favour urban political models and curriculum modalities that reproduce them. But also important is the ways they can be and are countered in living educational spaces and processes, through conscious and unconscious acts of resistance. The message from this for education politics is that the dominance in education policy of (global) metrocentric values and middle class educational codes and ideologies is a problem for sparsely populated areas and the pupils there, but that adults and children with strong links to rural communities are still able to define value in terms of local conditions through loyalties that exist in relation to local culture rather than national authority systems. These loyalties can be seized upon and used in a more progressive curriculum that is better geared to and driven by local values and local knowledge (Balfour et al, 2008; Corbett, 2015;

Vigo & Soriano, 2014).

Official representations often stubbornly distort the real conditions and needs of rural communities (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). These conditions today include the material hollowing out of regions, capital flight, movement of commodified labour, and negative representations of places and their people. They are apparent in many rural areas and despite (or indeed even perhaps because of them) extended economic demands are imposed on rural parents through education centralization effects. Parents in rural areas; particularly remote ones; more often belong to low income levels and they are now having to pay for their children to attend a school further away in terms of both travel time and the social distance of educational content to home conditions and values, with this inducing a double problem of education justice (Balfour et al, 2008). Rural children's future education plans have been identified to be in line with the economic realities of their neighbourhoods and their families, and although parents are reluctant to talk about it, the fact is that the poorest among them simply may not be able to afford to bear any further increases in their fiscal responsibilities for the education of their children. What price then the Swedish model of an equitable standard of freely available public comprehensive education that is easily accessible for all when (economically poor) parents have to foot the bill of an increasingly alienated/ing education for their children?

## **Conclusions**

The rural in relation to rural education, be this in terms of politics or experience, is rural precisely in terms of its relationship to three dynamic variables according to Balfour et al (2008), and in line with Corbett (2015), Farrugia (2014) and Massey (1994). We have described **them** as forces, agencies, and resources that are lived and intervene in education processes as social factors that account for both behavioural variations and differences in relation to the selection and treatment of local content in educational places (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014). **They** are described in relation to the conditions of economic and cultural production, the convictions of value that agents generate, and the push vs pull forces they may exact and are visible in terms of how three of the schools from three sparsely populated areas showed recurrent references to the local communities and their traditions and values in school activities and talk. These schools explicitly positioned themselves in the local neighbourhood through their discourse, with strong discursive strands connected to the concept of local value.

This isn't seen to be the case in areas that were once more emphatically tied to manufacturing industries. In these places the hegemony of metro-centricity is more often reinforced than challenged and a sense of an experience of a loss of local value prevails over the presence of senses of an experience of alternative value forms to those of the global economy. This is also visible in terms of how the local and the global are included in school content and everyday school discourses and we suspect that it can and does have effects on school motivation and behaviour and our call in educational terms is in this sense one for a rural-place-conscious education politics, which links to the actual conditions of rural lives rather than relationships to the urban domain and the current hegemony of global economic productivity (Bagley and Hillyard, 2014; Vigo & Soriano, 2014). We believe this could be of value in relation to countering what Corbett (2015) and Balfour et al. (2008) have described as a diseased political discourse in relation to the values and characteristics of rural life.

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