Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Volume 34 Issue 2
July 2024

SPERA

Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Volume 34, Issue 2 July 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial: Considering Diversity in Educational Research that Explores School-Community Relationships i-iv
Laurence Lasselle and Robyn Henderson

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

The Complexity of Managing Diverse Communication Channels in Family-School Relations as Seen by Parents and Schools 1-18
Sonja Beeli-Zimmermann, Melodie Burri, Anne-Sophie Ewald and Evelyne Wannack

Organising Inclusive Transitions in Vocational Education and Training in a Rural Community in Norway 19-36
Anna Rapp and Agneta Knutas

Educational Practices and Teaching Materials in Spanish Rural Schools from the Territorial Dimension 37-53
Núria Carrete-Marín, Laura Domingo-Peñafiel and Núria Simó-Gil

Bridging the Gap Between Community Schools and Rural Communities in Nepal Using Participatory Action Research 54-70
Salpa Shrestha, Megh Raj Dangal

Critical Pedagogies for Reappraising Indigenous Knowledge and Diversity in Rural Peru: The Voices of Two Rural Teachers 71-86
Silvia Espinal-Meza

Space, Place and Memories: Life Narratives About the Constitution of Subjects as Transforming Agents in the Periphery of São Paulo in Brazil 87-105
Elizabeth Braga

RURAL CONNECTIONS

Thinking about Rural Education and Binary Logic 106-112
Anne Paterson, Loreto Abarzúa-Silva, Moch. Imam Machfudi and Robyn Henderson

Responding to Remote, Rural and Regional Tertiary Education Needs: A Conversation Between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access 113-124
John McKendrick, Fiona Nash, John Guenther, Laurence Lasselle, Melyssa Fuqua, Carmel Hall

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Azano, A. P., Biddle, C., & Eppley, K. (Eds.). (2022). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States*. Bloomsbury Academic. 125-132
John Guenther

ISSN 1839-7387

The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* is the Journal of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). It serves as an international medium for educators and researchers with an interest in rural education

SPERA
Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Considering Diversity in Educational Research that Explores School-Community Relationships

Laurence Lasselle
University of St Andrews, Scotland
laurence.lasselle@st-andrews.ac.uk

Robyn Henderson
University of Southern Queensland
robyn.henderson@unisq.edu.au

Abstract

This special issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* explores school-community relationships from a diversity perspective. The contributions originated in presentations delivered as part of the European Educational Research Association's Network 14 sessions at the annual European Conference in Educational Research in August 2023. The papers present perspectives from a wide range of contexts: from Asia and Australia to Europe and South America.

Keywords: *communities, diversity, rurality, schooling*

Editorial

In this special issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, international scholars provide insights about school-community relationships in rural contexts by considering the broad concept of diversity in educational research. The origins of this special issue lie in the Special Call of the European Educational Research Association Network 14 for the European Conference in Educational Research held in Glasgow, Scotland, in August 2023. Network 14, one of the 34 networks of the European Educational Research Association, provides a forum for the development of research-informed knowledge in the field of Education, with a specific interest in the relationships between communities, families, and schools. The call unified the network's key research mission with the conference theme: valuing diversity. It invited contributions on school-community relationships in all locations, examining diversity as a driver and/or mediator for change. A selection of those contributions is published in this special issue.

Indeed, this special issue gathers papers that explore where diversity matters (e.g., educational settings, place, space) and highlights how it challenges homogeneous systems (cf. Biesta et al., 2022). Our collection of international scholars come from Australia, Brazil, Chile, Indonesia, Nepal, Norway, Peru, Scotland, Spain, and Switzerland. They share insights into (1) how cooperation or partnerships between schools and/or other organisations can be initiated and sustained to foster the development of more inclusive communities, (2) how homogeneous systems adversely affect school-community relationships, and (3) how the promotion of diversity may have a positive influence on these relationships.

These contributions often build on existing work. They challenge commonsense understandings about binaries relating to place (Corbett & White, 2014; Cuervo, 2016), move beyond deficit notions of groups to ensure more inclusive educational and community approaches (Gouwens &

Henderson, 2021), and problematise notions of community, place and identity (Pini & Mayes, 2015; Tatebe, 2021). Some rethink and rewrite curriculum (Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021; McPherson et al., 2017), and all promote opportunities for teaching and learning across communities (Hogarth, 2019).

The first article, the *Complexity of Managing Diverse Communication Channels in Family-School Relations in Switzerland as Seen by Parents and Schools*, give us some insights on the interaction between parents and schools via digital technologies in eight schools, including two rural schools, across Switzerland in autumn/winter 2021. Although Sonja Beeli Zimmermann, Melodie Burri, Anne-Sophie Ewald and Evelyne Wannack record that the diversity of communication channels between schools and families is particularly embraced by parents. They show that communication remains "*predominantly … one-way information (schools informing parents) … rather than dialogue,*" regardless of the location of the school.

In their article *Organising Inclusive Transitions in VET Education in a Rural Community in Norway*, Anna Rapp and Agneta Knutas allow us to reflect on school-community relationships in rural settings. In Norway (as elsewhere in the world), transitions from education to work are often perceived as more challenging in rural areas than in urban areas, due to limited resources. This perception is questioned by the researchers in their analysis of the interaction of the world of education and that of work in a village located in central Norway. It is from their systematic examination of the diverse forms of collaborations among the "*actors in the network*" (i.e., the students, the school, the training office and the local companies or institutions) that they are able to explain how "*the organising of rural VET supported students' crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation.*"

The article that follows contributes to the literature that stresses the importance of considering elements of the territorial dimension in curricular materials to allow "*rural students, teachers and their communities to feel represented*" in these materials. In their article *Educational Practices and Teaching Materials in Spanish Rural Schools from the Territorial Dimension*, Núria Carrete-Marín, Laura Domingo-Peñafiel and Núria Simó-Gil highlight that this consideration exists, but it "*is not identified as a priority*" in the survey responses of Spanish rural teachers. In addition, they point out that the lack of materials containing local knowledges and inadequate training may prevent the delivery of this desirable curriculum.

Salpa Shrestha and Megh Raj Dangal, in their paper entitled *Bridging the Gap Between Communities in Nepal using Participatory Action Research*, document how education equity and social justice in a Nepalese rural community have been fostered from a collaboration between some parents of out-of-school children and an academic team from Kathmandu University over a period of nine months. They detail the stages of the process, allowing them to highlight not only the spectrum of perspectives, experiences and cultural nuances among the community, but also how the collective action of these parents debunked discourse surrounding educational deficits and raised community engagement and awareness in education matters.

The final two articles transport us to South America. In her article *Critical Pedagogies for Reappraising Indigenous Knowledge and Diversity in Rural Peru: The Voices of Two Rural Teachers*, Silvia Espinal-Meza invites us to explore the practices of social justice through critical pedagogies from the narratives of two teachers located in rural schools in highly disadvantaged Peruvian places. She shows how the use of the Indigenous language (Quechua) in activities involving the arts, dance and storytelling at schools could help students, parents and communities to value and reappraise their cultural heritage. By doing so, she gives us the opportunity to think about how (local) practices can "*embrace diversity*" offered by the place and "*break traditional ways of teaching and learning within the complex scenarios of educational inequalities*" in the spirit of Darder (2015), Freire (1974) and Freire and Macedo (1995).

Elizabeth dos Santos Braga gives us a vivid appreciation of place and space in the periphery of São Paulo, Brazil, where rural and urban are not separate, but are overlapping concepts. In her article entitled *Space, Place and Territory: Life Narratives about the Constitution of Subjects as Transforming Agents*, she analyses the dynamics of transformation through the excerpts of interviews with two local activists. She makes us aware of how their experiences and perceptions of the place have converted them into environmental agents or transformative activists as per Stetsenko (2017).

The Rural Connections piece, written by Anne Paterson, Loreto Abarzúa-Silva, Moch. Imam Machfudi and Robyn Henderson, captures the richness of an encounter between four researchers from different parts of the world. Their exchange resonates very well with all of us willing to go beyond the urban-rural dichotomy and to think about how rural education should be represented in research. Their shared experiences and reflections remind us about how the diversity of positive narratives offered by rural education research can debunk deficit discourses.

The following article in this issue is the transcript of a conversation between the Regional Education Commissioner, Ms Fiona Nash, and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access, Professor John McKendrick, hosted by the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* at the end of February 2024. From their perspectives, both candidly discussed the importance of responding to the tertiary education needs of regional, rural and remote communities.

Finally, in this special issue, John Guenther has written the review of *the Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* by Azano et al. (2022). This handbook is an engaging collection of scholarly works on rural education in the United States. It provides an accessible representation of current and emerging trends.

To summarise, the contributing authors explore some of the challenges and opportunities of working with diversity in rural education across a wide range of contexts. Although their insights are specific to the particular contexts of their research, there are several synergies across the articles. These offer food for thought for building effective relationships and collaborations, fostering communication and dialogue, and finding ways of valuing and using local knowledges and the cultural and linguistic heritage of rural areas.

References

Azano, A. P., Eppley, K., & Biddle, C. (2022). *The Bloomsbury handbook of rural education in the United States*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Biesta, G., Wainwright, E., & Aldridge, D. (2022). Editorial: A case for diversity in educational research and educational practice. *British Educational Research Journal*, *48*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3777

Corbett, M. & White S. (2014). *Doing educational research in rural settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions*. Routledge.

Cuervo, H. (2016). *Understanding social justice in rural education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Darder, A. (2014). *Freire and education*. Routledge.

Freire, P. (1974) Education for critical consciousness. Continuum.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1995). A dialogue: Culture, language and race. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(3), 377–403.

Gouwens, J. A., & Henderson, R. (2021). Rethinking deficit discourses in education through rural education research and the concept of querencia. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.300

Hasnat, M. A., & Greenwood, J. (2021). Schools celebrating place and community: A study of two rural schools in Bangladesh and New Zealand. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 81–95. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.307

Hogarth, M. D. (2019). Racism, cultural taxation and the role of an Indigenous teacher in rural schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *29*(1), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v29i1.194

McPherson, A., Roberts, P., & Downes, N. (2017). Rural-regional sustainability in the Murray Darling Basin: School/community difference and the politics of water in rural Australia. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *27*(2), 93–107. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v27i2.121

Pini, B., & Mayes, J. (2015). Australian rural education research: A geographical perspective. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 25(3), 26–35. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v25i3.101

Stetsenko, A. (2017). *The transformative mind: Expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education*. Cambridge University Press.

Tatebe, J. (2021). The "new" rural: Small and rural schools' influence on regional urban developments. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.301

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

The Complexity of Managing Diverse Communication Channels in Family-School Relations in Switzerland as Seen by Parents and Schools

Sonja Beeli-Zimmermann
PHBern, Switzerland
sonja.beeli@phbern.ch

Anne-Sophie Ewald
PHBern, Switzerland
anne-sophie.ewald@phbern.ch

Melodie Burri
PHBern, Switzerland
melodie.burri@phbern.ch

Evelyne Wannack
PHBern, Switzerland
evelyne.wannack@phbern.ch

Abstract

The importance of family-school relations and their positive effects on children's developments is well documented. They can be shaped predominantly by one-way (schools informing parents) or two-way (a partnership approach) communication. When fostering these relationships, schools and families engage on individual and collective levels, using a variety of tools such as text messages, emails, phone calls or personal contacts. A growing body of literature suggests that digital technologies are changing the way families and schools communicate and digital media contacts are often considered to be more immediate and convenient. In this contribution, we present findings from a Swiss project focusing on school websites. Using data from interviews with 33 families and personnel in eight schools (principals, teachers and other staff), we explore how family-school communication is embedded in specific contexts, including rural contexts, and takes place through diverse channels. While parents make use of and appreciate diverse communication channels, schools' choices of communication channels are often related to specific functions. Overall, we found that one-way information rather than dialogue still dominates family-school relations.

Keywords: *family-school relations, communication, digital media, interviews*

Introduction

Parents matter, not only when it comes to providing children and youth with a home, but also with regard to supporting their learning at different ages (see e.g., Kilpatrick et al., 2020, for post-school education). To this end, parents also communicate and engage with schools. From schools' perspectives, managing these contacts is a key task, apart from organising lessons. Technological developments have contributed to increasingly diverse communication channels. Apart from notes on paper, face-to-face meetings and phone calls, schools can now reach parents through their websites, emails, text messages or specific communication apps. Each medium possesses specific qualities, some being more suitable for one-way communication by effectively sending information to large groups, with others enabling protected asynchronous exchanges. In this article, we aim to present some answers to questions raised by the availability of these tools, namely how and why families and schools in rural areas and elsewhere employ different communication channels.

We report findings from an exploratory project which initially focused on school websites as one communication channel. However, as one of our key insights was that school websites take on specific functions depending on the availability of other communication channels, we will

elaborate more generally on how the diversity of communication channels is viewed and managed by both, families and schools. We first present general background information on family-school relations. We then describe the context of Switzerland where the study was implemented and elaborate on the research design. While the findings present both families' and schools' perspectives separately, they will be discussed in an integrated manner.

Family-school Relations

There are many terms used to describe family-school interfaces. Some refer generally to family-school relations, connections or links (e.g., Guo, 2018); others talk about parental involvement (e.g., Paseka & Byrne, 2020), parental engagement (e.g., Goodall, 2013), parental participation (Helgøy & Homme, 2017), and family-school partnership (e.g., Epstein, 2010). Many of these terms refer to specific aspects of relationships, such as differentiating between parents' activities at home or school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) or whether parents have a voice with regard to their child or school matters more generally (Epstein, 2010). One of the most influential frameworks encompassing many of these aspects is Epstein's (1987, 2010) conceptualisation of schools, families (and communities) as different, overlapping, spheres of influence. With this framework, Epstein argues that we can analyse relationships at both institutional (e.g., when a school sends information to all parents) and individual (e.g., when a parent and a teacher meet) levels. Based on numerous studies, Epstein furthermore describes six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2010). We are most interested in the communication aspect, which is defined as "*design[ing] effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress*" (Epstein, 2010, p. 85).

The distinction between one-way and two-way communication is an important one. Goodall (2016) called it a distinction between communication and dialogue. More specifically, she described communication as simply giving or receiving information, whereas dialogue requires active participation from both parties. On a practical level, this distinction is relevant for digital media where technological characteristics can be used to enable or disable two-way communication within one application. For instance, if a website does not contain features such as a contact form or a chat function, two-way communication is not possible. Similarly, settings in messenger apps can be adjusted so that information can be sent to large groups, but group members cannot answer back to everyone. The same tool can therefore be used for both one-way and two-way communication. On a conceptual level, this distinction relates to changing aspects of family-school relations towards more equitable approaches, such as parental engagement or family-school partnerships where two-way communication is considered a prerequisite.

There is a plethora of empirical work on the use of digital media for family-school relations focusing on both different tools and different groups, including principals' social media use (Mazza, 2013), teachers' willingness to use text messages (Ho et al., 2013), characteristics of email (Thompson, 2008), blog-based interventions (Ozcinar & Ekizoglu, 2013), and school websites (Piller et al., 2023; Taddeo & Barnes, 2016). Using diverse communication channels for family-school relations potentially changes their characteristics, which have been described as infrequent, occurring at designated times, and initiated by teachers upon problems with students (Thompson, 2008). Messages, emails or websites potentially make schools more accessible by allowing for asynchronous communication. It is therefore not surprising that many studies found that a selected tool in a specific context affects family-school relations positively (e.g., Mazza, 2013) or has the potential to involve families that might not usually interact frequently with schools (e.g., Goodall, 2016). However, the potential of such tools is rarely fully exploited (e.g., Taddeo & Barnes, 2016), with beliefs held by both parents and teachers being identified as potential barriers (Macia Bordalba & Garreta Bochaca, 2019).

It is worth noting, that the geographic location (rural, suburban, urban) was often a criterion for schools to be selected for a sample in these studies; yet researchers rarely referred to differences in location when discussing findings (except when school choice was an issue, e.g., Gillece & Eivers, 2018). Personal characteristics and access to specific technologies were more frequently identified as key factors (e.g., Mazza, 2013). One exception to this is a study from Finland, where Kuusimäki et al. (2019) found a more positive appraisal of digital communication by rural parents than their urban counterparts. Apart from describing family-school relations, empirical studies often refer to media selection when studying specific technologies, such as the technology acceptance model (Ho et al., 2013) or media richness theory (e.g., Thompson et al., 2015). However, as different technologies continue to penetrate everyday practices, a more encompassing perspective is required. This is offered by the concept of mediatisation, which is used to capture both the quantitative increase and omnipresence of technical communication media as well as the qualitative changes that their use causes in the construction of social reality (Hepp et al., 2018).

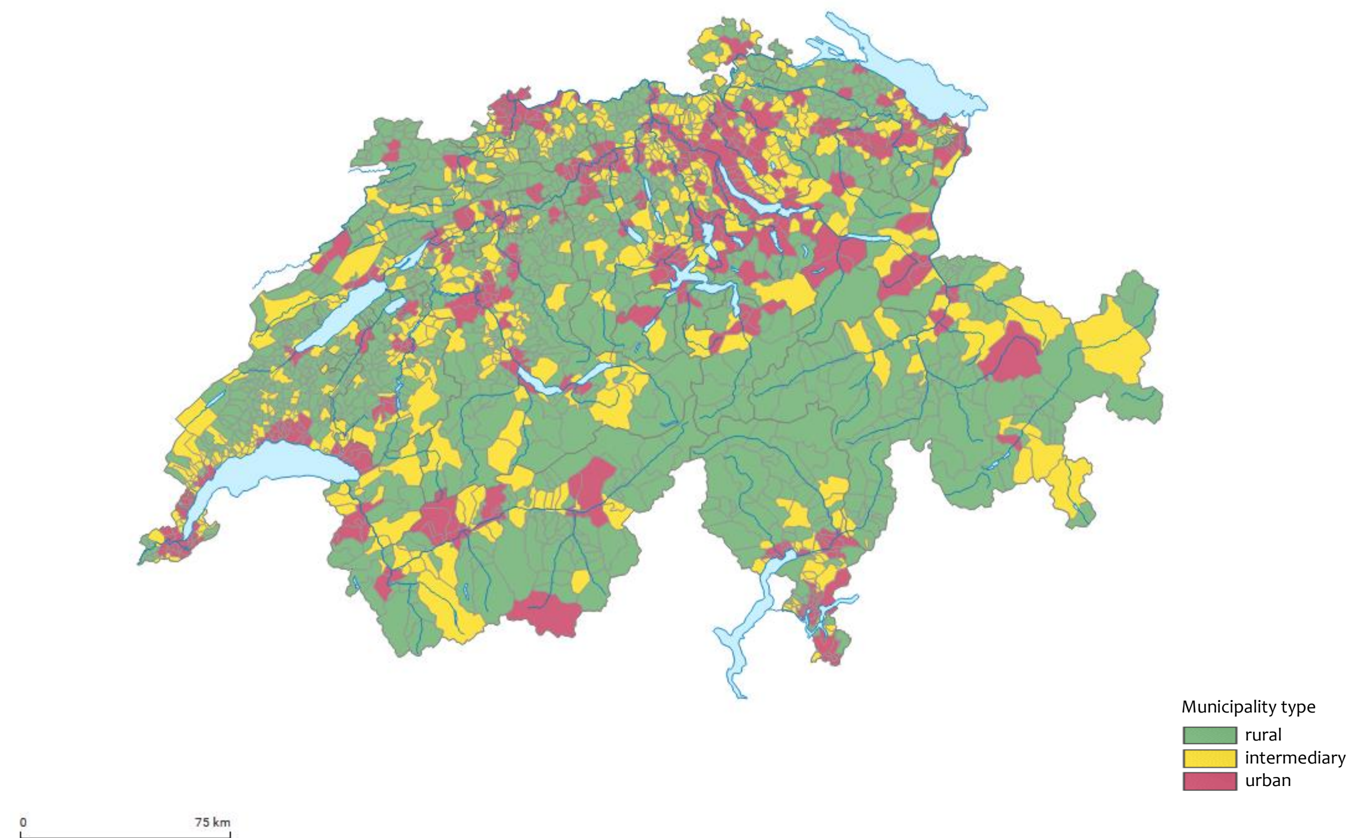
Based on this background, we formulated our research questions: 1. How do schools develop and maintain their websites? 2. How are these websites used and viewed by families? However, these questions, inspired by the idea of media selection, turned out to be inadequate to capture and understand the complexity of diverse communication channels, particularly for the families. We therefore aim to identify other aspects which should be addressed in further research, to arrive at a deeper understanding of family-school relations in times of ongoing mediatisation. However, before elaborating on the methods used and the related findings, we will briefly describe the context in which our study was implemented.

The Context of Switzerland

Switzerland, a small, landlocked country with four official languages, is located between Germany, France, Italy, Austria, and Liechtenstein. Its three distinct geographical regions are the Alps (60% of the country's surface), the Central Plateau (30%), and the Jura. The Central Plateau runs from Lake Geneva in the southwest to Lake Constance in the northeast and is the most densely populated region. There are no large cities with more than one million inhabitants; yet most of the population of 8.7 million live in urban areas.

Figure 1 shows Switzerland's municipalities (local government areas) based on their rural/intermediary/urban characteristics. All red surfaces indicate urban municipalities, yellow ones refer to intermediary, and green ones to rural municipalities. This typology takes both morphological (size, density) and functional (commuter flows) characteristics into account. Intermediary municipalities show some of both rural and urban characteristics, for example few inhabitants and many employment opportunities so people commute to that community. As of 2024, 49% of Switzerland's municipalities were assigned to the rural type compared to 24% marked as urban (Federal Statistical Office, 2024).Figure 1 also illustrates the small-scale character of Switzerland. Its territory of almost 41,300 square kilometres corresponds to two thirds of that of Tasmania; however, there are over 2,100 municipalities organised in 26 cantons, as the federal states are called. This number has decreased significantly in the past (424 municipalities disappeared between 2010 and 2021) as rural municipalities have merged mainly in order to cut costs (Steiner et al., 2021).

Figure 1: ***Switzerland's Municipalities According to Rural, Urban and Intermediary Type (Federal Statistical Office, 2023a)***



Source: https://www.atlas.bfs.admin.ch/maps/13/fr/17847_17846_3191_227/27617.html

As in Australia, political and legislative power is distributed across three levels (in Switzerland called national, cantonal and municipal) with the municipal level being accorded as much autonomy as possible. This distinct federal structure is also visible in the field of education: 26 cantons account for compulsory education resulting in as many different systems. Overall, 95% of Swiss students attend state schools and complete compulsory education in the municipality in which they live (The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). School choice, therefore, is an almost non-existing phenomenon, an important factor when it comes to family-school relations. Compulsory education spans 11 years (H1-H11) with the final three years at lower secondary being completed at different academic levels, based on students' performances and intended career paths.

The cantons coordinate their work at the national level in a political body called The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education; yet many cantons delegate the duty to establish and maintain schools to the local municipality. The lack of national legislation and decentralisation leads to considerable autonomy, particularly regarding schools' legal and financial situations. Municipalities contribute more than 50% of public expenditure for compulsory education (Federal Statistical Office, 2023b). Therefore, local school boards and municipal councils representing the public and constituting the governing body play an important role when it comes to providing financial resources and strategic guidance. These bodies generally consist of non-educational professionals and tend to be politically oriented which particularly in smaller and more rural municipalities may translate into conservative politics (Huber, 2011). The introduction of school principals as professionals managing schools has only taken place recently and many stakeholders are still in a process of clarifying their roles, as their different tasks often overlap (Huber, 2011). Family-school relations constitute typical task to

illustrate this ongoing clarification of leadership roles: Is, for example, introducing a school app a strategic decision and therefore in the responsibility of the school board or is it an operational one and therefore taken by a principal?

When it comes to family-school relations, further points are worth mentioning. Families and schools are traditionally considered separate spheres in Switzerland (Ho & Vasarik Staub, 2019). This separation is observed, for example, in the practice that many children go home for lunch, particularly in rural areas, as parents have been traditionally considered responsible for their upbringing, and school for teaching (Schüpbach, 2010). There is little national legislation or regulation addressing this aspect of the educational system, contrary for example to Australia, where a national family-school partnership framework exists (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018). The only stipulation at the national level addressing family-school relations is contained in the Swiss Civil Code which states that "*parents must co-operate as appropriate with school authorities*" (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2024, Article 302).

Only a limited number of cantons stipulate specific, more intense forms of participation for parents; for example, a parents' council (Villiger et al., 2020). Schools are not required to maintain a website or publish certain information online, as is for example the case in the United Kingdom (UK Department for Education, 2023). Regarding the use of digital media more generally, Switzerland can be considered to resemble German schools. Breiter and Ruhe (2018) found that they rely more on paper-based communication than English schools. Online platforms are mainly used for communication between staff and students, with an increase in their usage for communication with parents due to the COVID pandemic (S-Clever-Konsortium, 2021). The current technological trend, however, is the introduction of school specific messenger applications to communicate with parents. In the rest of this article, these are referred to as school apps.

Methods

To study the phenomenon of school websites from the perspectives of families and schools, we developed a two-phased research design. In the first step, we identified 40 schools in four cantons located in Switzerland's Central Plateau. We used a combination of probability and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) with the aim of having a maximally diverse sample, in order to capture as many aspects of the phenomenon—school websites—as possible.

As Swiss schools are run by their respective municipalities, the type (rural/intermediary/urban) was one of our key dimensions. Rural municipalities tend to have smaller schools: only 3% of rural schools have more than 200 students, whereas 80% of urban schools have more than 200 students (Federal Statistical Office, 2021). Moreover, there are fewer schools at lower secondary level in rural municipalities and locations tend to be further apart, therefore taking longer to reach. Other key dimensions were the schools' size and location (number of grades taught, number of locations) and the appearance of the website (e.g., the way it was linked to the municipalities' website or whether it contained specific elements such as a search function).

After an initial analysis of the 40 schools' websites, we chose eight schools for in-depth investigation. These were selected with the aim of having a maximally diverse sample. We have named them Schools A to H. At these schools, we conducted problem-centred interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with people from the school or municipality who were responsible for the school website, and semi-standardised interviews with parents. We contacted school principals in the selected schools with information about our project, asking for an interview with the person responsible for the school website. In five schools this was the school principal; in one school it was the principal and a teacher; in another it was a teacher, and in the last school it was administrative staff (a person from the municipality and the school secretary). Parents were

recruited in cooperation with the principals who sent out information about the project. Interested parents could then contact the project team. Parents from seven schools participated as School G discontinued to be involved in the project (see Table 1).

The school interviews (n = 9) were conducted in person in autumn/winter of 2021 and lasted between 30 and 100 minutes. They covered three broad areas: creation and maintenance of the school's website, specific aspects, and general topics such as the school's approach to family-school relations or its overall integration of technology. The parent interviews (n = 34) were conducted between winter 2021 and spring 2022 over the phone or using video telephony. They lasted between 15 and 45 minutes and covered three areas: general information about the family, the family's communication with the school, and its usage of the website. The interviews' dynamic was therefore inverted: the family interviews started with general information and moved to the website as a specific aspect of school communication, whereas the school interviews started with a focus on the website and then moved to more general issues such as family-school relations.

On some occasions, two people took part in one interview; for example, an incoming and outgoing principal or a father and a mother. This accounted for the considerable differences in length and the number of interviews. All interviewees were informed about the project and use of their data, and they participated voluntarily. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed manually. The authors translated all interview quotes included in the Findings section from Swiss German into English.

The transcripts were analysed using a combination of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The former, being more standardised, was mainly applied to the parents' interviews which were more structured, whereas the latter was used for the school interviews. The different approaches are also reflected in the presentation of findings. While the families' perspectives are rather descriptive, focusing on varying aspects reported in relation to their communication practices, the schools' perspective includes the description of broader themes, namely adaptation and leadership.

Table 1: ***Key Characteristics of the Sub-samples at the Time of the Interviews (n = 8 Schools)***

School	Canton	Municipality Type	Grades[a]	Number of Locations	School Interview Partners[b]	Parent Interview Partners[c]	Use of School App[d]	Parents' Council
A	Aargau	Intermediary	H1–H11	2	2 (principal & head of primary level/teacher)	3 mothers	Being introduced	No
B	Aargau	Intermediary	H1–H11	3	1 (principal)	3 mothers	Yes	No
C	Bern	Rural	H1–H8	3	1 (principal)	3 fathers 2 mothers	Yes	No
D	Bern	Intermediary	H9–H11	1	1 (teacher)	5 mothers 2 fathers	No	No
E	Bern	Rural	H9–H11	1	2 (school secretary & communication personnel from the municipality	4 mothers 1 father	Being introduced	No
F	Bern	Urban	H1–H8	5	1 (principal)	7 mothers 1 father	No	Yes
G	Fribourg	Urban	H1–H8	1	1 (principal)	---[f]	No (ongoing tests in other schools in the city)	Yes
H	Solothurn	Intermediary	H1–H11	5	2 (outgoing & incoming principals)	2 mothers 2 fathers	No	In 2 of the 5 locations

[a] H1-H11 indicates that a school offers all grades of compulsory schooling including two years of kindergarten (H1-H2). Accordingly, H1-H8 includes kindergarten and primary school, whereas H9-H11 includes the three years of the lower secondary level.
[b] We have nine interviews with 11 individuals representing eight schools.
[c] We have 34 interviews with 35 individuals representing 33 families.
[d] All schools used parent-teacher meetings, emails, phone calls, text messages and paper-based information for communication with parents, hence these channels are not listed separately.
[e] Due to the discontinuation of School G in the project, no interviews with parents were conducted.

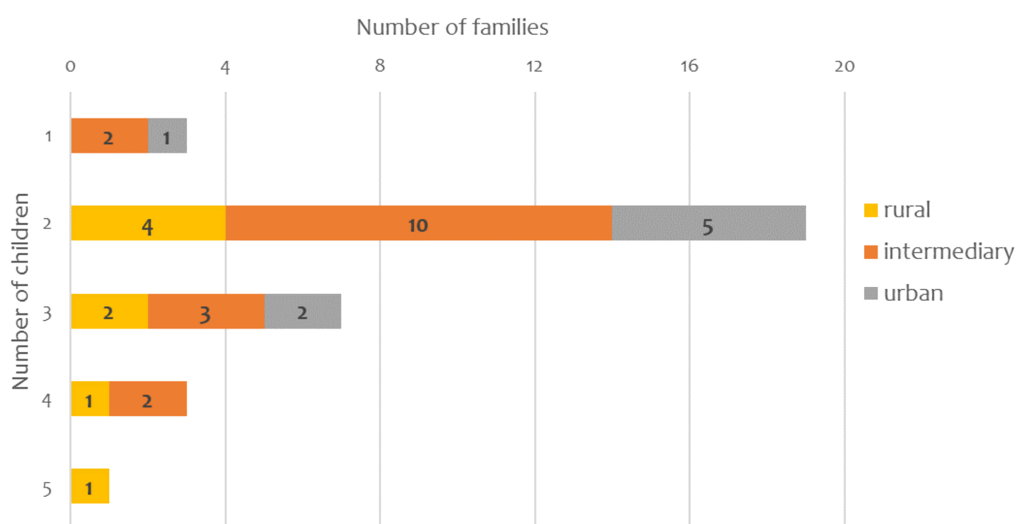
Findings

The Families' Perspective

Since the parents participating in our project volunteered after receiving information from their schools, they cannot be considered representative. The sample reflects diverse family constellations and is therefore well suited to provide insights into a variety of communication practices. While they reported differing uses of media, they all possessed digital devices and made use of those in their interactions with schools. Generally, information from schools that was accessible via smartphones (be it through a school app, the website, messages or emails) was highly appreciated, as it could be accessed from anywhere and facilitated action at short notice.

Out of the 33 families interviewed, a vast majority (26) were parents living with their children. Two constituted "patchwork families" (a term used by the interviewees themselves, often called blended families). Another five were single parents. Their number of children varied between one and five, with rural families tending to have more children (rural families in the sample on average had 3.25 children, whereas families in intermediary and urban municipalities had 2.29 respectively 2.12 children; see Figure 2). It is worth noting that families in intermediary municipalities showed the most diverse family constellations, whereas all urban families were "traditional" families with both parents living with their children.

Figure 2: ***Number of Children in Interviewed Families (n = 33)***



When it came to family-school relations, the children's age played an important role, as it determined the class they attended. Because Swiss teachers generally enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in shaping family-school relations (Huber, 2011), having two children in different classes could result in two different practices of communication; for instance, when having to report a sick child. Having more than one child increased the experienced complexity for parents. However, it also contributed to the accumulation of knowledge and made a difference in terms of self-confidence: "*With the third child of course you also notice, that your need for information is no longer so great. Because you are confident, and you know that things are going well*" (Mother, School F).

Another aspect relating to the children's ages were transitions in their educational trajectories. Entering the school system or changing from primary to lower secondary school constituted a significant step. In rural areas, attending lower secondary school was often related to changing to schools located further away from home. Many parents reported that the transition to lower

secondary brought marked changes and commented upon the more direct communication between students and teachers, resulting in fewer insights for parents. More student autonomy at the lower secondary level and more paper-based communication at the school entry level were reported by many parents, indicating a degree of shared communication practices beyond individual schools. Moreover, the school website was mentioned frequently as a source of information to prepare for transitions, as it provided general information: "*Before the transition we looked at the pictures of the new teachers. There are suddenly many more teachers whom we did not know so we looked at them together*" (Mother, School A).

Other factors relating to aspects of family-school relations include special needs, whether long-term (e.g., a specific diagnosis) or more temporary (e.g., disciplinary issues). Families with children having specific needs reported more intense communications with diverse staff. All families reporting communication beyond the "*run-of-the-mill*" (again a term used by interviewees themselves) indicated that they preferred phone calls or personal meetings for such exchanges. The more intense communication was usually temporary and limited: "*Our daughter had a crisis and yes, that was difficult. But we made it, and now she has a new class teacher and all that and she is well again, and it all runs smoothly*" (Mother, School E). Conversely, parents who judged their communication with the school to be "*normal*" or "*the usual*" often argued that their children had no special needs: "*We are standard users of the school. We need neither a lot nor special attention. It simply runs*" (Mother, School F). Such statements implied a norm of little or no contact for those families.

Furthermore, factors such as extracurricular activities or parental engagement at school sometimes increased the complexity of communication or facilitated access to information. These are summarised in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: ***Families' Use of Extracurricular Activities and After-School Care***

Extracurricular and After-School Activities	Number (%) of Families
Extracurricular activities taking place at the school, e.g., sports	8 (24%)
After-school care	6 (18%)
Both extracurricular activities and after-school care	2 (6%)
None	17 (52%)
Total	33 (100%)

Table 3: ***Parental Engagement at School***

Type of Engagement with School	Number (%) of Parents
Current formal engagement (e.g., school board or parents' council)	14 (42%)
Past formal engagement or ad hoc engagement (e.g., accompanying school trips)	8 (24%)
No engagement	10 (30%)
Other*	1 (3%)
Total	33 (100%)

* The researchers and the participants did not engage on the topic at the interview stage.

While the numbers are too small to make generalised statements, some of the data presented in Tables 2 and 3 gloss over possible systematic differences in rural and urban family structures. We found the typical Swiss employment pattern of fathers working full-time and mothers part-time in all three groups of parents (rural, intermediary and urban). However, rural families seemed to

have less need for after-school care as they made more use of extended family members to provide it. This included grandparents cooking lunch as reported in the interviews. As one mother observed, this often led to mothers being more engaged in, or burdened with, school communication:

> *Because in the end it's usually mum who gets the paper back, because it's mum who's usually there when the children come home in the evening … If the information were sent by email, fathers would be just as obliged to read them as mothers. I'm thinking that this would also be a way of getting fathers much more involved in bringing up their children. (Mother, School F)*

Urban families made more use of after-school care, and all the interviewed families in the urban setting had a current or past engagement at school, whereas only half of the rural families did. Moreover, rural parents reported to be more engaged in ad hoc activities (e.g., accompanying classes on trips or helping during special events), whereas urban parents were more formally involved (e.g., participating in the parents' council). The use of after-school care or extracurricular activities generally resulted in more complex communication, as more individuals were involved. It was particularly in these contexts where school apps were highly appreciated. They clearly defined processes and ensured that information was distributed to all relevant parties, including, for example, bus drivers. This seemed more relevant in rural areas where schools tended to be more distant from home locations than in urban settings.

Parental engagement was often perceived to improve information access, as parents felt more at ease in simply contacting a teacher or other person due to personal contacts. As rural parents in our sample engaged in more informal settings in school activities, the quality of their contacts may have differed from the more formal engagements (e.g., the parents' council) of urban parents.

We found parents' as well as their children's personal characteristics to be a frequently addressed issue. The interviewees often described their information needs and actions as depending on their children's behaviour:

> *Well, I personally like to be informed about everything. … I would like to have more information, because my son hardly tells me anything. I miss a lot and have to pull everything from his nose. (Mother, School B)*
>
> *[I like this app, it is easier] than those papers that the teachers give to the children and then they forget to take it out of their school bags. (Father, School C).*

Moreover, personal preferences, such as "*I'm no media person, I think paper and pencil are the best*" (Mother, School D), shaped parents' actions.

We close this section with a short account by a mother, because she vividly illustrates many of the previously discussed aspects relating to managing diverse communication channels, particularly her personal situation (first child in kindergarten) and her personality (wish to follow what the school has said; self-confidence of trying something). In most Swiss schools, children can take off from school for some days, without giving a reason. This mother wanted to make use of this practice and reported:

> *We had a parents' evening at the beginning of the school year where we got this information [on how to proceed for these days] and were able to ask questions. A fortnight ago I wanted to ask about this. It was so far the only incident when I did not really know how to do it. Do I have to report it to the school principal? To the kindergarten teacher? So I went to the website for the first time. Because I did not find anything, I wrote to the teacher on WhatsApp, but I didn't get an answer. I don't know if she doesn't want parents to write to her via WhatsApp. I don't know, I'd have to ask her personally, but I don't think that's the*

> *idea. She answered me days later via the school app, and I assume that's the way they want it, that you communicate through the school app. So I got the answer I wanted from her and yes, that was good. (Mother, School A)*

As a connector to the next section, we complement this personal experience of navigating between many channels of communication with the school's well-structured approach to family-school relations:

> *We have a concept [for family-school relations], yes. We have defined points with regard to transitions. We have guidelines on what the teachers have to discuss with the parents and when. … And yes, the usual parents' evenings and also the parent-teacher meetings. (Principal, School A)*

This more systematic approach was typical of the schools' perspective, which we will now describe in more detail.

The Schools' Perspectives

Table 1 describes key characteristics of the eight schools, including the respective interview partners. After a brief presentation of some structural aspects, the findings from the school interviews will focus on adaptation and leadership as two main themes. Websites are mentioned more frequently in this section, as they constituted a major element of the interviews.

Although physical structures, such as the number of locations in which a school was present or the locations themselves, were not an issue in the school interviews, organisational structures were addressed repeatedly. They included more distant actors, such as the respective canton and governing bodies, as well as the division of responsibilities within schools, marked by high degrees of teacher autonomy. More distant actors exerted influence by regulating the use of specific tools, like school apps, or providing templates for websites. We found references to such influences in all schools, with urban schools tending to be embedded in more professional structures, therefore providing more guidance. Typically, urban schools enjoy more support from their municipalities which employ professional staff whereas rural schools depend on their municipalities' goodwill to provide resources for schools, not least of all administrative staff.

The relationship to the municipality's administration was particularly noticeable in the context of the schools' websites. As the public schools were run by the municipalities, basic information about the local school was generally available on the municipality's website, yet some schools maintained an additional independent website themselves. However, this could be negotiated between the municipality and the school.

For many interviewees the reason for having a website was not always clear. They agreed that "*it goes without saying that a school needs a website*" (Teacher, School C) which runs smoothly, but its precise function was not obvious. For many, the website was more important for the recruitment of new teachers than for family-school relations. Metaphors such as "*it is our business card*" (Schools B, C and G) indicated that its orientation was towards people who were not yet members of the school community. This, however, included future parents, be they new inhabitants of the municipality or parents of a child starting school.

One last structural element worth mentioning is the parents' councils. Their institutionalisation varied considerably. This was best reflected in School H, where a parents' council existed in two of its five locations. Principals reported mainly being in contact with parents in problematic situations, which could not be resolved at the class level. They therefore considered their discussions with parents' councils as providing important additional perspectives, albeit not always easy ones due to often unclear areas of competence. Potentially problematic situations with parents included the refusal by parents to use email or install the school app. These, however, seemed to be exceptions and were dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Within the specific structures, namely the respective governing bodies and specific resources, the interviewees made use of available room for manoeuvre when so inclined. For example, they proposed the introduction of a school app to the school board which did not know that such tools exist (School C) or they set up a parallel website as the one provided by the municipality was not deemed functional (School F). In doing so, they were very much guided by their interests and values. For example, many principals initially designed their schools' first website, because they thought their school needed one and they were interested in doing it themselves. Some principals mentioned that they were aware of parents preferring more insight into their children's school (e.g., through social media such as Facebook or Instagram). However, only one school had an official Facebook account (School D) which merely automatically published any news that was posted on the website. Others that mentioned this option (Schools A, C and H) consciously decided against it, based on arguments about a lack of resources, potentially challenging situations when posting photos, and having to deal with comments. The ever-changing availability of various channels continuously required schools to position themselves anew.

A special case of reacting to external developments was the COVID pandemic, which was unanimously seen as accelerating the move towards more digitally-based communication by schools and families. This move could be considered as ongoing, best reflected in the introduction of school apps, but also reflected in the fact that schools reported sending the same information via various channels to make sure that parents received it. The schools that introduced school apps commented on how the app changed the function of their website which, consequently, became a "*back up for the school app*" (Principal, School C).

Moreover, we found several very specific practices, such as audio files of newsletters in Portuguese on the website of School C which had many migrant workers living nearby, a school bulletin published on paper addressed to the wider community (School B), regular contributions to the local newspaper (School D), and school-wide parent evenings (Schools A, B and C). These were dedicated to specific themes such as social media, rather than being determined by the school calendar. It is interesting to note that having room to manoeuvre was rarely used to formalise schools' practices. Only two of the eight schools had guidelines for family-school relations; one other school had general communication guidelines, and a fourth school was in the process of elaborating communication guidelines. Overall, the principals' beliefs shaped the promotion of specific communication channels within their schools, as could be seen in the introduction of school apps. Although one principal regretted that his school was not among the pilot schools of the city for introducing an app (School G), another voiced and upheld strong opposition to such a tool (School F).

With regard to family-school relations, we repeatedly heard that most contacts with parents were managed directly by the teachers, who did "*the classic things*" (Principals, School C, G and H). This mainly referred to parent-teacher meetings, parents' evenings, or letters to parents at the beginning of each term. Principals were not always able to elaborate in detail on how teachers communicated with parents, but they were confident that "*most of them do a good job*" (School H). Therefore, a key issue was how teachers were guided, as it was through them that school leaders established new communication routines. We noted that the principals were very much aware of the current situation, which was marked by increased demands for digital tools on the one hand, and limited resources, not least in relation to teachers' knowledge and attitudes, on the other. This was, for example, reflected in the considerate, step-by-step introduction of school apps (Schools A, B, C and E) and in their respect for current practices:

> *WhatsApp is an important channel. Officially it is not allowed, but I know teachers use it. So I say that they should use broadcast lists instead of creating groups, so the messages go from the teachers and if someone replies not the entire group gets it, only the teachers. It is used, that is also a financial issue, WhatsApp is free, SMS cost. (Principal, School G)*

Furthermore, we observed that their leadership styles reflected typical Swiss practices—participation and consensus-based decision-making. We saw this at School A, where all teachers were included in the redesign of the website, and in School B's approach to guidelines for its website:

> *We discussed the expectations that texts published on the website should meet and we agreed that they should have a certain standard, also when created by the students. They should be correct and not only cute or sweet. … Well, that was about three years ago, in the meantime new teachers came, so we should probably take it up again. (Principal, School B)*

Overall, we found that the principals showed awareness of ongoing developments, such as the availability of new tools or a change in parents' needs. While acknowledging the need for schools to adapt to these changes and leading the related processes, they only marginally interfered with teachers' practices in managing day-to-day contacts with parents. At the same time, they displayed distinct beliefs and values which guided them in the management of both family-school relations generally and communication channels specifically.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Findings section showed that families and schools reported using diverse channels for their communications with each other. We found that personal meetings, such as parent-teacher meetings or parents' evenings, phone calls, paper-based and electronic messages, and websites were used by all schools. Moreover, many made use of a school app. It is worth noting that the diversity of channels could be even higher, as other schools use tools that we did not find in family-school relations in Switzerland, namely social media, school management systems and chat bots (Breiter & Ruhe, 2018).

Managing this diversity on the side of families is shaped by children's ages and needs, their specific situations (e.g., parents' employment, use of after-school care, extracurricular activities, school transportation, parental engagement) and personal preferences. While some of these aspects increased the complexity of communication, the use of school apps reduced it considerably. In our sample, the rural families differed from their urban counterparts by tending to have more children—potentially increasing the complexity of communication due to individual practices for different classes—and made less use of after-school care—reducing complexity in communication— compared to their urban counterparts. Some of them relied on school transportation, which increased the number of interlocutors and added to the communication complexity, making the situation potentially more complicated in rural areas. Generally, parents reacted to what was offered by the schools, initiating contact primarily to report absences or when requiring specific information. Parents at schools using a school app reported particularly high levels of satisfaction. Overall, they seemed to be content with their schools' communication, regardless of their location, thus not confirming Kuusimäki et al.'s (2019) finding of higher appraisal of digital communication by rural parents.

Contrary to a more individual perspective that shapes families' communication practices, namely a specific child's needs as focus of many communication practices, schools were taking a more systemic approach oriented along their structures, primarily the roles of principals and teachers, the chronology of school years and educational trajectories. Their overall aim, as expressed in frequent mass emails, parents' evenings or the appraisal of tools in terms of convenience, is to distribute information to families as efficiently as possible rather than initiating dialogue (Goodall, 2016). Taken together, the use of diverse media for family-school relations still reflects what Thompson (2008) called infrequent practice—occurring at designated times—and the role of families as information receivers rather than two-way communicative partners (Epstein, 2010). Therefore, while adding to the structural complexity of family-school relations, digital

communication channels seem not to have fundamentally changed established practices of one-way communication, as has been found previously (e.g., Taddeo & Barnes, 2016).

As we set out to explore a phenomenon for which, to our knowledge, no research existed in Switzerland, we aimed for as heterogeneous a sample as possible to capture potential variations. One important element in generating variation was the location of schools, particularly the contrast between rural and urban schools, as has been done in other studies (e.g., Mazza, 2013). While we found some differences in family structures (e.g., the average number of children per family, employment and parents' engagement in school), these cannot be generalised due to the sampling method and the small number of families involved in the study. Future research would, therefore, need to validate our findings, namely that parents' employment, use of after-school care or school transportation are indeed related to more complex interactions with schools. It would also need to confirm that family structures do vary systematically between rural and urban regions. Rural families in our sample tended to have more children leading to potentially more complex communication with differing practices for each class. However, if a school uses a school app, as was the case in one of the rural schools, the complexity is reduced significantly. Moreover, the ad hoc personal engagement of rural families could lead to qualitatively different personal contacts, reducing the need for communication through other channels. Therefore, also interactions between the various aspects we identified to play a role would need to be examined more systematically in future research.

A potentially more important difference between locations were school structures, which we found to be more professionalised in urban areas. This was noteworthy in the infrastructure provided, which included specific tools such as software, e.g. a template for designing websites or specific communication apps. However, we found that school leaders consciously acted within their respective contexts, showing initiative in dealing with more regulation as it often existed in urban settings (e.g., School F) or filling a potential vacuum which can be caused by non-professional school boards (e.g., School C). Therefore, a key question is what school leaders' beliefs and preferences are, as in Switzerland they have chosen to work in a rural or urban school.

The relevance of school leaders' beliefs in view of adapting new technologies has been repeatedly shown (Macia Bordalba & Garreta Bochaca, 2019). For family-school relations, however, school leaders' beliefs about and knowledge of families' diverse realities is equally important. In this respect, we found little evidence for differentiated perceptions; rather, parents were referred to as a homogenous group marked by their need for information, which was assumed implicitly to be the same for everyone.

The one repeatedly differentiated group of parents were those who did not yet belong to the school's community. This was most clearly expressed on one website which offered a prominent link for parents who just moved to the respective municipality (School B). Moreover, schools' somewhat undifferentiated perception of parents was underlined by the fact that we found almost no linguistic diversity on the schools' websites. This suggested that monolingual websites possibly constituted a barrier to parent engagement not only in Australia (Piller et al., 2023). The potential of school apps for automated translations was only mentioned once and did not constitute a criterion for their introduction, as might be expected if principals were aware of linguistically diverse family backgrounds.

Other differences between schools, for example a somewhat more positive appraisal of communication overall in schools which used an app or a potentially more systematic approach to parent-school relations as expressed in written concepts, seemed to be related to personal convictions and leadership styles. We therefore conclude that principals' beliefs might be more influential for family-school relations than schools' locations. Their beliefs seemed particularly relevant in view of reaching increasingly heterogenous families where different tools could

facilitate reaching specific groups of parents (e.g., school apps with integrated translation or specific sections for new parents on a website).

Despite generating some interesting insights, our findings have several limitations. First, our study set out to explore school websites rather than the entirety of family-school relations. Therefore, the voices of teachers and administrative staff have not been integrated systematically, and some forms of potential data were not collected (e.g., we did not collect any emails or observe parents' evenings). This led to an incomplete picture, particularly from the schools' perspective. While we had an insight into the leaders' experiences and perceptions resulting in the perspective described, everyday practices by teachers, who were generally parents' direct contacts, were not examined. However, it is worth noting that the perspectives of the two interviewed teachers did not differ markedly from the principals', which might be explained by the fact that the focus of the interviews was the school as an entity, not the perspective of its individual staff.

A second limitation is the sample of interviewed parents. Contrary to the schools, which were chosen systematically on the basis of diverse criteria (location, characteristics of websites, etc.), we interviewed all parents who volunteered to participate. Unfortunately, only parents from one urban school participated, leading to a somewhat limited perspective of urban families. And, while we did achieve some of the desired variation (e.g., age of children, family constellation or variation in their use of the website), we did not capture other essential variations, particularly in view of the language/s spoken at home. Except for one interview in French, all others were conducted in Swiss German, though interviews in other languages would have been possible. Therefore, the presented families' perspective is limited and has most likely influenced the generally positive appraisal of their relations with schools.

At the same time, we identified some aspects which should be taken into consideration when further exploring family-school relations and the use of diverse communication channels, namely gender-related practices, the children's situation, personal preferences or principals' understandings of and preferences for a specific school community, be it rural or urban. Broadening theoretical approaches for studying family-school relations to include more than beliefs related to specific technologies (e.g., Macia Bordalba & Garreta Bochaca, 2019) could be beneficial for a deeper understanding. This could be done by using the concept of mediatisation (Hepp et al., 2018). Moreover, an international perspective would be valuable, to contrast Swiss practices and the country's small scale with another country's practices. This could identify other relevant aspects.

Lastly, the notion of continuous adaptations in communication channels used by both schools and families has been considerably influenced by experiences made during the pandemic, with the first school lockdown in Switzerland having taken place some 1.5 years before the interviews started. There is general agreement that this was an important factor accelerating ongoing efforts towards the integration of technology in schools (S-Clever-Konsortium, 2021). At the same time, the most noticeable change in the Swiss context—the introduction of school apps—had started before the pandemic and continues today. We assume, therefore, that this study is a snapshot of one moment in time as are others in the field of technology and family-school relations.

References

Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2018). *Family-school partnerships framework: Strategies*. https://www.education.gov.au/supporting-family-school-community-partnerships-learning/resources/family-school-partnerships-framework-strategies

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Breiter, A., & Ruhe, A. H. (2018). Paper versus school information management systems: Governing the figurations of mediatized schools in England and Germany. In A. Hepp, A. Breiter, & U. Hasebrink (Eds.), *Communicative figurations: Transforming communications in times of deep mediatization* (pp. 313–339). Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-65584-0_13

Epstein, J. L. (1987). Toward a theory of family – School connections: Teacher practices and parent involvement. In K. Hurrelmann, F.-X. Kaufmann, & F. Lösel (Eds.), *Social intervention: Potential and constraints* (pp. 121–136). De Gruyter.

Epstein, J. L. (2010). School/family/community/partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *92*(3), 80–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171009200326

Federal Statistical Office. (2021). *Educational institutions*. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/education-science/educational-institutions.assetdetail.18224107.html

Federal Statistical Office. (2023a, October 9). *Stadt/Land-Typologie 2020 [Urban/rural typology]*. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/catalogues-databases.assetdetail.31265015.html

Federal Statistical Office (2023b, December 11). *Public education expenditure by educational level and administrative level making the expenditure*. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsfinanzen/oeffentliche-bildungsausgaben.assetdetail.29105824.html

Federal Statistical Office. (2024) *Three new agglomerations and 10 more towns than 10 years ago: Urbanisation continues in Switzerland.* https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/catalogues-databases.assetdetail.30665765.html

Gilleece, L., & Eivers, E. (2018). Primary school websites in Ireland: How are they used to inform and involve parents? *Irish Educational Studies*, *37*(4), 411–430. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2018.1498366

Goodall, J. (2013). Parental engagement to support children's learning: A six point model. *School Leadership & Management*, *33*(2), 133–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2012.724668

Goodall, J. S. (2016). Technology and school–home communication. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, *11*(2), 118–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/22040552.2016.1227252

Guo, Y. (Ed.). (2018). *Home-school relations: International perspectives*. Springer. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0324-1

Helgøy, I., & Homme, A. (2017). Increasing parental participation at school level: A "citizen to serve" or a "customer to steer"? *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, *3*(2), 144–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2017.1343625

Hepp, A., Breiter, A., & Hasebrink, U. (Eds.). (2018). *Communicative figurations: Transforming communications in times of deep mediatization*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65584-0

Ho, E. S. C., & Vasarik Staub, K. (2019). Home and school relationships in Switzerland and Hong Kong. In S. B. Sheldon & T. A. Turner-Vorbeck (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of family, school, and community relationships in education* (pp. 291–314). Wiley Blackwell.

Ho, L.-H., Hung, C.-L., & Chen, H.-C. (2013). Using theoretical models to examine the acceptance behavior of mobile phone messaging to enhance parent–teacher interactions. *Computers & Education*, *61*, 105–114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.09.009

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, *106*(2), 105–130. https://doi.org/10.1086/499194

Huber, S. G. (2011). School governance in Switzerland: Tensions between new roles and old traditions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *39*(4), 469–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143211405349

Kilpatrick, S., Burns, G., Katersky Barnes, R., Kerrison, M., & Fischer, S. (2020). Parents matter: Empowering parents to inform other parents of post-year 10 pathway options in disadvantaged communities. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *30*(3), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v30i3.275

Kuusimäki, A.-M., Uusitalo-Malmivaara, L., & Tirri, K. (2019). Parents' and teachers' views on digital communication in Finland. *Education Research International*, *2019*, Article 8236786. https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/8236786

Macia Bordalba, M., & Garreta Bochaca, J. (2019). Digital media for family-school communication? Parents' and teachers' beliefs. *Computers & Education*, *132*, 44–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.01.006

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* [Forum: Qualitative Social Research], *1*(2), Article 20. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204

Mazza, J. A. (2013). *The use of social media tools by school principals to communicate between home and school* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1436987219?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses

Ozcinar, Z., & Ekizoglu, N. (2013). Evaluation of a blog-based parent involvement approach by parents. *Computers & Education*, *66*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2013.01.012

Paseka, A., & Byrne, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Parental involvement across European education systems: Critical perspectives*. Routledge.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

Piller, I., Bruzon, A. S., & Torsh, H. (2023). Monolingual school websites as barriers to parent engagement. *Language and Education*, *37*(3), 328–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.2010744

S-Clever-Konsortium. (2021). *S-CLEVER. Schulentwicklung vor neuen Herausforderungen. Erste Ergebnisse der Schulleiter*innen-Befragung September und Oktober 2020 für die Schweiz [S-CLEVER. School development facing new challenges. Initial results of the principals' survey September and October 2020 for Switzerland]*. https://s-clever.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Ergebnisbericht-S-CLEVER-ERSTE-BEFRAGUNG-Schweiz-final2.pdf

Schüpbach, M. (2010). Ganztägige Bildung und Betreuung im Primarschulalter: Qualität und Wirksamkeit verschiedener Schulformen im Vergleich [All-day education and care at primary school age: Comparing the quality and effectiveness of different school types]. VS Verlag. für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92334-5

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft. (2024). *Swiss civil code (1907)*. https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/24/233_245_233/en

Steiner, R., Ladner, A., & Kaiser, C. (2021). *Zustand und Entwicklung der Schweizer Gemeinden: Ergebnisse des nationalen Gemeindemonitorings 2017 [State and development of Swiss communities: Results of the national community monitoring 2017]*. Somedia. https://digitalcollection.zhaw.ch/handle/11475/22601

Taddeo, C., & Barnes, A. (2016). The school website: Facilitating communication engagement and learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *47*(2), 421–436. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12229

The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education. (2023, October 9). *Education system*. https://www.edk.ch/en/education-system

Thompson, B. (2008). Characteristics of parent–teacher e-mail communication. *Communication Education*, *57*(2), 201–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701852050

Thompson, B. C., Mazer, J. P., & Flood Grady, E. (2015). The changing nature of parent–teacher communication: Mode selection in the smartphone era. *Communication Education*, *64*(2), 187–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1014382

UK Department for Education. (2023, April 25). *What maintained schools must publish online*. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online

Villiger, C., Schuler, N., & Hostettler, A. (2020). Formen der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Schule und Eltern und Möglichkeiten elterlicher Mitwirkung in der Deutschschweiz: Eine umfassende Analyse der kantonalen Grundlagen [Types of parent-school collaboration and possibilities of parental participation in German-speaking Switzerland: An extensive analysis of cantonal regulations]. *Swiss Journal of Educational Research*, *42*(3), 733–748. https://doi.org/10.24452/sjer.42.3.16

Witzel, A., & Reiter, H. (2012). *The problem-centred interview: Principles and practice*. Sage.

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Organising Inclusive Transitions in Vocational Education and Training in a Rural Community in Norway

Anna Rapp
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
anna.cecilia.rapp@ntnu.no

Agneta Knutas
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
agneta.knutas@ntnu.no

Abstract

Our study examines the organising of transitions in Vocational Education and Training in a rural Norwegian municipality. In Norway, Vocational Education and Training is diverse and interlinked in continual organising. Organising, in this context, is a continuous set of actions forming recognisable patterns that become institutions. An upper secondary Vocational Education and Training case study was conducted in a rural municipality. The case study included interviews with students, teachers, leaders and company representatives. The study investigated in what ways the organising of rural Vocational Education and Training supported students' crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation. The findings indicate that actants in the network, as well as a balance between individuals' needs and labour market requirements, are stabilising factors. The interdisciplinary training office is an important choreographer in active networking, and it is also important for teachers and students to bridge over and interact with Vocational Education and Training companies early on in their education. Transition as a path to inclusion is a learning and developmental process that occurs in continuous, alternating interactions between education and work.

Keywords: *rural education, vocational education, organisation, theory of organising, lifeworld*

Introduction

Rural education is vital to the economic, social and environmental viability of nations. It is essential for democratic equity. However, according to research, there are fewer educational opportunities and other services available in rural areas compared to urban areas (Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014; Corbett, 2015). The manifestation of inequality goes beyond the urban-rural divide; it also has regional and subregional contexts (United Nations, 2022). In Norway, the term *rural* refers to peripheral areas eligible for national aid for transport, investment and payroll taxes. Regional differences are closely connected to the region's level of education, unemployment and business structure (Hovdhaugen & Skålholt, 2019).

Rural education may be undermined by unevenly distributed resources, knowledge and life chances (Corbett, 2015). In Norway, the number of schools decreased from 3140 to 2858 between 2008 and 2018, with most closures occurring in rural areas (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018). Under the influence of market-based goals, the centralisation of rural schools was advocated with the belief that larger schools could provide better learning and social environments (Kvalsund, 2019). However, neither European nor Norwegian research has

reported a correlation between school size and educational results (Iversen et al., 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2009). Instead, research reports that due to the smaller size of schools in rural areas, teachers develop closer relationships with their students and attend to individual needs (Villa & Knutas, 2020). Schools are, in addition, actively engaged in their local communities through their curriculum and school practices (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2008; Autti & Bæck, 2021; Gristy et al., 2020). Thus, learning by participation in community-active schools with place-based and place-conscious education is common in rural areas. Learning with standardised teaching methods that focus on imparting and gaining second-hand knowledge in selected abstract school subjects is more typically found in urban schools (Kvalsund, 2019).

Turning our focus to Vocational Education and Training (VET), neoliberal ideas of education have affected upper secondary education (including VET) in terms of pressure towards completion and specialisation (Skålholt et al., 2023; The Norwegian Government, 2021). Research suggests that inclusion and fostering democracy are just as important for society as skills training (Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). From a rural point of view, standardisation and centralised educational policies result in local VET reflecting the economies and identities of a neoliberal society (Helms Jørgensen, 2004), especially since rural circumstances are regularly judged by urban standards. In rural areas, place-conscious education and local institutions (e.g., VET and the local labour market) work together. The co-existence of these institutions is crucial for enhancing the resilience of rural communities, as it ensures access to a variety of important resources that are not dependent on a single organisation (McAreavey, 2022). Urban standards do not necessarily take into consideration local variations affecting transitions in VET.

In Norway, over half of upper secondary students (who have completed 10 years of compulsory schooling) choose VET. Urban regions show 71% of students opting for college-preparation programs. In medium-sized municipalities, many students choose vocational programs. In the smallest rural communities, as many as 68% opt for VET (Statistics Norway, 2023). As Milmeister et al. (2022) pointed out, additional research is needed to explore how participation, transition and organising of VET develop within different contexts.

Following Corbett (2015), we understand that urban standards, through the organising (Czarniawska, 2014) of VET, will influence students' lives. We find that research on rural VET contributes to expanding an understanding of the specific characteristics and social-cultural values of particular rural municipalities. Similarly, including lifeworld perspectives on the organising of VET will provide knowledge about students' transitions, the risks of marginalisation, and possible interventions. From a lifeworld perspective, identity construction occurs through the creation of places, which are experienced phenomena of the lived world. Social divisions, hierarchies and distinctions are also established in these places, influencing people's lifeworlds (Farrugia, 2014; Habermas, 1985). Consequently, the relationship to place and the transition between education and work are constitutive parts of young people's identities and life paths (Farrugia, 2014).

It is important to counteract the standards of urban regions. We contribute with research on a rural municipality and the organising of upper secondary VET, to gain insights into educational circumstances and distinctive rural characteristics (Corbett, 2015). Exploring VET students' transitions, we intend to provide knowledge on the risks of marginalisation as well as possible mitigations, with the question: In what ways does the organising of rural vocational education and training support student crossroads and transitions to impede marginalisation?

Background

Historically, vocational education followed a pattern where people apprenticed under a master in their trade. The Industrial Revolution brought significant changes, leading to the abandonment of the former apprenticeship system (Sennett, 2008). As a result, widely different VET systems

emerged. The Nordic VET systems are predominantly known for their robustness and appeal to a significant portion of the youth demographic. When examining VET systems comparatively, the focus tends to highlight differences rather than similarities and variations that exist in the organising of VET, especially in terms of work-based learning. Targeting youth who have completed compulsory schooling, VET serves a dual purpose in Nordic societies: fostering civic values in upcoming generations and equipping them with essential skills for workforce advancement. These dual functions are intricately intertwined.

The dual VET system in Norway consists of two years of school education and two years of apprenticeship in a company or institution. The system involves several crossroads where young people transition on their path. The transitions are critical, in the sense that they pose a risk of students becoming marginalised from education (Michelsen et al., 2021; Rapp & Knutas, 2023). Counties are responsible for providing students with relevant apprenticeships, compensating employers for hiring apprentices, and organising the final exam (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). In Norway, a known challenge in the VET transition is obtaining an apprenticeship in the third year. If students succeed, they are more likely to complete upper secondary education, regardless of their background (Statistics Norway, 2020). However, for students in rural areas, there are challenges with limited local labour markets, since small companies have less capability to host apprentices or hire new personnel (Antonsen et al., 2016; Karlsdóttir et al., 2019).

Research indicates that students in rural areas often ponder their future in a gendered and classed manner, based on the local labour market and structural and infrastructural characteristics (Rönnlund, 2020). The lack of adequate educational facilities in rural areas makes choice and independence crucial in the transition to upper secondary or further education (Rosvall et al., 2018). Norwegian rural research on VET found that teachers who adapted teaching to students' living circumstances supported students in clarifying values, and in identifying potential career paths, thus in turn supporting equity and increasing the possibilities of students reaching their goals (Rapp & Knutas, 2023).

Internationally, neoliberal discussions on transitions in VET repeatedly correlate the costs of students not completing their exams with economic growth demands in labour markets, while ignoring rural perspectives (Karlsdóttir et al., 2019). Rural research in the Nordic countries reports that neoliberal policies have resulted in several negative consequences for education (Villa & Knutas, 2020). The consequences for rural education include an increase in students' commuting distances and fewer opportunities for low-income students. Additionally, due to rising costs in small municipalities, fewer study programs are available (Karlsdóttir et al., 2019). This, in turn, has resulted in lower graduation rates for students in rural municipalities (Lind, 2019; Topsøe Larsen, 2017).

One additional aspect of the transition between school and apprenticeship is the overlap between school rationality and production rationality where, in practice, cooperation between businesses and educational institutions often falls short (Esmond, 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). Rural research finds that strong connections between advisors, students and teachers can promote essential networking in VET, making the transition between school and apprenticeship easier (Rapp et. al. 2023). To promote smooth transitions in VET, Angus et al. (2011) and Milmeister et al. (2022) pointed out that we should not only focus on individual barriers, but also pay attention to institutional barriers and opportunities, such as collaboration between schools, training offices and businesses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built on concepts from three interconnected theories: a theory of organising, communicative action theory, and the concept of personal curriculum. We

draw from Czarniawska's (2014) description of organising, Habermas's (1985) communicative action theory and his description of the lifeworld and system world, and Billett's (2023) perspective on personal curriculum. Combining these three perspectives allows us to explore how a specific way of organising VET may influence the way the system colonises people's lifeworlds and then affects their pathways through VET into apprenticeship and work.

A theory of organising (Czarniawska, 2014) is situated within social constructivism, where reality is seen as socially constructed. However, when we ask how the world is socially constructed, we see that reality is constantly being reconstructed by those who observe it and those who organise it. A theory of organising is, therefore, an action theory with a focus on processes (Weick et al., 2005). Such processes occur in the interactions amongst an organisation's characteristics, the positions (places) of individuals involved, problems and events. An institutional order is only valid at a specific place and time. Studying organisation through actant networks is a compromise designed to capture both the constructivist (ongoing) aspect of all organising and its effect at a specific point in time. Within the theory of organising, there are points of connections between actions that create actors. Various actors in the actant network attempt to stabilise each others' identities through the creation of actions. The actions stabilise representation and relationships (Czarniawska, 2014).

An organisational everyday life is composed of seemingly fragmented and loosely connected events. It is when people talk about their daily lives that meaning emerges, since meaning-making has a historical link. Additionally, the activities that people perform in an organisation help create order in chaos and make meaning visible (Czarniawska, 2014). Through sense-making (Weick et al., 2005), people try to make new events meaningful by placing them within the framework of previous events. Episodes are linked together through narratives that provide meaning, and organisational practices weave together the symbolic, the practical and the political (Weick et al., 2005) as in the encounter between young individuals, education and labour markets.

Habermas's (1985) concept of the lifeworld consists of two structural components: culture (the cultural tradition that shapes actors' interpretation in schemas and value standards) and society, or more precisely, the institutional order in a society. In addition to the above elements, Habermas proposed a third fundamental structure for the lifeworld, namely the motivation patterns and competence repository for action that he called personality structures. For example, a choice of secondary education deals with cultural conditions and the society the individual lives in. However, to navigate this society, individuals must develop the ability to calculate, command, organise, negotiate, forego short-term gain in favour of long-term goals, seek new profit opportunities, and take calculated risks. Personality structures constitute resources for social action. Social action, therefore, depends on three structures in the lifeworld: culture, society and personality.

Lifeworld is a subjective microcosm where individuals interact and communicate with each other. While the lifeworld is the world we experience as it appears to our senses, our understanding, and our emotional life, the system constitutes a rationalised, impersonal and regulated world. Habermas (1985) pointed out that the system world has its roots in the lifeworld, in the sense that, in close interaction between individuals, the system world begins to develop its structures. People must, for example, interact to create regulations that are later cemented into bureaucracies. The more powerful these structures are, the less room there is for communication and consensus in the lifeworld. According to Habermas, these rationalised structures can threaten communication and thus exert control over the lifeworld.

The concept of personal curriculum (Billett, 2023) should not be confused with an individual curriculum or with the institutional curricula on which every school organisation bases its education. Instead, the concept of personal curriculum is exploratory in its design and aims to

explore the pathways or life tracks of learning and development that young people experience on their journey from school to work. Personal curriculum is non-standardised; it is personal. It considers the breadth of educational experiences that an individual encounters in a lifetime. When viewed as a set of personal experiences, curriculum aligns with its original definition as a pathway to follow for progress (Billett, 2023). We suggest that the concept of personal curriculum can be beneficial in understanding transitions within VET as a continuous pathway. This pathway can be linked to students' lifeworlds, as well as the wider system, and can be either well or poorly organised depending on the actant network involved in the transition.

Methodology

To investigate how the organising of rural VET supports student crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation, we have chosen to conduct a case study. Flyvberg (2011) described how a case study is less about methodology and more about determining which unit should be studied and defining the boundaries of that unit. The case consisted of a local VET system in a rural area (Hovdhaugen & Skålholt, 2019). Included in the case study were students, a school, an interdisciplinary training office, and companies and institutions offering apprenticeship placements. The four parts of the system are interconnected by a series of concrete and mutually related events that occur at specific times and places, making up the case (Flyvberg, 2011). In Flyvberg's approach, case studies focus on relationships the case has with its surroundings, the context in which it exists. Thus, case studies generate context-dependent knowledge.

The chosen case could be studied in several ways. In this case study, qualitative in-depth interviews (Rapley, 2007) were conducted with strategically selected representatives from the four parts of the VET system (students, school, training office, and companies/institutions). The selection of informants represented diversity and variation related to the VET system, its context, and its organisation. The design of each interview guide was a little different since each was directed toward a specific part of the VET system. The parts were paired with the interview guides, which consisted of four themes: student and environment, organising for inclusion, school and work life, and resources regarding students' needs. In the students' interview guide, we asked about their experiences of VET at the school and specifically of the vocational program regarding inclusion. We asked about challenges in the transition between school and work, about learning at work, and their future thoughts on work life in the rural community.

The data were collected in a county in Central Norway. The VET system under study was in a village with about 4000 inhabitants. The local labour market in the village consisted of one large construction company and several electrical companies, two other major industries, and a sawmill. Additionally, the public sector and the municipality were important employers in health, education, childcare and public welfare. The interdisciplinary training office was located at the upper secondary school which had approximately 115 students enrolled each year. Despite its size, the school offered first- and second-year programs in childcare and youthcare, health sciences, construction, and electrical work. Each year, more than 50% of the students chose VET. For example, in 2022, 65 students chose vocational programs, while 51 chose college preparatory programs. Twenty-five teachers worked at the school in addition to other professionals. The administration consisted of a principal and two other leaders who worked as a team. One leader was responsible for VET.

The parts that delimit the case, as mentioned, were a local VET system and its subunits. The interviews were conducted with strategically selected informants, representing organisational actors in the four parts of VET (students, a school, an interdisciplinary training office, and companies/institutions offering apprenticeship placements). The qualitative data consisted of 12 interviews with significant actors for VET and five group interviews with students and apprentices; each group included five students. The informants were selected with the support of the principal and based on each person's pivotal role in VET transitions.

Interviewees included:

- the former school leader, as he played a leading role in establishing the current system;
- the current school leader;
- the vocational education leader;
- the school counsellor;
- a teacher from the electrical program;
- a teacher from the childcare and youthcare program;
- the head of the interdisciplinary training office;
- apprentice supervisors from healthcare;
- apprentice supervisors from childcare;
- apprentice supervisors from a construction company;
- four teachers from the healthcare program (one group interview);
- two teachers from the construction program (one interview); and
- students and apprentices (five group interviews).

The authors conducted the data gathering together. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research approved the research. We handled data in line with the law on personal data. Following ethical guidelines for conducting research, the participants were provided with oral and written information before the interviews. We asked for permission to record the interviews on a secure device and informed the interviewees that the recorded material would be deleted as soon as the anonymised transcriptions were completed. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. In the analysis, we have ensured the de-identification of location by not using any names of persons, places or organisations. In line with the National Research Ethics Committee, we emphasised the importance of treating participants with respect, seeking good outcomes, ensuring fairness, and maintaining integrity.

In the analysis of the transcribed interviews, we worked together. In the first phase, we used thematic analysis. We found that the data from the different parts of the VET system correlated with topics such as safety in students' learning environments, working on inclusive transitions, cooperation in networks with the labour market, and allocating and using resources. Based on the four categories from the first phase, we worked with concepts as exploratory categories in the second phase. The concepts we used were organising, actant network, meaning and sense-making (Czarniawska, 2008; Weick et al., 2005), life- and system-world, culture and tradition (Habermas, 1985); and personal curriculum, pathways and life tracks (Billett, 2023). The term *actant* is used because not everyone who acts can become an independent actor with their own voice, but many are part of networks that act as actors (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005). The analysis resulted in the themes presented in the findings: the actant network (Czarniawska, 2014), action and meaning (Weick et al., 2005), and students' lifeworlds and personal curriculum (Habermas, 1985; Billett, 2023).

Findings

Several different organisations and actant networks were involved in the transition from school to apprenticeship, as the transition occurred over an extended time period. In the findings section, the various organisations and their characteristics are described, as well as institutionalised actant networks as they appear to an observer in the specific case. These constitute the context in which the transition is situated. Furthermore, the actions of the various actors in the network are described; for example, what is done to create opportunities and meaning for the students. The findings also include how students perceived the organisation and collaboration among various actors, and how personal curriculum took shape in the students' lifeworlds. The context of rurality, as theorised by Corbett (2015), frames the results.

The Actant Networks

In the rural municipality, the VET transition from school to apprenticeship was facilitated by actant networks that crisscrossed between the various organisations and actors in VET. A local interdisciplinary training office was established at the school to support VET students who were not receiving satisfactory follow-up from the central training offices in the county. Hiring someone with a pedagogical background to lead the training office was essential and made integration between school and training easier:

> *I think it is very important that she came from the education sector and had a pedagogical approach to her role in the training office. Because then we get an understanding that, okay, the expertise lies in the companies. We should organise and guide as best we can, and we should handle all the necessary paperwork and such. That is our responsibility. However, the expertise should reside in the companies, with the skilled workers in the companies. (Former principal)*

The actant networks involved in the transition had a time perspective; that is, transition occurs as a process over several years. In secondary school, students participated in VET to gain information and experience about vocational training. The head of the training office met the students for the first time in the 9th grade during an open day. The students were informed about vocational paths during internships and parent meetings. The head of the training office and the school counsellor remained part of the students' network after they started upper secondary education:

> *I've arranged it so that she [the leader of the training office] is present when we provide information about vocational education. We include her when we visit classes in November and provide information after they have started and when they make their choices. … At the parent meeting before Christmas in the 10th grade, she is present. … Moreover, if there is anything she needs cooperation on regarding a student who has had some adjustments and whom we have had in student services, we assist them when they are apprentices. … Since she's at the school, it's fantastic because you can meet her in the area, or they can make an appointment and ask about something related to career choices. (Counsellor)*

The students' options in VET and transitions were a shared responsibility among leaders, teachers and the guidance counsellor. Communication was ongoing, and homeroom teachers played a central role in referring cases to the counsellor. Subject teachers also contributed to student success by providing subject-specific information. Another example of the actant network was the continuous collaboration in team meetings:

> *If there's a student who struggles a bit in mathematics, the mathematics teacher often comes and talks to both the class teacher and teachers in program subjects, for example. Then they find a solution to the problem right then and there. (Teacher, construction)*

> *Just take the teacher team meetings ... where we sit and talk about the students, and it's also about how we present the students. … It's often like that in those meetings; we see them, what can we do to make this work? So we sit there, and then all the teachers find out what the problem or challenge is, and then we try to make the best of it. (Teacher, childcare and youthcare program)*

The school's leadership team also worked closely together. Since the team was small, everyone shared a common meaning of what was happening in the school. The idea was that the connections between leadership and the students should be strong, and the outcomes of the leader's initiatives that were implemented should be visible to, and seen as important for, the students:

> *We are a very close-knit leadership team; we work together a lot, and we have a good understanding of what each of us does. … what we discuss, talk about, and work on should ultimately have an impact on the students, whether it's in terms of learning, social aspects, or in some other way. … We talk a lot about it, that what we initiate should have an impact on the end-user. It's crucial for us. (Leader, vocational education)*

One important aspect of organising rural VET was teamwork at different levels. For example, the four vocational disciplines collaborated across subjects and in projects. All staff, including administration, kitchen staff and janitors at the upper secondary school, gathered in the staff room during lunch breaks. Problems that arose during the day could thus be addressed immediately, and more administrative matters, such as the need for a substitute teacher or transportation to a construction site, could be resolved directly.

> *They collaborate, you know … But the collaboration, we collaborate crosswise, I think, everywhere, and the same goes for the carpentry students. We have such close relationships everywhere, so we can reach each other all the time; everyone gathers in the staff room every day … we pull the threads we need, and I think there's a culture of using the resources we have available to help our students reach their goals. … I don't perceive anyone as being more concerned with themselves than with the students, and I think that's a great thing. (Leader, vocational education)*

Staff reported that they collaborated to support students in reaching their goals in several ways. The systems at play also related to the fact that some services, often found outside VET education at the rural municipality, were gathered under the same roof. The situation with different actors relating to different organisations under the same roof had an impact on how transitions and the risk of marginalisation for students could be handled:

> *Are there some we miss? … I mean, there are people who get sick, who drop out, refuse to show up, things like that … we have systems in place to support individual students. So, it's certain that some have slipped through the cracks for us, I'm convinced of that … we have the follow-up service here at the school. And that's a factor that's a success criterion … that the counsellor and the follow-up service here are the same person. And the training office is on the school premises, which is also very, very convenient. Our teachers are skilled workers who come from the local business community, who know the owners of the businesses and what they work on, and who fits where … I think the individual level is a key to getting satisfied students and results. (Leader, vocational education)*

> *And it's now a choice that we do it, and then we stand by our decision, and we are willing to bear the cost if we don't get the funding for it. (Head of school)*

Parallel with resources initiated to support students at risk, the counsellor made sure to work closely with teachers, providing teachers with support on how to best progress with individual students. In addition, the counsellor participated in teacher-team meetings where the challenges and opportunities for individual students' progressions were aired. Class teachers were responsible for each class, while subject teachers had subject responsibility. At the school, collaboration was frequent through formal systems, such as annual schedules and meetings, as well as informal everyday conversations.

When students engaged in practice at work or apprenticeships in companies within the municipality, the school collaborated closely with the business community, which was both accessible and supportive of the school and the students. As the school of VET was small, the staff had opportunities to match students with the companies. For students at risk, the matching and tight network between the school and companies was highly significant.

In the transition from school to work, vocational teachers' networks and the school's general interactions with its surroundings were important for students' learning during their school years

and their transition to apprenticeships. The findings indicated that what the students learnt at school was significant for their socialisation as skilled workers and how they experienced being in practice at a company or institution:

> *Over one year of school here I've learned a lot practical and interesting stuff, which I imagine I could make use of. Both later in life, but also in the career path I've chosen. (Student, VET)*

Actions and Meaning

Our study showed how important the two years of education at the local school were for the students regarding the transition to apprenticeship that followed. The collaboration between schools and the local labour market was considered a key factor in the successful completion of VET. Employers expressed that their contribution through offering practical training and apprenticeships was an essential investment for the students' completion of VET. Schools have a dual responsibility: to educate students with the necessary skills to become productive workers, and to provide equal opportunities for students from all backgrounds to succeed in work and life.

All the VET programs sent their students to work at companies during the first year of education. The VET teachers prioritised practical work early on, something which came to the fore in a dialogue between two teachers in construction during a group interview:

> *They are very eager to get started. They have a lot of energy when they come … It's about trying to gather that energy and channel it into something positive. … They want something to do, especially those who often end up in our program … we have to make them like the books that are related to the profession or the subject. And that's why what we do is important, I think. We introduce practical experience first … so that when they open the book, they can see that they've tried this. (Teacher 1, construction)*

> *Yes, exactly. Practice first, and then theory. And we emphasise that a lot. Very little theory at the beginning … Our leadership also says that we need to focus on the practical aspect. They have spent 10 years in school down the road here … so they have chosen construction and construction technology because they want to do something practical. We need to give them that opportunity. (Teacher 2, construction)*

In the municipality during the first and second years of construction studies in VET education, the students engaged in meaningful, practical work that involved either working for a company or participating in a project related to the local community. The teachers were pleased with the abundance of real construction projects available to them. These projects provided students with opportunities to explore various vocational directions within the field of construction and construction technology that they could choose in their second year.

> *People from the local community contact us, especially during this time of year, in June and during the summer. They have heard that we might be suitable for carrying out a construction project, so we almost have a luxury problem every summer when it comes to choosing which jobs to accept. (Teacher, construction)*

Parallel with assignments given to the VET programs, there was work experience in a company. When a student first entered a company, they typically worked from 7 am to 3 pm. Through work experience, they established relationships, explored their interest in the profession, and tried out different tasks. During this period, they might discover their preferred area of work and come to build connections with fellow workers. If they made a good impression, they might return to the same company for work experience in their second year, increasing their chances of securing an apprenticeship. For students with difficulties establishing a work experience place for themselves at a company, teachers had good connections with the local labour market and could provide suggestions and help the students find something suitable.

> *Fortunately, we have enough contacts in the construction industry in our community, so we can help by checking around to see if there is anyone who could use an extra hand for a week. Usually, it works out, and they get into a company, and then things start rolling, and they become more confident that this was not so bad. Typically, by the next round, they have usually arranged their own placement. (Teacher, construction)*

In a group interview, the teachers in healthcare stressed the importance of early practical adaptation. At the beginning of the semester, they focused on social relations within the student group and typically had some overnight trips together to support the social foundations of the learning environment.

The teachers stressed that it was crucial to encourage collaboration between first- and second-year VET students. They recognised the value of fostering a positive working culture with shared meanings and values among second-year students that could be passed on to their first-year peers. Over time, the teachers came to appreciate the significance of employing diverse and practical teaching methods in VET.

> *The aspect of variety is very important, as is the practical approach, that we have much collaboration between first and second year, I would say, is important. (Teacher, healthcare)*

The education and labour market of the rural municipality in our study was gendered, with girls often choosing health and childcare while boys tended to choose construction and electricity. Since two of the programs in VET attracted mostly male students (though there were females), raising the status of the healthcare program was a priority for the VET staff.

> *So, we try to use the school and showcase ourselves to a greater extent. ... We invite people here, the elderly and the developmentally disabled, and open up the school to them. We also have our own T-shirts for the section. Nice blue ones with a logo ... to create a sense of pride for our field and subject area. (Teacher, healthcare)*

Several of the teachers in healthcare had additional roles in rural VET. For instance, one teacher also worked as a special education advisor, another a counsellor, and yet another was an environmental advisor. Although their administrative tasks may have varied, their roles were interrelated and integrated in terms of the support they provided to students in their academic and personal pursuits. For instance, when the environmental advisor worked as a teacher in the classroom, there were close connections between the different roles she fulfilled:

> *The role of an environmental advisor is a bit peculiar because I'm sort of like a teacher at the same time as I'm an environmental advisor, and I'm supposed to help so that the students who have special challenges make some academic progress. But with some, we work more on the social aspects. We work on getting them to come to school and motivate them to sit in the cafeteria and have lunch, yes, because there's social anxiety and various other issues. So, it's a bit fuzzy to describe exactly what I do. But I prepare lessons and try to make it run smoothly for them during class. (Teacher, healthcare)*

VET Teachers faced a wide range of academic levels among students. Collaboration among professionals was essential to guide all students through the educational path. The primary goal was to ensure that the students thrived and enjoyed their time at school.

Even when the transition from school to work was well organised, some students required individual attention on their pathway from school to work. Each year, some students started vocational programs and, after a while, realised that they had chosen the wrong path. Some realised it right away, but others discovered it after a few months. At the school, it was a collective task to find the best solution for each student. The rural municipality offered limited programs at upper secondary, and the job market was narrow; thus, compared to an urban situation, the students had fewer opportunities to choose from. The upper secondary school was

the first institution to help students in such cases. The efforts from the school to offer equal and flexible opportunities contributed to a high degree of completion.

> *We have a strong sense of responsibility in such cases because we know that there is no other option here. I mean, if they are not in school, where are they then? … So, we take a very large responsibility to ensure they come here … and there's an advantage to living in the countryside. We set standards and have some expectations at school … I believe that other schools may lose students to other offerings. I mean, there are communities outside of school that students can apply to, and that happens to a lesser extent here. (Leader, vocational education)*

VET staff at the rural school took responsibility for supporting the students along the pathway towards their exams. We found similar examples when students faced difficulties during apprenticeship. The supervisors at the companies or public sector expressed that there was a support network available to help them find effective solutions. At times, an apprentice may have needed to switch their workplace, or they may have needed to adapt to the tasks given to them at the company or institution. It was also possible to extend the apprenticeship period or to provide them with more opportunities to enhance their skills.

Students' Lifeworlds and Personal Curriculum

Certain values have guided the organising of the students' pathways by connecting to their lifeworlds and helping them create a personal curriculum. The counsellor expressed a value held by the school:

> *In my core beliefs, I think it has always been there that everyone should be valued and able to accomplish things from their own perspective. I think that belief has been deeply ingrained. So, you have to be on the lookout for what suits each individual. (Counsellor)*

There were positive and negative aspects of participating in a small school situated in a rural municipality, where the small number of programs limited students' choices of educational pathways, disciplines of apprenticeship, and vocations. However, the small size of the rural municipality influenced and, when necessary, enhanced the interactions in the actant network. Engagement to support students made way for the possibility of entering a pathway that was connected to students' future work, living and life.

The school paid close attention to the diverse range of students to support those who were skilled craftsmen but struggled with concentration and had faced unfavourable circumstances. As students, they were held accountable for their actions; they were provided with personalised support from their teachers. Additionally, the students were given guidance on their tasks to ensure their success.

> *Essentially, we guide students in a manner that presents them with tasks that they can successfully complete. The teachers who instruct vocational subjects are adept at identifying appropriate tasks and training locations. However, some students may require additional support and guidance from a teaching assistant, environmental mentor, or teacher to prevent them from failing and losing confidence. Assisting them in realising their potential is essential. (Counsellor)*

The students confirmed that teachers continued helping them until they understood and felt comfortable with their tasks. Since the school was small, teachers could find time to support students. For example, two students expressed how they had been struggling with reading and writing. Being in VET at a small school in a rural municipality had been successful for them. In a discussion in a group interview, students said:

> *I have it too; the letters curl up when I'm reading, but if there's something I wonder about, I just ask the teacher. So, as you say, one might get it explained a bit better, yes. Can get a bit*

> *more time; it's just about letting the teachers know that I have dyslexia, for example. Need a little more help.*
>
> *Yes. And the teacher understands that.*
>
> *They are very understanding. It's not threatening to let them know about it.*
>
> *No, not at all. (Students, VET)*

During the group interviews with the students, it was apparent that they valued adaptive tasks and practical education. As mentioned by the teachers, practical work was integrated into the curriculum starting from the first year of education. The small class sizes at the school allowed students to participate in a variety of practical tasks that may not have been possible in larger groups.

> *We went straight to work and had to start learning things very early, and it wasn't about getting a lot of information; it was straight into it. I thought that was great, fun, and fantastic. Getting right into it and learning practical skills and such. (Student, VET)*
>
> *There are a lot of advantages, as said, it's quite direct. Start, learn, begin practical jobs, and keep growing, and keep at it all the time. For my part, at least, it's the best way to learn. When you get to start working in practice and working with your hands, and yeah, all that. (Student, VET)*

The students emphasised the importance of gaining practical experience in the workplace. They found it supported their learning and provided opportunities to build connections and networks for future apprenticeships, summer jobs, and employment. In the public sector, the school and the public institutions had agreed that the sector provide the school with some alternative practice places. Thereafter, the students could make choices within the frame of the opportunities delivered. In electricity and construction, teachers encouraged students to make the call to the company by themselves. In a group interview, two students discussed the arrangement of finding practice or apprenticeship:

> *The teachers and the school prefer that we try to arrange it ourselves, yes. The teacher at the school wants us to handle it ourselves. (Student, VET)*
>
> *But they want you to be independent. That's why they say that, but of course, if you can't find anyone, the teacher always has something available, where they take in people. So then he just takes initiative. (Student, VET)*

VET is considered a wise choice in the rural municipality where the study was conducted. Several students chose vocational education out of interest. They enjoyed working with their hands, and they had parents who worked in the same profession. Some students made their choice due to an earlier overload in book studies. Next to being considered a wise choice, VET studies were regarded as a sensible choice in the rural municipality. In some part, a choice was connected to the opportunity to enter the job market quickly. The choice could also be considered sensible (considering the limited options for upper secondary education) if they wanted to stay in the local rural municipality. Then, by taking VET, the students found they could work anywhere in the world.

> *Well, the advantage of vocational education is that you can quickly enter the workforce with only a few years spent on studying. And people with vocational skills are needed everywhere in the world, even here in [place name]. There are many advantages to choosing VET. (Student, VET)*

Students deliberated over the available VET programs at their upper secondary school. However, they were aware that their choices were restricted, and they evaluated different factors before making any decision. They pondered whether they wanted to continue in the same area or

explore other options. Despite this, once they made a choice, they tried to view it positively. Students in a group interview pondered their choices:

> *I was thinking about what options we had here, where I wanted to go, and there was an option that I wanted to pursue, yes. So it was an easy choice for me, at least. (Student, VET)*
>
> *Well, I might have wanted to go into construction engineering a bit. Still, it was a plus that there was also carpentry here, so I could choose that instead. And I'm happy with that choice. I'm satisfied with this choice. But if there had been construction engineering, I would have chosen that. (Student, VET)*

Discussion and Conclusion

Rural areas often face challenges in the organising of education and work due to limited resources. In rural areas, standardisation and centralised policies can hinder local VET from reflecting the unique identities and economies of the community. Urban standards of education often do not consider local variations in VET transitions, as for example the local labour market. It is important for local institutions, such as VET and the labour market, to work together for the resilience of rural communities (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; McAreavey, 2022). Inclusion and fostering democracy are equally crucial for society as skills training. VET is a matter of developing excellence in terms of virtues and good judgement or practical wisdom (Rosvall & Nylund, 2022; Tyson, 2015).

In our rural study, lifeworld perspectives shed light on identity formation through place-based experiences, influencing social divisions. Research indicates that factors like gender, class, parents' occupations and limited local labour markets shape students' career choices (Farrugia, 2014; Habermas, 1985; Rönnlund, 2020). In addition, rural youth prioritise independence in choosing a career, but also have a strong attachment to family and place, indicating ambivalence due to the lack of appropriate educational facilities (Rosvall et al., 2018). In that sense, it is crucial to investigate how the organising of rural VET supports student crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation.

We find that integrating institutions for school and work prevents marginalisation risks in VET. The transition from the second year of education to the third year of apprenticeship is a critical point in vocational education, and completing VET is essential for future job opportunities (Falch & Nyhus, 2011). In line with crossroads and transitions, our findings indicate that educational institutions were committed, and all personnel involved in VET adapted to each individual student and their specific journey from school to work (Billett, 2023). The small size of the school made the actant network tightly integrated with several points of connection involving different roles. Leaders of vocational education, VET teachers and subject teachers worked closely together with the best interest of the students in mind. The staff constructed and stabilised each other's identity by recognising each other's value for the students (Czarniawska, 2014). The activities that people perform in an organisation contribute to sense-making and make meaning visible. The culture and values guided the meaning (Habermas, 1985; Weick et al., 2005); as the counsellor at the school said, "*everyone should be valued and able to accomplish things from their own perspective. I think that belief has been deeply ingrained.*"

We conclude that culture and values are central in a rural municipality; yet it is important to understand that, in local VET provision, practical actions created order in chaos and made meaning visible. When making sense of new events, staff, students and companies used previous experiences as a framework for understanding (Weick et al., 2005). Episodes were connected through narratives that provided meaning, and organisational practices weaved together the symbolic, the practical, and the political. We understand that it was the practical work, carried out in the transition from school to work and starting early in the first year at school, that overbridged the distinction between system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1985), and it also

moderated and integrated the difficult shift from school rationality to production rationality (Esmond, 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004).

The goal of VET is to bridge the gap between education and work. However, in practice, cooperation between businesses and educational institutions often falls short (Esmond 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). From an educational perspective, work can be understood as a rationalised structure, difficult to change and communicate with. Considering the structural aspects of work, grades and standards will be important for VET students in finding employment. However, Habermas (1985) claimed that the system world has its roots in people's lifeworlds where they are required to interact and communicate to develop structures. Based on our findings, we claim that practical work which interlinks education and work—where students are recognised as responsible, able and valuable (political) actors—contributes to weakening the system world's cemented and bureaucratic structures. As a result, students' possibilities for inclusion and participation in the transition comes to the fore (Weick et al., 2005).

Our findings also suggest that the ongoing work of organising VET is underpinned by the actant network. In our study, the network stretched over a long period: the period when students met VET at upper secondary school, then there were two years of education, work experience and, finally, they moved to apprenticeship. While there were limited choices in programs and work, the network's engagement with organising a personal curriculum became even more important. In talking about organising a personal curriculum, we mean the way the leader of the school and of VET, the counsellor, and the leader of the interdisciplinary training office, together with teachers and central actors in the working life, organised and supported students' different pathways through education because everyone was valuable for the local community.

From the study, we conclude that a central aspect of organising is the interaction between different individuals, organisations, roles, positions and places involved in solving problems and creating events (Czarniawska, 2014). We found that the organising supported students' crossroads and transitions and the risk of student marginalisation was taken seriously, as all actants and their networks were regarded as equally important and involved in the students' paths toward their exams. At the centre of organising and the actant attention was the journey of the students and their personal curriculum and pathway through education and life (Billett, 2018). As the leader of VET said, *"I don't know anyone in our organisation who is more interested in him- or herself than in the students' success."*

Nevertheless, the small, rural school and the local environment offered limited opportunities for students. There were five study programs to choose from, as well as a gender-segregated VET education and labour market (Lorentzen & Vogt, 2021). Our findings indicate that the students chose in line with what was available and traditional in the rural area. This may be understood because the system world puts limitations on and shrinks the individual's lifeworld (Habermas, 1985). Making untraditional choices may, therefore, affect the students' personal curriculum (Billett, 2023) and exclude them from the rural pathway and the place-based and place-conscious education (Kvalsund, 2019).

The aspect of organising is a continually ongoing work that is not possible to study, except from a certain place at a specific time. Times and places shift during the transition and in our research we found points of connection that were crucial for the students' success. The points of connection supported students' transition; for example, the practical work carried out in collaboration with the local community and the labour market. Additionally, the findings from our study indicate that the sense-making which arose in the students' continuing interactions with teachers and workers in the labour market supported transitions and laid a foundation for finding employment at a later stage.

The interdisciplinary training office and its intersection point with the counsellor at the school played a role in limiting marginalisation. We found that in the organising, their roles

interconnected and stretched out to both the students and teachers at the school, and the leaders and supervisors for apprentices in working life; thus, organising creates a transition safety net. In contrast to Corbett's (2015) research that concluded with learning to leave, our study indicates that students in VET learn to stay. To conclude, in our study we found that it takes an organised village to raise a child.

References

Angus, L., Golding, B., Foley, A., & Lavender, P. (2011). Promoting "learner voice" in VET: Developing democratic, transformative possibilities or further entrenching the status quo? *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 65(4), 560–574. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2013.855648

Antonsen, K. M., Anvik, C. H., & Waldahl, R. H. (2016). *Jeg skulle ikke være en av de som slutter, liksom! Frafall og tiltak mot frafall videregående opplæring i Lofoten* [I shouldn't be one of those who drop out, somehow! Dropouts and measures against dropping out of upper secondary education in Lofoten] (Report No. 10). Nordlandsforskning. https://www.nordlandsforskning.no/nb/news/2016/flere-veier-til-frafall-i-lofoten

Aðalsteinsdóttir, K. (2008). Small schools in north-east Iceland. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(3), 225–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313830802025017

Autti, O., & Bæck, U.-D. K. (2021). Rural teachers and local curricula: Teaching should not be a bubble disconnected from the community. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65(1), 71–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1659399

Billett, S. (2023). The personal curriculum: Conceptions, intentions and enactments of learning across working life. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 42(5), 470–486. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2023.2245150

Brauer, R., & Dymitrow, M. (2014). Quality of life in rural areas: A topic for the rural development policy? *Bulletin of Geography: Socio-Economic Series*, 25, 25–54. https://doi.org/10.2478/bog-2014-0028

Corbett, M. (2015). Rural education: Some sociological provocations for the field. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 25(3), 9–25. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v25i3.100

Czarniawska, B. (2008). Organizing: How to study it and how to write about It. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 3(1), 4–20. https://doi.org/10.1108/17465640810870364

Czarniawska, B. (2014). *En teori om organisering* [A theory of organising] (2nd ed.). Studentlitteratur.

Czarniawska, B., & Hernes, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Actor-network theory and organising*. Liber.

Esmond, B. (2018). "They get a qualification at the end of it, I think": Incidental workplace learning and technical education in England. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 70(2), 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1393000

Falch, T., & Nyhus, O. H. (2011). *Betydningen av fullført videregående opplæring for sysselsetting blant unge voksne* [The importance of completed upper secondary education for

employment among young adults]. Senter for Økonomisk Forskning. https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-7989-2011-04-01

Farrugia, D. (2014). Towards a spatialised youth sociology: The rural and the urban in times of change. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *17*(3), 293–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.830700

Flyvberg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter. Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge University Press.

Gristy, C., Hargreaves, L., & Kučerová, S. R. (Eds.). (2020). *Educational research and schooling in rural Europe: An engagement with changing patterns of education, space, and place*. Information Age Publishing.

Habermas, J. (1985). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Beacon Press.

Hargreaves, L., Kvalsund, R., & Galton, M. (2009). Reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in British and Nordic countries: Analytical perspectives and cultural meaning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *48*(2), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.02.001

Helms Jørgensen, C. (2004). Connecting work and education: Should learning be useful, correct or meaningful? *Journal of Workplace Learning*, *16*(8), 455–465. https://doi.org/10.1108/13665620410566423

Hovdhaugen, E., & Skålholt, A. (2019). Å forstå regionale forskjeller i gjennomføring i videregående opplæring [To understand regional differences in implementation in upper secondary education]. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *3*(3), 24–42. https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.3281

Iversen, J. M. V., Bonesrønning, H. J., & Pettersen, I. (2010). *Kommunal skolepolitikk etter kunnskapsløftet: Med spesielt fokus på økt bruk av spesialundervisning* [Municipal school policy after the knowledge boost: With particular focus on increased use of special education] (Report No. 7/10). Senter for Økonomisk Forskning. https://samforsk.no/publikasjoner/nr-7-10-kommunal-skolepolitikk-etter-kunnskapsloftet-med-spesielt-fokus-pa-okt-bruk-av-spesialundervisning

Karlsdóttir, A., Cuadrado, A., Gaini, F., Jungsberg, L., & Vetergård, L. O. (2019, June 18). *Enabling vulnerable youth in rural not in education, employment or training*. Nordregio. https://doi.org/10.30689/R2019:8.1403-2503

Kvalsund, R. (2019). Bigger or better? Research-based reflections on the cultural deconstruction of rural schools in Norway: Metaperspectives. In H. Jahnke, C. Kramer, & P. Meusburger (Eds.), *Geographies of schooling* (pp. 179–217). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18799-6_10

Lind, T. (2019). Upper secondary schools and sparsity: The case of Northern Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *63*(3), 333–346. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1375005

Lorentzen, T., & Vogt, K. C. (2022). Gendered transition structures: Life course patterns after completion of gender-segregated vocational education in Norway. *Journal of Education and Work*, *35*(1), 64–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.2009781

McAreavey, R. (2022). Finding rural community resilience: Understanding the role of anchor institutions. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 96, 227–236. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.10.014

Michelsen, S., Høst, H., Leemann, R. J., & Imdorf, C. (2021). Training agencies as intermediary organisations in apprentice training in Norway and Switzerland: General purpose or niche production tools? *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, *75*(3), 522–542. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2021.1904437

Milmeister, P., Rastoder, M., & Houssemand, C. (2022). Mechanisms of participation in vocational education and training in Europe. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.842307

Rapley, T. (2007). Interviews. In C. Seale, D. Silverman, J. F. Gubrium, & G. Gobo (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (2nd ed., pp 15–33). Sage.

Rapp, A. C., & Knutas, A. (2023). Organising opportunities for all: Building equity in vocational education and training. *Educational Research*, *65*(2), 267–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2023.2203145

Rapp, A. C., Knutas, A., & Smeplass, E. (2023). Bridging gaps in vocational education and training systems in Norway. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2023.2255992

Rönnlund, M. (2020). "I love this place, but I won't stay": Identification with place and imagined spatial futures among youth living in rural areas in Sweden. *Young*, *28*(2), 123–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818823818

Rosvall, P.-Å., & Nylund, M. (2022). Civic education in VET: Concepts for a professional language in VET teaching and VET teacher education. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2075436

Rosvall, P.-Å., Rönnlund, M., & Johansson, M. (2018). Young people's career choices in Swedish rural contexts: Schools' social codes, migration and resources. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 60, 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.02.007

Sennett, R. (2008). *The craftsman*. Penguin.

Skåholt, A., Aakernes, N., Andresen, S., Aspøy, T. M., Dahlback, J., Høst, H., Johannesen, H. S., Lillebø, O. S., Lyckander, R. H., Lysvik, R. R., Nyen, T., & Vagle, I. (2023). *Evaluering av fagfornyelsen yrkesfag* [Evaluation of the vocational education reform] (Interim Report 2). https://www.fafo.no/zoo-publikasjoner/evaluering-av-fagfornyelsen-yrkesfag-delrapport-2

Statistics Norway. (2020, September 18). *Hvordan går det med elever som ikke får læreplass? Gjennomføring i videregående opplæring og tilknytning til arbeidsmarkedet* [How is it going with students who do not get an apprenticeship? Completion in upper secondary education and connection to the labour market] (Report 2020/34). https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/hvordan-gar-det-med-elever-som-ikke-far-laereplass

Statistics Norway. (2023). *Gjennomføring i videregående opplæring* [Completion in upper secondary education]. https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/12961/

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2018). *Skolenedleggelser: Det er færre skoler i dag enn for 10 år siden Statistikknotat* [School closures: There are fewer schools today than 10 years ago]. https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/statistikk/statistikk-grunnskole/analyser/2023/analyse-av-skolenedleggelser/

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2022, June 2). *Kraftfull satsing på yrkesfag og kvalifisering i 2022* [Powerful investments in vocational subjects and qualification in 2022]. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/kraftfull-satsing-pa-yrkesfag-og-kvalifisering-i-2022/id2917183/

The Norwegian Government. (2021). *Fullføringsreformen – med åpne dører til verden og fremtiden* [The completion reform – with open doors to the world and the future] (Report No. 21, 2020–2021). https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-21-20202021/id2840771/

Topsøe Larsen, K. (2017). *Laboured learning: Investigating challenged localities through a geography of vocational education* [Doctoral dissertation, Aalborg University]. Aalborg Universitet Research Portal. https://vbn.aau.dk/en/publications/laboured-learning-investigating-challenged-localities-through-a-g

Tyson, R. (2015). Educating for vocational excellence: The auto/biographical exploration of enacted craft pedagogy. *Vocations and Learning*, *8*, 229–245. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-015-9132-5

United Nations. (2022). *Rural development*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/ruraldevelopment

Villa, M., & Knutas, A. (2020). Rural communities and schools: Valuing and reproducing local culture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *80*, 626–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.09.004

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, *16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Educational Practices and Teaching Materials in Spanish Rural Schools from the Territorial Dimension

Núria Carrete-Marín
University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, Spain
nuria.carrete@uvic.cat

Laura Domingo-Peñafiel
University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, Spain
laura.domingo@uvic.cat

Núria Simó-Gil
University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, Spain
nuria.simo@uvic.cat

Abstract

Rural schools have their own identity, influenced by the context in which they are immersed and their multigrade classroom structure. According to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, educational institutions must ensure the preservation of the particularities of the environment by taking into account the territorial dimension as a contextual element and as social and cultural heritage. Therefore, the integration of territorial elements into educational practices, projects and didactic support materials is a relevant topic for investigation. This paper aims to identify whether rural schools have the work of the territorial dimension as a priority in their educational practices and, specifically, if the curricular didactic materials used in multigrade classrooms also contemplate this. A survey questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of 537 Spanish rural teachers, and focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The results show that, although work on the territorial dimension is considered, it is not identified as a priority. A dearth of didactic resources thinks about the rural context and has references to it, and there is a lack of collaboration with families and communities in the creation of resources. The conclusion refers to the importance of bearing in mind elements of the territorial dimension in curricular materials and improving communication networks between teachers and teacher training.

Keywords: *educational practices, rural education, rural school, teaching materials, territorial dimension*

Introduction

Rural schools have traditionally been subordinated to the urban school model, which is why educational administrations treat them as extraordinary cases despite their notable presence (Abós-Olivares et al., 2015; Blanco-Martin et al., 2020). According to the *Informe España* 2020 (Blanco-Martin et al., 2020), there are around 723 clustered rural multigrade schools in Spain, with 72,923 enrolled students. However, these data are reductionist, as they do not include rural schools that do not belong to a school grouping. According to the Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional (2022), in nursery and primary education alone there are approximately 275,000 pupils in rural municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants.

In Spain, 85% of the territory is rural, home to 20% of the total population (Anzano-Oto et al., 2020). Traditionally, rural schooling has not been notably considered in educational policies (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021), nor in teacher training (Boix-Tomàs, 2023). Yet, it is important to consider the challenge that the diversified educational response necessary for multigrade classrooms poses for teachers (Boix-Tomàs & Bustos-Jiménez, 2014), as well as the need to attend to those elements of the environment that characterise and permeate school educational practices and projects (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021; Boix-Tomàs, 2014).

The urban-centric majority view has been critical in making the needs of rural schools invisible (Vázquez-Recio, 2008), and the conception, treatment and provision of curricular resources have been based on standardised educational criteria (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; García-Prieto et al., 2023). Over time, rural schools have continued to show an under-supply of materials compared to urban schools, and it is apparent that these are not suitable for them (González-Alba et al., 2020). It is also a function of an economic policy on education and initial teacher training that does not consider rural schools in the first instance (Boix-Tomàs, 2023; Corchón-Álvarez et al., 2013). In addition, publishers, who provide textbooks and other curricular materials (Abós-Olivares et al., 2015; García-Prieto et al., 2017), have failed to take into account the characteristics of rural schools when designing resources.

It is as if rural schools do not exist and it is not relevant for rural students, teachers and their communities to feel represented in curricular materials and the knowledge they contain. Little consideration has been given to particularities such as the organisation of multigrade classrooms or the importance of considering the specific knowledge of rural contexts and their communities. This implies the importance of reviewing the work of the territorial dimension in schools (Fundació Món Rural, 2019) and the role and training of teachers in the development of curricular materials, to ensure that teachers have knowledge of the environment and awareness for integrating it into classroom practices and materials.

Studies have reinforced that rural schools should play a dynamic role in the environment and the local community (Sepúlveda-Ruiz & Gallardo-Gil, 2011). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.a) and the Global Goals for the 2030 Horizon (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.b) urge education systems to guarantee the peculiarities of rural contexts, rather than considering them as limiting factors or something to be excluded, and to contextualise educational practices and support resources. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2019) stated the importance of not discriminating against children by area of residence and of improving equity in education. A rethinking of educational practices and support resources is necessary.

The study reported here is relevant because it provides evidence on the considerations of rural teachers about the territorial dimension in classrooms and teaching materials, and highlights the needs detected. It is also significant because of the lack of research focused on curricular materials in rural schools (Carrete-Marín & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2022; Cornish & Taole, 2021).

Considering the Territorial Dimension in Rural Schools

The school forms part of an institutional system within a specific territory. It is one actor in a system that participates and interacts with different actors and agents within the community, contributes to its development, organisation and identity, and generates social and cultural capital (Boix-Tomàs, 2014). The role of the school in a territory is vital, especially in municipalities undergoing depopulation processes; if the school disappears, so does the town (Bustos-Jiménez, 2007). It is necessary to consider the needs of the surrounding territory and to promote participation and cohesion with the local community (Autti & Bæck, 2021). Projects that are carried out concerning the territory—sharing objectives and establishing relationships with the

community—will take on relevance, ultimately opening the school to the municipality and promoting the creation of networks amongst the school, the community and other agents of institutions (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). The school is an important driver of territories' social, economic and cultural development (Tomazzoli, 2020).

The concept of *territorial dimension* goes beyond the term *territory*, which is used mainly to delimit a geographical space (Champollion, 2018). It is a symbolic concept that refers to different aspects related to events, problems and challenges that describe the felt reality shared by people in a rural community. It hints that the school is an institution that influences the interactions and structures in a territory, acting as a receiver and transmitter of identities and emotions and a shaper of rural social constructions (Boix-Tomàs, 2014). The school is considered to be socially alive, dynamic and responsible for working on all aspects that differentiate and identify a territory. Such aspects comprise local knowledges, valuing the environment, working together with the community, including it and the rest of the surrounding entities in the school, recognising the cultural and social heritage, and searching for and recognising rural references (Theobald, 2018).

The treatment of the territorial dimension in rural schools should take into account the following aspects:

- problems and social and educational challenges that the agents of the community consider as affecting the rural territory;
- activities organised by the school to respond to the concerns and desires of rural community members;
- the creation of networks or collaborations between schools and the institutions or local administrations to preserve or generate social capital. (Boix-Tomás, 2014; Champollion, 2018)

It is necessary to review the work done in schools, as well as the teaching materials that can contribute in some way to changes in rural territories, through the imaginary or the rootedness and appreciation of these territories by students. Apart from promoting essential curricular learning, rural schools need to promote cohesion and empowerment of their rural communities, thereby promoting educational activities closely linked to the economic, political, social and cultural needs and problems that make up their territory (Boix-Tomàs, 2014). To do this, it is necessary for teachers to know and take into account the particularities, knowledges and problems of rural territories, and to consider them in curricular planning and project promotion (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021). Teachers must be trained to develop a level of awareness and competencies for this purpose (Boix & Buscà, 2020).

Pedagogical and territorial decisions and the leadership of teaching teams are important aspects to consider. These involve taking the territorial dimension into account in classroom planning and conducting school projects in conjunction with the territory and its community. This will promote quality education in rural areas and contribute to the valuation and sustainability of rural municipalities (Nordholm et al., 2021).

Successful practices demonstrate the importance of interactions between rural communities and work in multigrade classrooms. These include the incorporation of the territorial dimension and a population's attachment to its territory, and the creation of links which promote improvements in rural territories (Alpe & Barthes, 2013; Lorenzo-Lacruz & Abós-Olivares, 2021). Teachers cannot evade the responsibility of integrating the territorial dimension into educational practices and classroom projects, due to the impact and influence the school can have (Champollion, 2018). Teachers must know the territory where they will work and develop relevant professional competencies (Lorenzo-Lacruz et al., 2023).

Incorporating the Territorial Dimension into Teacher Planning: School Activities and Teaching Materials

In multigrade classrooms, the quality of teaching for all students must prevail over catering for just a few. Didactic planning and choosing teaching strategies should bear in mind the needs of all students. This implies considering different levels of competence, interests and skills, and integrating the immediate context to make learning meaningful (Abós-Olivares et al., 2014; Boix-Tomàs & Bustos-Jiménez, 2014). It is essential to encourage and prepare teachers to offer diversified and situated learning for students.

Many teachers have contributed to organising curricular content to make teachers' work easier (Montiel-Ruiz & López-Ruiz, 2023). Most of the materials, especially those produced by publishers such as textbooks, have traditionally focused on the needs of the majority, urban schools, and have been based on normative curricula and standardised by subject and school year (Boix-Tomàs, 2011; García-Prieto et al., 2017). It is necessary that such resources go through reflective, critical and deliberative processes on the part of teachers, to ensure they are appropriate to the needs of their classrooms and provide contextualised and meaningful curriculum (Restrepo et al., 2023). This allows for more effective curriculum and situated learning, and enhances the transferability of learning (Ahamat & Kamarul, 2022; Galfrascoli, 2020; Sokolowicz et al., 2016).

Learning should be contextualised, interdisciplinary, meaningful and multigrade (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021) and curricular resources must also consider these (Santos-Casaña, 2011). When a school is responsible for dealing with the territorial dimension, decontextualised and graded materials will not be the most suitable (García-Prieto et al., 2023). This is closely related to the concept of place-based education in rural schools (Smit et al., 2015). However, the idea that rural territories in different places with similar characteristics can share common learning despite distance also emerges. This aspect opens avenues for establishing common themes and resources with transferable aspects and adaptations from one territory to another.

It is important to consider that didactic materials may come from sources beyond the school: the community or the different associations or entities with which a school has contact. The co-construction of materials with families, other community members, producers of materials and pupils is possible too. It is also important to define what we are referring to in each case and to assess the relevance of teaching materials, given that they have undergone transformations over time and currently have a great variety of formats. It is necessary to assess and reflect on which agents are involved in their elaboration and what criteria teachers use to evaluate and analyse these resources (Carrete-Marín & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2022).

Despite the relevance of the territorial dimension and the need to create materials adapted to the rural environment across different curricular areas—both in physical and electronic support and with the local community (Area-Moreira et al., 2010)—there are still few research studies on teaching materials that are adapted to the reality of rural schools and their needs (Cornish & Taole, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Our research highlights the need not only to include the territorial dimension in educational activities, but also to consider the role of the associated teaching materials.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study is based on the hypothesis that the territorial dimension should permeate educational practices in rural schools. Such practices will require specific materials that integrate the elements that define a school's local area to facilitate the learning processes carried out in multigrade classrooms. This allows us to ask the following questions:

- How is the territorial dimension taken into account in the educational practices and projects developed in rural schools?

- Do the didactic materials used by teachers in rural schools take elements of the territorial dimension into account?
- What is their main source of elaboration or who participates in them?
- Have teachers been trained to integrate the territorial dimension in curricular resources and didactic materials?

To answer these questions, four research objectives were set:

- to analyse whether teachers in rural schools take the territorial dimension into account in their educational practices and school projects;
- to find out whether teachers are familiar with materials that refer to the territory and what is the main source of such materials;
- to identify whether teachers consider the territorial dimension in the selection and design of curricular materials;
- to detect needs in the use, elaboration or adaptation of materials for the inclusion of the territorial dimension.

Method

To provide a well-founded answer to these questions, we collected quantitative and qualitative data in different phases, adopting a mixed methods approach. The design that best suited this study corresponded to a sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), describing aspects of the topic and allowing deep data analysis. This involved two complementary phases: a survey questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Both were implemented after approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia.

In the first phase, the survey questionnaire used a combination of multi-response, single response, Likert and open-ended questions. It was comprehensive, as it was part of a larger-scale research study and was designed by the research team. For the present study, questions were selected with content that refers to territorial dimension work, the incorporation of elements of local territory and culture, the type of materials used in the classroom and their provenance, teachers' knowledge of materials related to the territorial dimension, and the integration of local knowledge and the environment into materials for classroom activities.

The questionnaire was validated in terms of the format and content of the questions by expert judgement. It was piloted with rural school teachers to assess the relevance and understanding of the questions as well as to ensure the correct collection of data based on the questions asked. The questionnaire was administered online using Microsoft Forms and sent to more than 1600 rural school email addresses. Regular reminders and systematic monitoring of the receipt of responses were conducted for six months during the 2022–2023 school year. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 45 minutes.

A representative random sample of 537 teachers from rural schools in different regions of Spain was obtained. The participants' teaching experiences and their roles in rural schools are shown in Tables 1 and 2. The data for Table 2 were collected from multiple choice questions, so the percentages were calculated from the total number of responses recorded.

In the second phase, purposive selection of teachers for interviews and focus groups was based on responders to the questionnaire who showed interest in participating in this phase. With the relevance of their answers, it was possible to perceive their link with the object of study. Their availability, experiences in rural schools and locations across regions were taken into consideration. Some teachers who did not respond to the questionnaire but who could provide relevant and complementary information, because of their experience or their practices in rural schools, were invited to participate. Finally, 10 informants were selected for interviews and 16 participated in four focus groups.

Table 1. ***Participants' Teaching Experience***

Years as a Teacher	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants	Years as a Rural Teacher	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Up to 5 years	99	18.4	Up to 5 years	217	40.4
6–10	58	10.8	6–10	79	14.7
11–25	282	52.5	11–25	194	36.1
> 25	98	18.2	> 25	47	8.8
TOTAL	537	100	TOTAL	537	100

Table 2: ***Teachers' Roles and Teaching Sectors in Rural Schools***

Role	Number of Responses	Percentage of Participants	Educational Level	Number of Responses	Percentage of Participants
Staff	262	37.6	Kindergarten	293	39.6
Tutor	304	43.5	Primary	436	59
Itinerant	132	18.9	Secondary	10	1.4
TOTAL	698	100	TOTAL	739	100

The script of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups was organised around areas of response: their profiles and experiences, the teaching strategies and resources used, the criteria in their review and development, the training received, and their knowledge of specific materials developed and platforms or spaces for sharing and disseminating materials. Informed consent was sought before audio-recording their responses for later transcription. The duration of the interviews and focus groups was approximately 90 minutes. All informants' opinions, comments and impressions were noted.

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages). For non-parametric variables, Chi-Square (X^2) was calculated to find significant relationships between them. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test assessed whether the variables met the normality assumption. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS v27 with the significance level set at $p < .05$.

The qualitative data were analysed using an inductive system of coding by categories and subcategories. Data reduction and analysis were carried out with Atlas Ti v.23. The saturation and relevance of the information and the confirmation and contrast of descriptions and interpretations of the data were compared with the results or conclusions of similar studies. This provided credibility criteria for selecting and presenting representative data. For this article, the semi-structured interviews and focus group data were examined through a descriptive and qualitative analysis of memos and field notes. Relevant quotes were selected.

Incorporating the Territorial Dimension in Multigrade Teaching, Planning and Activities

A multiple-choice question in the questionnaire asked which didactic aspects were a priority for teachers. Table 3 shows that, although contextualised and meaningful work with reality was a

priority (11.8%), the two items directly related to the territorial dimension have a low presence: integration of aspects of the territory and rural environment in the contents (9.3%), and the incorporation of family and community members in classroom projects or activities (2.7%). The latter is linked to community references, the opening of the centre to the local community and the establishment of networks. These aspects will be key to the promotion of the territorial dimension, bearing in mind the crucial role of schools in rural areas (Boix & Buscà, 2020; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023).

Table 3. Didactic *Priorities in Teaching and Planning*

Didactic Aspects	Frequency	Percentage
Multigrade grouping/organisation	317	21.4
Orientations and follow-up of the textbook	65	4.4
Contextualised and meaningful work	175	11.8
Integration of the rural territory into the contents	175	11.8
Adaptation of the curriculum to the multigrade classroom	138	9.3
Globalised and cyclical work by themes (in spiral)	66	4.5
Different ways of presenting the information/activities	73	4.9
Different levels of complexity (contents/activities)	95	6.4
Flexibility and creativity	45	3.0
Personalisation of the learning process	129	8.7
Introduction of families/ members of the community	101	6.8
Didactic materials	40	2.7
TOTAL (multiple choice questions)	1482	100

We asked why these aspects were considered in the educational practices of multigrade classrooms (i.e., we were asking about the intentionality of rural teachers in the teaching/learning processes in multigrade classrooms). Table 4 shows that the teachers' priority was the development of key competencies (f = 289; 53.8%) and promoting teaching/learning situations for students from different levels or grades (f = 204; 38%). In the case of the territorial dimension, the data indicate that this intention was contemplated by a small percentage of respondents (f = 26; 4.8%). It will be necessary to see whether it is present in schools, even if it is not a priority.

In a compulsory open question, we asked more precisely about how teachers took into account the rural context of the classroom and school. The data indicate that they do not identify it as a priority in their work even though the territorial dimension is present in a significant way, and it is necessary to become more aware of it (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024).

Table 4. ***Pedagogical Purposes in Educational Practices***

Pedagogical Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Multigrade learnings	204	38
Academical results	11	2
Territorial dimension	26	4.8
Key competences	289	53.8
Others	7	1.3
TOTAL	537	100

Nevertheless, the qualitative data suggest that the majority more or less consciously or intentionally take the territorial dimension into account in their teaching. This illustrates that the school-territory interrelationship is regarded as a necessary and positive element to be included (n = 537). The qualitative analysis shows that the most frequent opinions (f = 88; 16.38%) highlight the organisation of outings to get to know the local environment and enhancing curricular content, including local and territorial knowledge (f = 63; 11.73%). In some cases, teachers even mentioned that they also used the elements of the territory as the focus or centre of interest of learning (f = 26; 4.84%). Moreover, the territorial dimension is present in classroom planning in terms of teaching methodology (f = 25; 4.65%) and choice of resources, such as the use of materials from the environment (f = 1; 2.79%), the participation of local community and families, and collaborations relating to activities and educational practices. This opens the school to the community and establishes networks with other entities (f = 18; 3.35%).

The school's openness to the environment is also taken into account through outings and participation in festivities and elements of local culture, as well as an extension of the school as a space in which to carry out activities and as an element that educates (f = 21; 3.91%). In contrast to these elements, the consideration of the territorial dimension in curricular teaching materials is scarcely present (f = 3; 0.55%). Teachers mentioned only materials such as stories or learning boxes with elements of the territory; they did not highlight whether the educational community participated in the production of these materials. Finally, the data show that there is important work in the promotion of projects from schools that try to have an impact on the development of the territory and on community projects. This corroborates the important role of promotion (f = 16; 2.97%).

The data reveal that there is a long way to go in the inclusion of the territorial dimension in rural schools, if it is to go beyond knowledge of the environment and efforts to contextualise learning (f = 38; 7.07%) to impacting on the methodology to make it meaningful and give pupils an appreciation of the territory and local values (f = 14; 2.60%). These aspects need to be reflected in the design and use of curricular materials.

Knowledge of Curricular Teaching Materials Related to the Territorial Dimension

Teachers were asked if they knew of any curriculum materials that took into account the rural context and were useful for adapting to their territory. The majority stated that they did not know of any (f = 478; 89%), compared to 11% who did know of some (f = 59). They referred to materials which were mainly produced by other teachers, by the rural group or by local institutions. This corroborates that respondents also found it necessary for teachers to produce the materials themselves. A considerable proportion of respondents agreed that the use of

digital platforms for teacher-to-teacher contact would be useful, not only to have a greater knowledge of existing materials and to improve their dissemination (f = 198; 36.9%), but also to share resources among teachers and learn about materials, from different places with similar characteristics, that could be adapted to their context (f = 140; 26.1%).

As shown in Table 5, the criteria that prevailed when selecting or creating resources referred to materials that encourage autonomous work (f = 204; 38%) and cooperative and competence-oriented work (f = 74; 13.8%). Regarding the selection or design of materials taking the territorial dimension into account, the data indicate a testimonial prevalence: three references to the criterion "school environment," referring to the rural territory (f = 3; 0.6%), and one reference to the criterion "references to the rural environment" (f = 1; 0.2%). It does not seem that these materials intentionally consider the territorial dimension. Moreover, bearing in mind that teachers' knowledge of specific materials dealing with the territorial dimension is quite low, it appears this has no significant relationship with the moment when rural teachers select or decide to create materials adapted to multigrade classrooms ($X^2 = 16.549$; df = 10; p = .085).

Table 5. ***Main Criteria for Selecting Teaching Materials***

Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Autonomy	204	38
Cooperation	164	30.5
Individual Learning	9	1.7
Content by levels	8	1.5
Global work	9	1.7
Key competences learning	176	23.5
Cross-disciplinary	8	1.5
School environment	3	0.6
Rural referents	1	0.2
Others	5	0.9
TOTAL	537	100

Finally, we asked about the training received for the development of resources for rural schools. The majority of teachers (87.9%; f = 472) stated that they had not been trained for this purpose. When added to the lack of knowledge of available resources, this can lead to difficulties in creating or adapting them or contemplating their use. This information was contrasted and complemented with the preliminary information gathered from the field notes about the interviews and focus groups. They corroborated many results of the questionnaire and revealed a lack of teacher training in considering the needs and characteristic elements of rural schools in the creation of materials to address multigrade teaching and the territorial dimension (Table 6, Excerpt A).

Table 6: ***Excerpts from the Interviews and Focus Groups***

A.	Lack of specific teaching training programs	• In the teaching career, there is no mention or representation of the rural school. There is no specific training in rural school, neither by the universities nor the educational administrations. (MC, interview memorandum) • The lack of capacity of teachers to attend rural schools. The problem is not the school; it is the teachers who have shortcomings and lack of training for it. (BO, interview memorandum)
B.	Opening the school to the global territory	• They also do service-learning related to territorial issues and environmental projects. It is a UNESCO school [its purpose is to publicise] its cultural and social heritage. (JR, interview memorandum) • Sometimes we focus on the idea of including elements of the environment so that the materials and activities contemplate rurality, and sometimes what the teachers ask is to see things outside their environment because perhaps those children do not have the possibility to see it or go. (Focus group 4, memorandum)
C.	Participation of students and families in the creation and use of teaching materials	• At school they create lapbooks [materials made by the students themselves] or they create their own games and even video games [gamifications]. The students have to make their own material and they can even make their books. (AT, interview memorandum) • He points out the importance of textbooks for the teacher, students and family as a guide for the teacher, as a consultation and specific activities for the students, for the family to have books at home [given the rural context there] and for them to be and share what the students do at school. (BO, interview memorandum)
D.	Teaching materials adapted by teachers	• The need for curricular adaptation and restructuring by teachers regardless of the area, methodology, type of school, experience. (Memorandum, discussion group 2) • The most important thing in the school is that all the teachers create the materials. Teamwork and cooperation. (CO, interview memorandum)

Participants emphasised that as much contextualised work as possible is needed in the classroom to consider the rural reality. They recognised the need to open the school to the global territory, not only to the local one, in order to access different opportunities and realities (Table 6, Excerpt B). The data suggest the necessity to open the classroom to families and the community, as well as to work on joint projects for local development. The data also suggest the importance of considering the participation of pupils, families and the community in the development of materials, to include their own and local knowledge.

That way, pupils can recognise themselves in these materials and this will help to empower families and the community, giving value to what they can contribute and valuing local culture so that it remains (Table 6, Excerpt C). On the other hand, the majority of teachers participating in this part of the research considered that teachers have to be the ones to adapt or create

resources. This is in line with the results of the survey questionnaire. Standardised materials such as textbooks did not meet their needs (Table 6, Excerpt D).

In short, the teachers said that a restructuring of resources is needed, as well as a curricular revision to adapt to the characteristics of the rural school and to adopt aspects of the communities' heritage and culture. Teachers said that it is not possible to speak of one rural school, but of several rural schools, and that the context is only one element that establishes schools' identities. In other words, resources need to undergo critical adaptation to include what is relevant for pupils and the specific community.

As the survey questionnaire shows, teachers' lack of knowledge of materials prepared for rural schools stood out, as well as the importance of teachers knowing how to create materials for the needs of their classrooms and territory. This suggests that it would be useful to share knowledge about how to do this, as well as to promote teacher networks so that information about existing resources might be shared.

Our research demonstrates that the territorial dimension was not highlighted by teachers as a priority in their planning of schoolwork. However, it was observed that most of the participants, when asked about this, considered that they do take the territorial dimension into account in the activities they design. This was especially when their intention was to contextualise learning and promote the value of the environment and local knowledge, and to highlight the rural school as a different school model, open to the territory and its community seen as a resource (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021). To deal successfully with the territorial dimension in the classroom, it will be necessary to emphasise the role of teachers. Indeed, their knowledge of and involvement with the territory will be fundamental to placing the territorial dimension at the centre of teaching and learning processes (Boix-Tomàs, 2014; Fundació Món Rural, 2019).

This finding is closely related to other studies about the specific teaching competences that are needed for rural schools (Boix & Buscà, 2020). Teachers must know local knowledge to promote projects that will influence local development (Jiménez-Sánchez, 2020) and encourage an appreciation of natural, social, cultural, tangible and intangible heritage and the grounding of students in the territory (Boix-Tomàs, 2014). Teachers should take advantage of the opportunities offered by being in rural territory, such as strong relationships and involvement with families, the community and the environment (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). They must also accept the interdependence of community and school and be aware of the positive impact a rural school can have on the territory's development and valuation (Abós-Olivares et al., 2021).

This study suggests that, at present, rural school teachers tend to use standardised curricular materials which are based on the characteristics of urban schools. For rural schools, the teaching materials should show realistic images of the rural environment so students can identify with the environment with which they are familiar. It is also necessary to avoid idealised and negative images of rural territories (Santamaría-Luna, 2020), as these can set up unrealistic expectations or deficits. As the data have shown, in many cases the work of the territorial dimension has been reduced to outings to the environment, or is of an anecdotal nature. This aspect should be examined further, in order to provide teachers with training that allows them to become aware of the need to address the territorial dimension in rural schools and evaluate the adequacy of available resources (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022). This could include reviewing the curricula used in teacher training (Abós-Olivares, 2011; Boix-Tomàs, 2023) and developing a set of pedagogical criteria to share with teachers in rural schools.

There seems to be a need to build awareness of the role that schools play in rural areas and to make sure that teachers develop appropriate understandings and competences before being expected to work there. The results point out the need to review and evaluate existing published and teacher-created resources, and to envisage successful practices through, for example, digital platforms that make it possible to reduce teacher isolation. The data also indicate that teachers

valued knowing about materials from other places with similar characteristics as this allows them to adapt materials for situated learning in their own location, as reinforced by various studies related to place-based education (Smit et al., 2015).

The data corroborate a widespread perception that teacher training programs do not take into account the specific training needs of teachers who will conduct their educational work in rural schools and areas. The apparent scant reference to rural schools in teacher training seems to link to a lack of knowledge about this educational model (Abós-Olivares, 2011). By extension, the study suggests teacher training should enable future teachers to acquire the necessary competences for rural schools. This highlights the need to change initial and in-service teacher training (Anzano-Oto et al., 2022), so that rural teachers are aware of the existence of specific materials designed for rural schools, are able to create their own resources, and can adapt materials from other rural locations.

Such training would permit rural teachers to recognise the relevance of knowledge of the local environment and the role of the rural school in territories undergoing depopulation. Additional training would enable teachers to become confident and capable in preparing appropriate teaching materials (Boix & Buscà, 2020). However, further thought is needed around this aspect, especially considering the isolation of many teachers, the lack of experience they may have in rural schools, and the potential preconceived ideas they might have about rural territories.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that the territorial dimension is not usually considered intentionally in the teaching and learning carried out in rural classrooms, and that teachers are not always aware of specific materials that deal with the territorial dimension. It has shown that the treatment of the territorial dimension is not a priority in the creation and selection of curricular teaching resources and this links to the lack of training teachers said they received.

It is important to stress that the mixed methods design adopted for this study has brought together the analysis of results obtained in two phases, thus allowing a response to the research objectives in greater depth. This is relevant because there are few publications on the subject. Although this study is part of a broader study, we recognise limitations. For example, it will be necessary to carry out more interviews with other profiles to build a global vision of the criteria for considering specific teaching materials that incorporate the territorial dimension. It will also be necessary to analyse the teacher training that is currently being received and to consider improvements for the development of teachers' competences for teaching in rural schools.

Finally, it should be emphasised that rural schools play a fundamental role in the creation of social capital, influence the views of the population, and help to preserve the heritage of the territory to which they belong (Boix-Tomàs, 2014, 2023). The territorial dimension should be explicitly considered in the educational work of rural schools, as the data from our study show. To guarantee relevant and meaningful learning, teachers must be provided with appropriate teaching materials created for this purpose and contextualised, given that those available do not account for the reality of rural locations. Some present a distorted view and do not help students experience situated and meaningful learning (Smit et al., 2015) and do not let them feel that the learning represents themselves, their territory and their community. Therefore, it will be necessary to promote knowledge and dissemination of available resources among teachers and to establish networks to showcase successful practices from rural schools.

Acknowledgement

This article and the associated data are part of Núria Carrete-Marín's doctoral thesis, from the Educational Innovation and Intervention Programme of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC), Spain. The research is supported by a UVic-UCC Predoctoral Research Grant.

References

Abós-Olivares, P. (2011). La escuela en el medio rural y su presencia en los planes de estudio de los grados de maestro en educación infantil y primaria de las universidades españolas [The rural school as a topic at the infantile and primary teacher initial formation in Spain]. *Profesorado, 15*(2), 1–14. https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/profesorado/article/view/43421

Abós-Olivares, P., Boix-Tomàs, R., & Bustos-Jiménez, A. (2014). Una aproximació al concepte pedagògic d'aula multigrau [An approach to the pedagogical concept of a multigrade classroom]. *Guix: Elements d'acció educativa*, *402*, 12–17. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4756156

Abós-Olivares, P., Boix-Tomàs, R., Bustos-Jiménez, A., Domingo-Peñafiel, L., Domingo-Cebrián, V., & Ramo-Garzarán, R. M. (2015). La escuela rural y la política educativa española. Diferencias entre comunidades autónomas [The rural school and Spanish educational policy. Differences between autonomous communities]. *International Studies on Law and Education, 19,* 73–90. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306387779_La_escuela_rural_y_la_politica_educativa_espanola_Diferencias_entre_Comunidades_Autonomas_Andalucia_Aragon_y_Cataluna

Abós-Olivares, P., Boix-Tomàs, R., Domingo-Peñafiel, L., Lorenzo-Lacruz, J., & Rubio-Terrado, P. (2021). *El reto de la escuela rural: Hacer visible lo invisible* [The challenge of the rural school: Make the invisible visible]. Graó. https://eduso.net/res/revista/32/resenas/el-reto-de-la-escuela-rural-hacer-visible-lo-invisible

Ahamat, M. I., & Kamarul M. K. (2022). Material adaptation among rural primary school English language teachers. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 28*(1), 90–102. http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2022-2801-07

Alpe, Y., & Barthes, A. (2013). De la question socialement vive à l'objet d'enseignement : comment légitimer des savoirs incertains? [From the socially lively question to the object of teaching: How to legitimise uncertain knowledge]. *Les Dossiers Des Sciences de l'Éducation, 29,* 33–44. https://doi.org/10.4000/dse.95

Anzano-Oto, S., Vázquez-Toledo, S., & Liesa-Orús, M. (2020). Análisis de la formación inicial en escuela rural en los grados de magisterio: Valoraciones y percepciones del alumnado como agente implicado [Analysis of the initial training in rural education in the teaching degrees: Evaluations and perceptions of the students as an involved agent]. *Tendencias Pedagógicas, 37,* 43–56. https://doi.org/10.15366/tp2021.37.005

Anzano-Oto, S., Vázquez-Toledo, S., & Liesa-Orús, M. (2022). Invisibilidad de la escuela rural en la formación de profesores [Invisibility of the rural school in teacher training]. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, *24*, e27, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.24320/redie.2022.24.e27.3974

Area-Moreira, M., Parcerisa-Aran, A. & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, J. (2010). *Materiales y recursos didácticos en contextos comunitarios* [Teaching materials and resources in community contexts]. Graó.

Autti, O., & Bæck, U.-D. K. (2021). Rural teachers and local curricula: Teaching should not be a bubble disconnected from the community. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65(1), 71–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1659399

Blanco-Martin, A., Chueca-Sánchez, A. M., López-Ruiz, J. A., & Mora-Rosado, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Informe España 2020* [Spain Report 2020]. Universidad Pontificia de Comillas.

Boix, R., & Buscà, F. (2020). Competencias del profesorado de la escuela rural Catalana para abordar la dimensión territorial en el aula multigrado [Competencies of Catalan rural school teachers to address the territorial dimension in the multigrade classroom]. *Revista Iberoamericana Sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, 18*(2), 115–133. https://doi.org/10.15366/reice2020.18.2.006

Boix-Tomàs, R. (2011). Qué queda de la escuela rural? Algunas reflexiones sobre la realidad pedagógica del aula multigrado [What remains of the rural school? Some reflections on the pedagogical reality of the multigrade classroom]. *Profesorado, 15*(2), 13–23. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4089448

Boix-Tomàs, R. (2014). La escuela rural en la dimensión territorial [The rural school in the territorial dimension]. *Innovación Educativa, 24,* 89–97. https://doi.org/10.15304/ie.24.1959

Boix-Tomàs, R. (2023). Formación inicial del docente y planificación en el aula multigrado [Initial teacher training and planning in the multigrade classroom]. *Revista Teias, 24*(72), 386–393. https://doi.org/10.12957/teias.2023.70623

Boix-Tomàs, R., & Bustos-Jiménez, A. (2014). La enseñanza en las aulas multigrado: Una aproximación a las actividades escolares y los recursos didácticos desde la perspectiva del profesorado [Teaching in multigrade classrooms: An approach to school activities and teaching resources from the perspective of teachers]. *Revista Iberoamericana de Evaluación Educativa, 7*(3), 29–43. https://revistas.uam.es/riee/article/view/3100

Bustos-Jiménez, A. (2007). Enseñar en la escuela rural. Aprendiendo a hacerlo. Evolución de la identidad profesional en las aulas multigrado [Teach in the rural school. Learning to do it. Evolution of professional identity in multigrade classrooms]. *Profesorado, 11*(3), 1–26. https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=56711311

Carrete-Marín, N. & Domingo-Peñafiel, L. (2022). Textbooks and teaching materials in rural schools: A systematic review. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 12*(2), 67–94. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1288

Carrete-Marín, N., Boix-Tomàs, R., & Buscà-Donet, F. (2024). Analysis of the contribution of rural schools to the territorial dimension from the teachers' perspective. *Revista de Investigación Educativa, 42*(2), 311–329. https://doi.org/10.6018/rie.559011

Champollion, P. (2018). *Inégalités d'orientation et territorialité: L'exemple de l'école rurale Montagnarde* [Inequalities of orientation and territoriality: The example of the Montagnard rural school]. Cnesco. https://www.cnesco.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/181026_Cnesco_Champollion_ecole_rurale_montagnarde.pdf

Corchón-Álvarez, E., Raso-Sánchez, F., & Hinojo-Lucena, M. A. (2013). Análisis histórico-legislativo de la organización de la escuela rural española en el período 1857–2012 [Historical-legislative analysis of the organization of the Spanish rural school in the period 1857–2012]. *Enseñanza & Teaching: Revista Interuniversitaria De Didáctica, 31*(1), 147–179. https://revistas.usal.es/tres/index.php/0212-5374/article/view/11609

Cornish, L., & Taole, M. J. (Eds.) (2021). *Perspectives on multigrade teaching: Research and practice in South Africa and Australia*. Springer.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Sage.

Fargas-Malet, M., & Bagley, C. (2022). Is small beautiful? A scoping review of 21st-century research on small rural schools in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal*, *21*(5), 822–844. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211022202

Fargas-Malet, M., & Bagley, C. (2023). Conceptualising small rural school-community relationships within a divided society: People, meanings, practices and spaces. *Oxford Review of Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2262383

Fundació Món Rural. (2019). *Proyecto Fopromar: La formación profesional y las competencias del maestro rural como dinamizador de la dimensión territorial de la escuela rural* [Fopromar Project: The professional training and skills of the rural teacher as a promoter of the territorial dimension of the rural school] (Final Report). https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/project-result-content/a355fd6c-1ea5-4b53-9e33-a35b8789b96d/Informe_final_proyecto_E__FOPROMAR.pdf

Galfrascoli, A. (2020). *Los materiales curriculares para la enseñanza de las ciencias naturales en 7° de escuelas rurales. Un estudio comparado* [Curricular materials for teaching natural sciences in 7th grade of rural schools: A comparative study]. [Doctoral dissertation, Nacional del Litoral University]. Estudios Rural. https://doi.org/10.48160/22504001er20.63

García-Prieto, F. J., Pozuelos-Estrada, F.J., & Álvarez-Álvarez, C. (2017). Uso de los libros de texto en la educación rural en España [Use of textbooks in rural education in Spain]. *Sintética. Revista Electrónica de Educación, 49*, 1–18. https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-109X2017000200009

García-Prieto, F. J., Álvarez-Álvarez, C., & Pozuelos-Estrada, F. J. (2023). Escuelas del medio rural español en proceso de hibridación: Estudio multicasos [Spanish schools at rural areas in hybridization process: Multi-case study]. *Pensamiento Educativo*, *60*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.7764/PEL.60.1.2023.4

González-Alba, B., Cortés-González, P., & Leite-Méndez, A. (2020). Las aulas multigrado en el medio rural en Andalucía: Visiones docentes [Multigrade classrooms in rural areas in Andalusia: Teaching visions]. *Revista de Investigación Educativa de la REDIECH*, *11,* e860. https://www.rediech.org/ojs/2017/index.php/ie_rie_rediech/article/view/860

Jiménez-Sánchez, J. (2020). Innovar desde la escuela rural [Innovate from the rural school]. *Participación Educativa*, *7*(10), 33–47. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7459310

Lorenzo-Lacruz, J., & Abós-Olivares, P. (2021). Escuela rural y territorio: Análisis de buenas prácticas educativas en el contexto de la comunidad autónoma de Aragón (España) [Rural school and territory: Analysis of good educational practices in the context of the autonomous community of Aragón (Spain)]. *Revista Espaço do Currículo, 14*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.1983-1579.2021v14n2.58080

Lorenzo-Lacruz, J., Buscà-Donet, F., & Abós-Olivares, P. (2023). Rural teacher competencies: An international comparative study on the territorial dimension of rural schools. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1542

Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional. (2022). *Las cifras de la educación en España* [Figures on education in Spain]. https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano/estadisticas/indicadores/cifras-educacion-espana/2020-2021.html

Montiel-Ruiz, F. J., & López-Ruiz, M. (2023). Inteligencia artificial como recurso docente en un colegio rural agrupado [Artificial intelligence as a teaching resource in a rural group school]. *Revista Interuniversitaria de Investigación en Tecnología Educativa*, *15*, 28–40. https://doi.org/10.6018/riite.592031

Nordholm, D., Nihlfors, E., & Arnqvist, A. (2021). Perceptions on the local school and further education: A rural school leader's perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *66*(1), 150–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1865447

Restrepo, N. R., Correa, J., Taborda, Y. M., & Ayala, L. J. (2023). Currículo contextualizado con pertinencia cultural para la educación infantil en contextos rurales [Contextualised curriculum with cultural relevance for early childhood education in rural contexts]. *Revista Iberoamericana Sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, 21*(3), 119–138. https://doi.org/10.15366/reice2023.21.3.007

Santamaría-Luna, R. (2020). La escuela rural [The rural school]. In A. Blanco-Martin, A. Chueca-Sánchez, J. A. López-Ruiz, & S. Mora-Rosado (Eds.), *Informe España 2020* [Spain Report 2020] (pp. 221–290). Universidad Pontificia de Comillas. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=780149

Santos-Casaña, L. E. (2011). Aulas multigrado y circulación de los saberes: Especificidades didácticas de la escuela rural [Multigrade classrooms and the circulation of knowledge: Didactic specificities of the rural school]. *Profesorado, 15*(2), 71–91. https://www.ugr.es/~recfpro/rev152ART5.pdf

Sepúlveda-Ruiz, M. del P., & Gallardo-Gil, M. (2011). La escuela rural en la sociedad globalizada: Nuevos caminos para una realidad silenciada [The rural school in a globalised society: New paths for a silenced reality]. *Profesorado, 15*(2), 141–153. https://revistaseug.ugr.es/index.php/profesorado/article/view/20266

Smit, R., Hyry-Beihammer, E. K., & Raggl, A. (2015). Teaching and learning in small, rural schools in four European countries: Introduction and synthesis of mixed-/multi-age approaches. *International Journal of Educational Research, 74,* 97–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.04.007

Sokolowicz, D., Spindiak, J. & Terigi, F. (2016). Condiciones de enseñanza en plurigrados rurales: Análisis de cuadernos de Matemática [Teaching conditions in rural multigrade schools: Analysis of mathematics notebooks]. *Archivos de Ciencias de la Educación, 10*(10), 1–13. https://www.archivosdeciencias.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/Archivose008

Theobald, P. (2018). *Teaching the commons: Place, pride, and the renewal of community*. Routledge.

Tomazzoli, E. (2020). Viaggiando tra montagne, campagne e piccole isole: Le scuole primarie rural italiane motore per lo sviluppo della comunità [Travelling through mountains, countryside and small islands: The rural Italian primary school motivates the development of the community]. *Temps d'Educació*, *59*, 91–108. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7904969

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.a). *Sustainable development: The 17 goals*. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.b). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2019, December 6). *La nueva recomendación de la UNESCO promoverá el acceso a los recursos educativos para todos* [New UNESCO recommendation will promote access to educational resources for all]. https://www.unesco.org/es/articles/la-nueva-recomendacion-de-la-unesco-promovera-el-acceso-los-recursos-educativos-para-todos

Vázquez-Recio, R. (2008). Las escuelas rurales: Un lugar a ninguna parte. Las ciudades invisibles del mundo educativo [The rural schools: A place in the middle of nowhere. The invisible cities of the educational world]. *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado, 11*(1), 53–58. https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/2170/217015211006.pdf

Wang, J., Tigelaar, D. E. H., & Admiraal, W. (2019). Connecting rural schools to quality education: Rural teachers' use of digital educational resources. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *101*, 68–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.07.009

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Bridging the Gap Between Community Schools and Rural Communities in Nepal Using Participatory Action Research

Salpa Shrestha
Kathmandu University
salpashrestha@gmail.com

Megh Raj Dangal
Kathmandu University
megh@ku.edu.np

Abstract

This paper explores the engagement of parents with out-of-school children through community-based participatory action research in a rural community in Nepal. This study addresses the connection gap between local communities and community schools, which has resulted in consequences such as inconsistent attendance among students and low educational expectations among parents. By investigating the processes of formulating an action plan by a parent-led action group and analysing its execution, the research aimed to understand how participatory action research can foster a stronger bond between community schools and parents, thereby enhancing parental involvement in children's education. The study draws on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, incorporating concepts from Habermas's public sphere and Freire's notion of conscientization. It specifically focuses on the action group's monthly meetings held over nine months and the collaborative outcomes that resulted. By emphasising targeted interventions, collaboration and a departure from deficit-focused approaches, the findings propose effective strategies for bridging the gap between community schools and rural communities in Nepal.

Keywords: *community schools, conscientization, Nepal, out-of-school children, parent-led action group*

Introduction

Community schools play a vital role in providing basic education in Nepal, often catering to underserved populations in rural areas. These schools comprise an overwhelming 76% of the country's educational institutions, having long been at the forefront of delivering basic education (Government of Nepal National Statistics Office, 2021). The *National Education Policy 2076* (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2020) emphasises the importance of good governance in community schools and requires active participation and representation of community members in school management. The policy aims to improve community participation in school management committees and parent-teacher associations. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, 1997) created the *Basic and Primary Education Master Plan* to improve education management in line with the *Education for All* consensus (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports, 2003). The plan provided school management committees with more autonomy and elevated their role in managing education at the basic and primary levels (Carney & Bista, 2009). School management

committees are formed via local elections of parents and guardians, and they are accountable to both their local community and the district education officer.

Community schools are considered government entities in Nepal, despite the responsibility for education being devolved to the community. School management committee members in rural communities are not necessarily educated or trained to provide constructive feedback to qualified teachers on teaching and learning (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development, 2006). In many instances, parents are nominally part of the schools' Parent-Teacher Association and the School Management Committee, but their involvement is minimal, often a formality. As highlighted in the report by the Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (2009), there exists an acknowledged reluctance among community schools to actively involve parents in decision-making processes. This intensifies the perceived disconnect. High levels of illiteracy amongst parents, combined with the limited awareness of community members regarding their roles and responsibilities, have widened the chasm between educational institutions and the communities they serve.

The inadequate representation of parents in the direct management of children's education in community schools has disconnected communities from educational processes, leading to a decline in community trust towards these schools. This is reflected in the academic performance, school attendance and enrolment of students, as highlighted by Bhatta (2021). Even after the implementation of a federal structure in Nepal, the Nepali government continues to face challenges in strengthening school management committees and parent-teacher associations across the nation (Shahi, 2021).

Conversely, educators attribute the dearth of parental involvement in children's learning to parents. This assertion holds, particularly in rural areas where parents have limited literacy skills and are unsure about their roles in children's education. Additionally, criticism is directed at parents for not visiting schools to inquire about their children's well-being, having no interest in children's learning, and failing to provide home learning environments and educational materials (Bhatta, 2021).

Pherali (2012) suggested that excessive politicisation and corruption in school management committees have created tensions in the school system in some places, and privileged groups—mainly the upper castes—are most likely to influence the selection of parents for membership of school management committees. The Nepal National Teachers' Association expressed opposition to the government's decentralisation act, which granted school management committees the authority to recruit, oversee and terminate teachers (Pherali, 2012). Consequently, teachers and head teachers are reluctant to establish school management committees and parent-teacher associations (Uprety, 2021). This tension between government and teachers has further widened the gap between parents and community schools.

Recognising the need to address this gap, the central focus of the current research is on promoting diversity through robust parental and community engagement. Engagement is seen as a critical component in the formulation of a collective action plan, aimed at enhancing the education of children within the community. The objective of the research is to understand how the execution of community-based participatory action research facilitates a bond with community schools and successfully enhances parental involvement in children's education. With the understanding that diversity extends beyond demographic variations to encompass a spectrum of perspectives, experience and cultural nuances within the community, the research applies a participatory approach that celebrates and integrates this rich tapestry of differences.

The Literature and the Theoretical Framework Shaping the Research Design

Bridging the gap between community schools and their communities is a crucial endeavour with significant implications for the overall well-being of students and the community. A substantial

body of literature underscores the importance of fostering strong connections between schools and their surrounding communities. Epstein et al.'s (2018) seminal work on the six types of involvement emphasised the multifaceted nature of parental engagement, asserting that successful schools actively involve parents in various aspects of educational processes. This involvement extends beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences to include participation in decision-making processes and collaboration in shaping school policies. Moreover, the work of McAteer and Wood (2018) highlighted the significance of collaborative partnerships between universities and communities, suggesting that when universities facilitate rather than dictate, they enhance participation, social change, and epistemic democracy. To address these issues, McAteer and Wood advocated for participatory action research as a methodological approach to actively involve stakeholders in research processes.

The research of Fuentes (2009–2010), Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010) and Snell et al. (2009) share several common themes in the exploration of participatory action research with a focus on parents. One overarching theme is the commitment to challenging societal stereotypes and perceptions regarding the roles of working-class parents and multicultural parents in academic achievement (Fuentes, 2009–2010). In Fuentes' work, there is a deliberate effort to empower parents and challenge prevailing stereotypes that may hinder their active participation in educational decision-making processes. Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010). and Snell et al. (2009) similarly aimed to redefine and broaden the concept of parental involvement, particularly for marginalised groups, challenging conventional notions and advocating for more inclusive perspectives. Fuentes (2009-2010) incorporated the idea of organising power within the public sphere. This commitment to understanding and restructuring power dynamics aligns with the transformative goals of participatory action research, where the agency of individuals—in this case parents—is central to research processes.

The literature about critical pedagogical frameworks is inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970, 2000) work. Snell et al. (2009) explicitly draw from Freire's critical pedagogy to amplify the voices of marginalised parents, thereby challenging traditional evaluations of parental involvement. Ditrano and Silverstein (2006) also grounded their work in Freire's model of participatory action research, assisting parents, whose children had been classified as having emotional disabilities, to share their experiences, thus fostering critical consciousness within the special education system. The incorporation of Freire's critical pedagogy reflects a commitment to promoting equity, empowerment, and critical reflection within educational settings through participatory approaches. In Nepal, the *National Curriculum Framework* (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports, 2007) focuses on the development of an inclusive education and creates evaluation policies based on consultation at every legislative level and with organisations for disabled persons and parents/caretakers.

Participatory action research is seen as a suitable approach for parent-focused research, as it ensures inclusive decision-making incorporating diverse parental perspectives and fostering empowerment, trust, and culturally sensitive solutions within the community (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Often associated with social transformation, participatory action research has its roots in liberation theology (Freire, 1970), neo-Marxist approaches to community development (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), and human rights activism (Brydon-Miller & Damons, 2019). Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) work highlighted the key features of participatory action research: the reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Considering insights from previous literature and our acquired knowledge, we have adopted the transformative learning theory formulated by Jack Mezirow (2000) as the foundational framework for this research. His theory posits that individuals can undergo significant and lasting changes in beliefs, perspectives and behaviours through critical reflection, dialogue, and the implementation of new perspectives. The current research applies this theory to explore the transformative experiences of parents of out-of-school children and how participatory action

research facilitates critical reflection and dialogue among them, aiming to empower parents and improve the status of parents of out-of-school children in the community. Out-of-school children in this study are those children who are not attending school. They may be chronic absentees (absent for more than one month), school dropouts, or not enrolled in a school despite being of school age.

Habermas's (1984) notion of the public sphere supplements the research, providing insight into the formation and functioning of public spheres or action groups. It emphasises inclusiveness and equal participation in collective decision-making processes, aligning with the democratic ideals of participatory action research. The process of conscientization developed by Freire (1970) is integral to the research and emphasises critical awareness-raising and empowerment. Applied to parents of out-of-school children, conscientization enables them to recognise social and political realities affecting their children's education and to develop strategies to overcome barriers (Freire, 1970).

Methodology

Underpinning Worldview, Research Location and Participants

The study adopted a participatory methodology, engaging members of parent-led action groups in the implementation of educational campaigning activities. Using a qualitative approach to data collection, the research sought information from the parents of out-of-school children. Action group members collected the data, which were subsequently deliberated upon in monthly meetings.

The participatory worldview is articulated using subjective-objective ontology (Heron & Reason, 1997). Epistemology is how an individual acquires knowledge, and in this research, it consists of experiential, propositional and practical ways of knowing (Lincoln et al., 2013). Lincoln et al. (2013) explained that experiential knowing involves gaining knowledge through personal experience and direct observation; propositional knowing involves gaining knowledge through logical reasoning and the analysis of facts and concepts; and practical knowledge involves using knowledge in real-world situations and problem-solving. By embracing multiple ways of knowing and valuing the contributions of all individuals, the participatory worldview seeks to create more inclusive and equitable forms of knowledge production and decision-making. The axiology of this research is rooted in the values of social justice. It recognises that access to education is a fundamental human right and that all children should have opportunities to learn and develop their full potential.

This study's methodology was characterised by collaboration between the parents of out-of-school children and an academic study team from Kathmandu University, resulting in mutual learning and social and personal action. The research participants were members of parent-led action groups, each with up to 10 members. The academic research team included a doctoral candidate, a facilitator, and support personnel from a local partner organisation. The study took place in the Durga Bhagwati rural municipality within the Rautahat district of Nepal, purposefully chosen due to having the country's lowest literacy rate at 57.75% (Government of Nepal National Statistics Office, 2021). The municipality comprises five wards and a parent-led action group was set up in each.

Before the commencement of the participatory action research and the formation of action groups, preliminary efforts involved the collection of secondary data by the study team to identify households with out-of-school children in the municipality. This encompassed the examination of school records, identifying chronic absentees (absent for more than one month in a row) and dropouts, supplemented by ward records identifying school-age children not enrolled.

The goal of establishing action groups was to actively engage and raise awareness within communities regarding educational matters, placing particular emphasis on promoting regular school attendance, encouraging parental involvement, and fostering a positive home learning environment. The formation process entailed discussions with members of each community, identification of problems, and collaborative generation of local solutions. The action groups then shared information about the prevalence of out-of-school children in the community and potential future consequences as a means of sensitisation, and presenting an accurate portrayal of the existing reality. This played a crucial role in prompting community members to recognise the unacceptable nature of the situation and instigating a collective realisation that proactive measures were necessary. This was followed by collaborative efforts dedicated to the development of action plans, involving both community members and the study team. The details of the process are presented in Figure 1.

During the discussion and after the development of action plans, interested participants were invited to join the parent-led action groups. The formation criteria considered factors such as active participation, motivation, willingness to commit for a nine-month period, and influence within the community. The study team conducted subsequent meetings with the groups, briefing them on monthly meetings, meeting minutes, and the participatory formulation, revision and documentation of action plans. Five groups were formed across five wards, meeting monthly for progress updates, action plan revisions, reflections, and new plan formulations. Facilitators and local staff from the partner organisation led the meetings, with a strong interest in the outcomes of the action plans and aiming to integrate valuable insights into future projects. The team maintained records, including minutes and action plans for documentation and analysis.

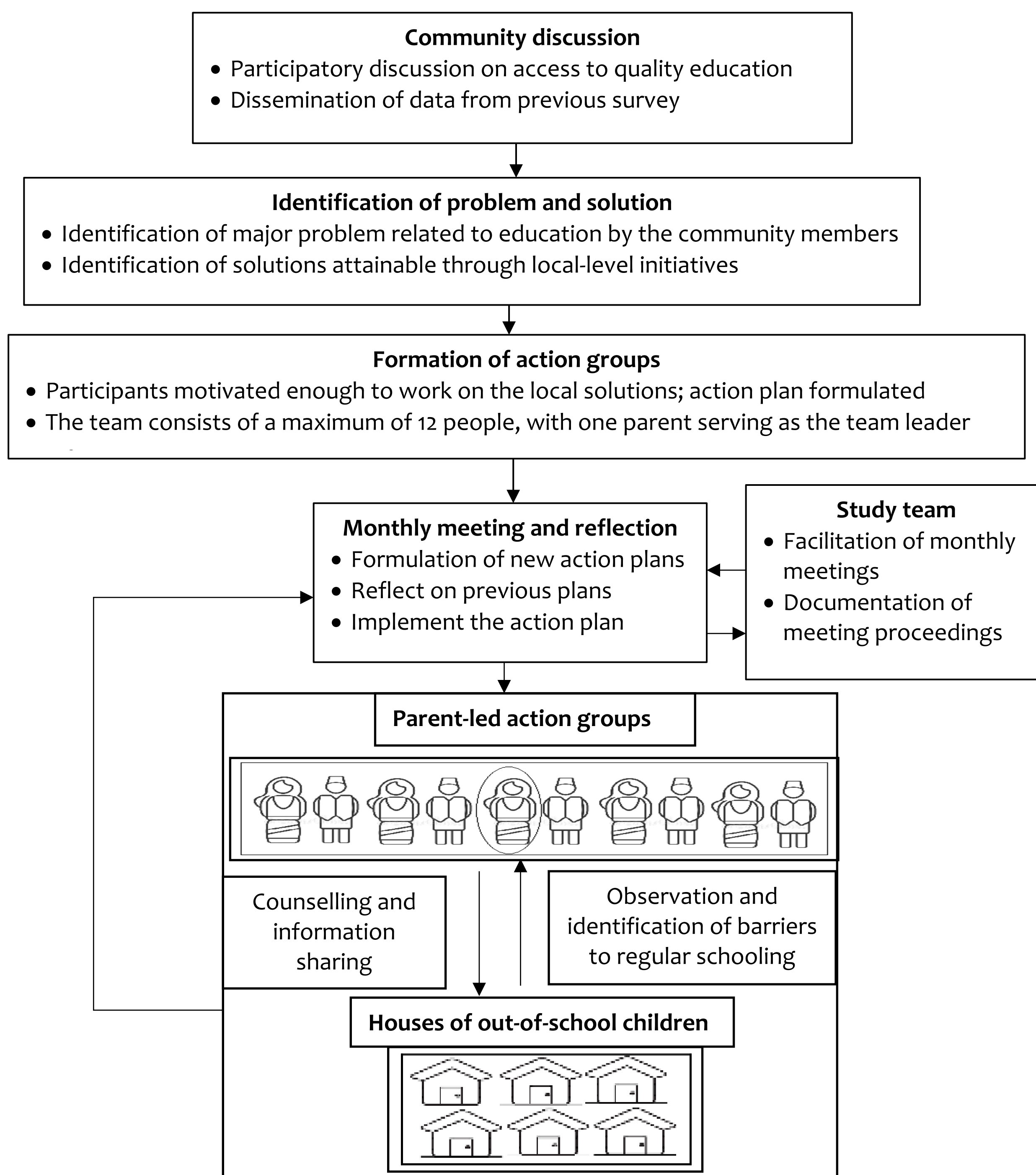
Data Collection, Data Analysis and Dissemination of Findings

Complementing participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), participatory narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009) was used to capture the lived experiences of participants. Through the collection of personal stories, participatory narrative inquiry facilitated a deeper understanding of complex situations and provided a platform for sharing previously untold narratives, thereby providing an opportunity to hear diverse perspectives and gain new insights. This collaborative process involved active engagement of the participants, aligning with the participatory action research principles of involvement and collaboration.

Participatory narrative inquiry’s three essential phases guided this research: narrative collection, sense-making, and dissemination (Kurtz, 2009). The narrative collection phase involved gathering stories to offer diverse perspectives and gain new insights. Members were assigned to visit five or six houses of out-of-school children in their neighbourhoods at least once a month (see Figure 1). During these visits, members of the action group engaged in discussions with parents of out-of-school children about the obstacles preventing regular school attendance. These conversations provided insights into the challenges faced by out-of-school children. Action group members documented the stories in their notebooks or recalled and shared at the monthly meetings.

Monthly meetings served as a platform for discussion for members of the parent-led action groups. During these sense-making sessions, the groups worked with the raw stories gathered along with personal experiences to make sense of complex situations. This approach emphasised the importance of diverse perspectives, interpretation by storytellers, catalytic pattern exploration, and narrative group sense-making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The sense-making phase entailed collaboratively analysing narratives to extract meaningful insights. The dissemination phase involved returning these insights to the community, ensuring a purposeful and goal-oriented engagement.

Figure 1: ***The Study's Participatory Action Research Process***



The dual-method approach, using participatory action research and participatory narrative inquiry, ensured the study team's comprehensive exploration of parents' transformative experiences in their children's education, adhering to the principles of active participation, collaboration, and purposeful engagement. Each stage of the process was documented. The monthly parent-led action group discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

Subsequently, the transcribed data underwent a process of anonymisation and coding during analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to examine the data, with key themes emerging organically. Coding and categorisation identified recurring patterns and shared perspectives, allowing for the identification of significant challenges faced by out-of-school

children. The presentation of these themes captured the collective sense-making and reflections of parent-led action groups, offering valuable insights for targeted interventions and enhancing the overall impact of the study. This paper focuses on the thematic analysis conducted by the study team.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers followed ethical guidelines, obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. , They actively acknowledged potential biases through reflexivity. The study team adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including securing informed consent, respecting participant autonomy, ensuring no harm, and presenting empirical data fairly. The team used pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. The entire process of data collection and assessment strictly adhered to the principles of systematic inquiry, competence, honesty, and respect for participants. The research received approval from the Ethical Committee at the School of Education, Kathmandu University.

Findings

Four main themes emerged from the data: the utilisation of sense-making sessions as a means of conscientization (Freire, 1970), the role of participatory action research in connecting the rural community with community schools, the importance of rising above deficit discourses, and the proactive solution measures undertaken by the action group members and community. In the discussion that follows, we discuss these themes, referencing both the field and relevant theoretical literature.

Conscientization Through Sense-Making Sessions

A participant of the study and action group member, Sarita, shared a narrative highlighting the challenges a fellow parent, Sabira Begam, faced in balancing household chores and her daughter's education.

> *I struggle with the household chores without my daughter's assistance. If she goes to school, it becomes challenging to oversee her younger sibling. With the need to work at a nearby farm and her father employed in Dubai, our family faced practical difficulties. While it's easy to preach about education, the reality is tough for the rural people like us who grapple with financial constraints.*

Sabira Begam's dilemma raised concerns about the prioritisation of education, particularly for girls within the community. This became a catalyst for understanding the complex interplay of factors affecting community educational decisions. One of the action group participants, Nursrat Begam, acknowledged that:

> *Sarita's story really resonates with me. I've faced similar challenges trying to balance work and my children's education. It's not just about sending our kids to school; it's about juggling multiple responsibilities with limited resources. Education seems like a luxury sometimes.*

The group members engaged in a conversation tinged with frustration, reflecting on a common theme that emerged during the discussion. They expressed a shared sentiment, acknowledging their economic struggles and the daunting challenges associated with accessing education. The prevailing belief among the group was that poverty extended beyond financial constraints; it encompassed the opportunity costs associated with pursuing education. They emphasised that the true cost of education went beyond school fees and stationery expenses, encompassing the time and effort required to support a child's learning while managing household responsibilities. In their view, poverty was not just a consequence of lack of education; rather, it perpetuated a cycle where impoverished individuals were unable to afford educational opportunities for their children, thereby perpetuating their own economic hardship. This cycle seemed inescapable,

trapping generations within a cycle of poverty and limited educational access, but the central question was whether there was a way to break the cycle.

Rita Mishra, one of the group members and a teacher at the local school, had a slightly different opinion. She articulated:

> *I think we need to look beyond just the financial aspect. There are cultural and societal expectations at play here too. Why does the elder female child always have to sacrifice her studies to take care of the sibling? This is rarely the case for elder boys. In fact they are sent to stay at their relatives' homes in towns for better learning opportunities. Even if the families are poor they borrow money to give better education for their sons. Families prioritise boys' education over girls', perpetuating inequality. Even in the case of Sabira Begum, it is her daughter she is talking about, not her son.*

The group members agreed with her, but also acknowledged that it was hard to change the attitude of parents towards sons and daughters. They were univocal in saying that it not just about convincing parents, but also about challenging deep-rooted beliefs in the community that take a long time, even generations, to change. After this, the group facilitator tried to refocus the conversation towards action plans. She stated:

> *But isn't education supposed to be the key out of poverty? How can we ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has access to quality education? Can we do something locally that can help these children?*

While the socio-economic conditions are likely to persist, the participants affirmed that collaborative efforts could be made to ensure that Sabira Begam's daughter had opportunities to attend school regularly. The participants proposed various ideas but they unanimously agreed that meaningful change would only occur when Sabira Begum recognised that education serves as a beacon to lead her family out of the relentless cycle of poverty. They invited her to the next month's meeting when the group discussed that education can provide females with better life opportunities compared to their mothers. Concerning the action plan (dissemination of information to the community), the suggestion was to collaborate on creating community-driven childcare initiatives. This would involve seeking assistance from both local government and non-government organisations for technical expertise and financial support. Such initiatives could offer opportunities for numerous students in the community to attend school consistently, while simultaneously allowing parents to pursue their livelihoods without concerns about the well-being of their young children.

This process exemplified how participatory narrative inquiry facilitated a deeper level of conscientization (Freire, 1970), which refers to the process of developing critical awareness and understanding social and economic injustices, leading to action for change. By valuing and interpreting personal stories, the group uncovered systemic issues influencing educational choices. The dialogue moved beyond individual experiences to a collective understanding, fostering a richer appreciation of the participants' realities. The approach facilitated a collective learning process, empowering individuals to critically assess and address the complexities surrounding education in their community.

Participatory Action Research Connects the School with the Rural Community

As shared by a member of one of the action groups, a third-grade student from the Saraswoti Primary School had an extended period of non-attendance, having missed school for two consecutive months within the previous six months. When the member of the action group had visited the student's home and asked about the reason for the child's irregular attendance, the mother responded:

> *Previously, my son used to attend classes in Saraswoti Primary School, but last year they refused to provide stationery to him. Unfortunately, my husband and I were out of town at that time. Upon our return, we visited the school to inquire about the stationery issue. But the school officials mentioned that he was registered in two other schools, and they couldn't give stationery to a student from another school. Although it's correct that my son is enrolled in two other schools, he only attends Saraswoti Primary School. We enrolled him in the other schools because all the parents are doing the same, to receive school meal compensation and uniforms. The teachers come to our house and enrol our children in their school because they need the student count to keep the school running. It's for their benefit. Now they are not giving the amenities showing the same reason. It's unfair, and my son stopped attending due to humiliation.*

In the sense-making session, the group acknowledged this issue in their community and the associated mindset of parents and the hoarding mentality that seemed to exist. This story illustrates the complex interplay of factors influencing children's attendance, some of the motivations behind multiple school enrolments, and challenges faced by school authorities in maintaining fairness amid varying pressures.

An integral realisation emerged from the discourse: that community members do not adequately value education and its role in their livelihoods. Acknowledging this, one participant questioned the need for education beyond the eighth grade, asserting that basic literacy was sufficient for their children to maintain day-to-day life. From this viewpoint, he argued that boys can sustain their livelihoods by seeking employment abroad, while girls usually marry. Participants deemed education up to the eighth grade sufficient to guide children in their school assignments. They raised doubts about the justification for pursuing higher education when graduates reportedly earned comparable income to daily wage labourers.

It is important to emphasise that in the context of participatory action research the university's role as facilitator was not to steer or influence the group's perspectives on how they comprehended certain matters (Freire, 2000). The facilitators refrained from expressing opinions on the significance of education in individuals' lives. The conversation instead focused on acknowledging the challenges faced by the school management in distributing resources amidst societal pressures. In line with this, the group developed an action plan to assist the school to ensure a fair and equitable distribution process. One of the action group participants, Sadam, said:

> *In the schools of our village, head teachers face threats and are compelled to distribute amenities to anyone who shows up, as they have no alternative. Ultimately, they also reside within the same community and must consider their safety.*

The group decided to meet with the head teacher to identify and implement feasible solutions. During the meeting, the head teacher requested the group's assistance in managing the upcoming distribution of uniforms, which they anticipated would attract a large gathering of people. In response, the male members of the group expressed their willingness to aid in this task. During the conversation, the head teacher disclosed his plan to distribute the goods exclusively to students with at least 80% attendance, aiming to mitigate concerns of favouritism and discrimination. The group welcomed this decision and acknowledged the necessity of communicating this change to the community. Recognising the potential for unrest during the distribution process, the group felt compelled to convey this message effectively. Given that each member of the action group was assigned to six or seven households, they resolved to disseminate this information within these houses and beyond, aiming to ensure a smooth distribution process and prevent any potential conflicts.

The inclination of parents towards accumulating resources was leveraged as an incentive or strategy to encourage consistent school attendance for their children, with the condition that

they achieve at least 80% attendance to receive any amenities from the school. The action plan carried the potential to foster collaboration between the community school and the rural community itself, working together for the betterment of children's education.

Rising Above Deficit Discourses

As highlighted by community participants during the initial community discussion (see Figure 1), there were parents who were detached from their children's community schools. They showed minimal engagement in the schools' activities, revealing a clear absence of community school ownership, with the parents primarily holding the school responsible for the perceived low quality of education. Parents perceived these schools as institutions where influential individuals in the community profit from government funding. Based on their perspective, the benefits and amenities provided to community schools rarely reach the students who should be the primary beneficiaries. Instead, the advantages were often enjoyed by those with strong connections and networks. They viewed community schools as the exclusive domain of influential families, functioning as a kind of family business where key positions, from teachers to administrative roles, were held by members of a single family. Parents felt marginalised and had minimal influence in addressing any misconduct.

Oversight from the education authorities in the rural municipality was infrequent. Even when monitoring visits occurred, they often did not take necessary actions. This lack of oversight resulted in community schools operating as monopolies. Families with the means to seek a better future for their children typically opted for private schools, while those with fewer resources enrolled their children in community schools. Within the same family, participants reported that boys sometimes attended private schools, while girls were enrolled in community schools.

In the discourse surrounding educational deficits, members of one action group emerged as advocates for addressing a critical concern: the inadequate quality of school meals. A collective grievance surfaced, revealing that some students received meagre provisions, often limited to biscuits worth 5 rupees for an entire day, resulting in hunger which forced them to leave classes early. To understand the problem, the action group asked a student to keep track of what food was given every day for a month. When they looked at the information, the action group members realised the extent of the issue and felt more empowered to do something about it.

Foremost, the group confessed to their ignorance regarding the government's allocation of funds (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, 2016) for a child's daily meal. Rehena Khaun, one of the group members, explained:

> *We were aware that the school wasn't providing enough food for our children, but I never thought about what exactly they were giving them. The list only mentions instant noodles and biscuits. Some days, they don't provide anything at all. There is nobody here to whom we can complain about the issue.*

Additionally, there was a notable gap in understanding the nutritional needs for children's optimal growth and development. Stepping into this void, the study team provided invaluable support, offering government guidelines tailored to community schools. These guidelines, structured around local food availability, nutritional content and a weekly menu, empowered schools to utilise government-provided meal funds judiciously.

With their new understanding, the action group talked to local schools and had discussions with the head teachers about following the food guidelines. They found a big challenge. There were limited funds to cover things like gas, paying the people who helped with the meals, and buying food. The head teacher stated that the government's assistance of 15 rupees per child per day covered only the cost of purchasing food and did not take into account any expenses associated with its preparation. That was the main reason behind the school distributing cheap packaged food which was easy to store for a long time. The head teacher of Shiva Primary School asserted:

> *How can we afford to provide a sumptuous meal with such a small amount of money? The 15 rupees are used up in transportation just to bring biscuit packets from the market. Now, the villagers expect us to give their children chicken curry and rice every day. Should we spend that from our own pockets? It's not realistic. They should have more reasonable expectations.*

Responding with resilience, the action group proposed a collaborative solution: community members with low economic status volunteering to prepare meals in exchange for school meals for themselves and their children. The school, in turn, committed to pursuing this matter. The action group also gave copies of the guidelines and cooking instructions to the school. It helped the school administration understand that a nutritious meal does not necessarily have to be expensive; locally available, affordable ingredients could also be used to create a healthy diet. The action group members pledged ongoing monitoring and close collaboration with schools to ensure sustained improvements in the school meal program.

Proactive Solutions

In the Bhadarwa (Ward 5 of Durgabhagwati rural municipality), action group members engaged in home visits also engaged in conversations with adolescent female students enrolled in community schools. The focus of these discussions centred around attendance and the factors influencing students' motivation to attend school. According to the female students, they frequently experienced catcalling, bullying and harassment while travelling to school, which discouraged them from going alone. To navigate these challenges, they relied on their brothers for company, or if possible, they gathered a few friends to make it easier to confront bullies on the way. Unfortunately, if they were unable to arrange for such companionship, it often resulted in them missing school. At times, the instances of harassment were so intense that it led them to return home in tears. These conversations shed light on the complex dynamics affecting school attendance of adolescent girls in that community.

Kasturi Devi, one of the female students studying in grade 8 of a community school, recounted:

> *One day, while my sister and I were on our way to school, a local boy who had a crush on me started following me and grabbed my hands tightly. His friends, sitting at the tea shop, began applauding. That day, he wanted to propose to me, but I had no interest. My younger sister rushed home to inform our parents. It was embarrassing for me. I rejected his proposal and returned home. I still feel scared to walk down that road because his friends are always there in the area and start shouting his name whenever they see me. This is unnecessary.*

The action group convened to address the issue and formulated a plan of action. They identified specific locations where catcalling incidents involving adolescent males were prevalent, particularly around the marketplace where they gathered to play carom-board (an indoor board game). The action group took a proactive approach by engaging with local shopkeepers, urging them to warn the males against harassing students. The warning emphasised potential consequences, including the possibility of the action group reporting incidents to the local police.

Upon further investigation, they discovered that some of the males involved were students in local schools. To deter such behaviour, the action group approached the head teachers of these schools, requesting them to issue circulars to particular classes. The circulars warned that severe punishment would be imposed by the school management on anyone found engaging in catcalling. The action group's coordinated efforts and measures proved effective in putting a complete halt to catcalling events within the community.

In another incident, the action group members along with other parents appointed two temporary teachers at Rajdevi Primary School Matsari. Despite official provisions designating 12 teachers per school, many schools struggled to operate as they had a mere fraction of the

necessary teaching staff. This resulted in significant barriers to the delivery of quality education. One action group member had a candid exchange with the head teacher when he conveyed the difficulty of managing a school with over 300 students with just two teachers and himself. The head teacher said:

> *The shortage of teachers means we're often forced to merge classes, compromising our ability to provide individualised attention to students. We teach for 15 minutes in the classroom and then have to go to other classrooms to teach there. How can the students benefit from such kind of education?*

He expressed frustration with the situation, feeling a sense of urgency and helplessness. The responsibility of hiring new teachers would usually fall on the school management committee, but it had not existed for the previous seven years.

After conversing with the head teacher, the community member initiated a discussion on how to persuade the municipal office to allocate additional teachers for the school. Manoj Ji, a member of the group, proposed the idea that they would require the backing of an influential individual, such as a leader or someone recognised by the municipal office. Among the suggested names was Laxmi Ji, who had previously served as a ward chairperson and had contributed to the school by donating land for its playground. He possessed strong connections with education authorities in the municipal office. All group members agreed and proceeded to approach Laxmi Ji for assistance. In response to the request to address the issue, Laxmi Ji suggested hiring two local teachers for the school at salaries equivalent to those of government-appointed teachers, funded by donations collected from the community. He also reassured that the need for collecting funds would be temporary, only for a period of one to two months. Additionally, he pledged to communicate with the municipal office to advocate for the permanent status of these teachers. However, the rural municipality hesitated to provide regular salaries, prompting Laxmi Ji to assert:

> *I have personally requested the mayor and administrative officer to ensure monthly salaries for the new teachers. If needed, we will take collective action against the municipal office.*

Discussion

The narratives underscore the complex interplay of challenges faced by educators and community members in striving to uphold the integrity of the education system. Regardless of the outcomes, the participatory action research and the dedication of the action group members succeeded in directing the community's attention toward the previously overlooked issue of basic education in community schools. This sparked discussions about education quality, with a growing realisation that community schools aspire to provide quality education but face limitations due to resource scarcity and inadequate infrastructure. Rather than assigning blame for educational outcomes, the community offered support to improve results. It is now evident to the community that change is possible with time and collaboration, and even small efforts or initiatives have the potential to bring about positive transformations in the education sector of their community.

Conscientization, rooted in Paulo Freire's (1970) educational philosophy, empowers individuals to critically analyse societal structures. Utilising participatory narrative inquiry, the research facilitated monthly meetings where the parents shared narratives, revealing the intricate challenges that were faced. The case of Sabira Begam exemplified how sense-making sessions delved beyond surface issues, uncovering systemic influences on educational choices. Sabira Begam's concern regarding sending her daughter to school every day highlighted a genuine problem that was prevalent in several households, due to the foreign migration of family members for employment. This situation forced children to assume additional responsibilities, impacting their educational attainment.

This issue always existed within the community and, while everyone was aware of it, no one had previously discussed it in any forum. The magnitude of the problem and how many children in the community faced the same issue, was not known before the discussion. The action group unanimously acknowledged this as the primary reason for the high number of out-of-school children in rural communities. This newfound dialogue in the public sphere (Habermas, 1984) became instrumental in fostering collective awareness. Participant narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009) fostered a collective learning process, empowering participants to address complexities collectively, and showcasing the role of deeper conscientization (Freire, 1970). The local solution proposed by community members, namely community-driven childcare initiatives, had the potential to not only enable consistent school attendance for many students, but also to allow parents to pursue their livelihoods without concerns about the well-being of their young children.

The discussion with Kabita Devi regarding the distribution of stationery exposed complex factors affecting students' absences and emphasised the difficulty of handling multiple school enrolments. It is important to recognise flaws in the ways community schools were managed and monitored by the central government for budgeting, because they failed to identify inflated student numbers (Budhathoki, 2022) due to students' enrolment in multiple schools. This issue requires urgent attention to ensure the equitable distribution of government scholarships and amenities.

The action group served as a microcosm of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), where individuals came together to discuss matters of common concern—in this instance, issues related to education access and distribution of resources within community schools. Furthermore, the action group's engagement with the school authorities reflected communicative action characteristic of the public sphere. By negotiating and formulating action plans to address challenges faced by the school, participants engaged in intentional and conscious efforts to achieve inter-subjective agreement and mutual understanding. The decision to distribute resources based on attendance rates demonstrated a commitment to fairness and transparency in decision-making processes, essential aspects of a functioning public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory offers insights into how individuals can undergo significant changes in their beliefs and perspectives. In the case of poor quality school meals and insufficient numbers of teachers, parents challenged deficit discourses surrounding education by critically reflecting on their assumptions. Rather than blaming the school for everything, the action group took a stance to address the quality of school meals and teacher numbers. This highlighted a shift from deficit discourses. Through collaborative solutions and ongoing monitoring, they fostered a connection with the community school.

Mezirow's (2000) framework underscores the transformative potential of participatory approaches, as parents actively engaged in the process of redefining their understanding of quality education and their roles in shaping it. It is essential to recognise that this step is a positive move, with the potential to bring community schools and rural communities closer.

The solutions implemented by the action group members further underscored the transformative potential of community-led initiatives. Addressing issues of safety and attendance among adolescent girls reflected a commitment to holistic educational reform. By leveraging local knowledge and resources, the action group members were able to implement targeted interventions that directly addressed the needs of their community. Moreover, their collaborative approach and willingness to engage with stakeholders at various levels highlighted the importance of building partnerships and fostering community ownership in their attempts to make sustainable change.

An evaluation of all the outcomes resulting from the action groups' initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can deduce that the participatory platform provided a space for community members to openly share narratives, delve into the intricate details of their

community realities, and formulate action plans that suited their context. In each case, the theoretical frameworks of Freire's (1970) conscientization, Habermas's (1989) public sphere and Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning offered valuable insights into the processes and dynamics underlying the participatory action research and community-driven interventions in education. These theories provided a way of explaining how individuals engaged in critical reflection, dialogue and action to address systemic challenges and to promote social change within their communities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the transformative potential (Freire, 1970) inherent in participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) within the context of rural community education. Through sense-making sessions and participatory narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009), community members engaged in critical reflection, dialogue, and collective action to address systemic challenges within their community schools. Four main themes emerged: conscientization through sense-making sessions, the role of participatory action research in connecting the rural community with community schools, rising above deficit discourses, and proactive solutions undertaken by the action group members and community.

Conscientization inspired by Freire's (1970) philosophy empowered participants to critically analyse societal structures and understand the complex interplay of factors influencing educational choices. Through personal narratives, participants explored beneath surface issues, recognising the systemic influences of poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms for education access and quality. This deepened understanding, fostered collective awareness, and facilitated a richer appreciation of the participants' realities.

Participatory action research served as a bridge between the rural community and community schools, allowing for meaningful dialogue, collaboration and collective problem-solving. By acknowledging and addressing issues such as stationery distribution and multiple school enrolments, community members challenged deficit discourses surrounding education and advocated for fair and equitable practices within their schools. The measures undertaken by the action group members—from addressing inadequate school meals to hiring additional teachers—demonstrated a commitment to improving educational access and quality within their community.

Despite the challenges faced by educators and community members, the participatory approach directed attention towards the overlooked issue of basic education in community schools. By fostering discussions and collaboration, the community realised that change is possible through collective effort and collaboration. It is evident that even small initiatives have the potential to bring about positive transformations in the educational sector of the community.

It is essential to acknowledge the research's limitations at this point. The evaluation of long-term outcomes and the sustainability of the interventions falls beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific community and context limits the generalisability of the findings to other settings. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of participatory approaches on educational outcomes and to explore the scalability of these interventions to other communities.

This study has contributed to the growing body of literature on participatory action research and highlights the importance of community-driven initiatives in promoting educational equity and social justice.

Acknowledgement

The authors express their gratitude to the Global Partnership for Education's Knowledge and Innovation Exchange and the International Development Research Centre for funding the project titled *Effectiveness and Scalability of Programs for Out-of-School Children at Risk of Dropping Out in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal*. Their support has played a crucial role in the successful execution of this research.

References

Bhatta, P. (2021). Public desire for private schooling in Nepal. In L. Parajuli, D. Uprety, & P. Onta (Eds.), *School education in Nepal: History and politics of governance and reforms* (pp. 263–290). Martin Chautari.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brydon-Miller, M., & Damons, B. (2019). Action research for social justice advocacy. In C. A. Mertler (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of action research in education* (pp. 371–392). Wiley.

Budhathoki, S. B. (2022). Decentralization of corruption in the education sector: An analysis of anti-graft reports. *Molung Educational Frontier*, *12*(1), 208–229. https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v12i01.45938

Carney, S., & Bista, M. B. (2009). Community schooling in Nepal: A genealogy of education reform since 1990. *Comparative Education Review*, *53*(2), 189–211. https://doi.org/10.1086/597394

Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Ditrano, C. J., & Silverstein, L. B. (2006). Listening to parents' voices: Participatory action research in the schools. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *37*(4), 359–366. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.37.4.359

Dworski-Riggs, D., & Langhout, R. D. (2010). Elucidating the power in empowerment and the participation in participatory action research: A story about research team and elementary school change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*(3–4), 215–230. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9306-0

Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., Van Vorliss, F. L., Martin, C. S., Thomas, B. GB., Greenfeld, M. D., Hutchins, D. J., & Williams, K. J. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (4th ed.). Corwin Press.

Fals Borda, O., & Rahman, M. A. (1991). *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. Intermediate Technology Publications.

Freire, P. (1970). Cultural action and conscientization. *Harvard Educational Review, 40*(3), 452–477. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.40.3.h76250x720j43175

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum International.

Fuentes, E. (2009–2010). Learning power and building community: Parent-initiated participatory action research as a tool for organizing community. *Social Justice*, *36*(4), 69–83. https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768562

Government of Nepal Ministry of Education. (1997). *The basic and primary education master plan for 1997–2002*. https://www.martinchautari.org.np/storage/files/thebasicandprimaryeducationmasterplan-1997-2002.pdf

Government of Nepal Ministry of Education. (2016). *School sector development plan 2016–2023*. https://www.doe.gov.np/article/376/school-sector-development-planenglish-1.html

Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports. (2003). *Education for all 2004–2009: Core document*. https://www.martinchautari.org.np/storage/files/education-for-all-2004-2009-english.pdf

Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports. (2007). *National curriculum framework for school education in Nepal*. Curriculum Development Centre. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230707

Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2020). *National education policy 2076*. https://ugcnepal.edu.np/uploads/web-uploadsfiles/National%20Education%20Policy%2C%202076.pdf

Government of Nepal National Statistics Office. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021: National report*. https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/national

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. I). Beacon.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society.* MIT Press.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (1997). A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *3*(3), 274–294. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049700300302

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincolns (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 559–603). Sage.

Kurtz, C. F. (2009). *Working with stories in your community or organization: Participatory narrative inquiry* (3rd ed.). https://www.workingwithstories.org/WorkingWithStoriesThirdEdition_Web.pdf

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2013). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 199–267). Sage.

McAteer, M., & Wood, L. (2018). Decolonising knowledge: Enacting the civic role of the university in a community-based project. *South African Journal of Education*, *38*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n4a1662

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress.* Jossey-Bass.

Pherali, T. J. (2012). The World Bank, community schooling, and school-based management: A political economy of educational decentralization in Nepal. In D. Kapoor, B. Barua, & A. Datoo (Eds.), *Globalization, culture and education in South Asia: Critical excursions* (pp. 71–86). Palgrave Macmillan.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Sage.

Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development. (2006). *Effectiveness of school/community-based monitoring system*. Tribhuvan University.

Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development. (2009). *Community managed school: An innovative approach to school management* (Report 33). Tribhuvan University.

Shahi, M. B. (2021). *Teacher management in federal system of Nepal: Policy perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation, Tribhuvan University). https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/bitstream/123456789/16757/1/Full%20Thesis.pdf

Snell, P., Miguel, N., & East, J. (2009). Changing directions: Participatory action research as a parent involvement strategy. *Educational Action Research*, *17*(2), 239–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790902914225

Uprety. D. (2021). Teachers' unions in school education governance: Experiences from post–2000 Nepal. In L. Parajuli, D. Uprety, & P. Onta (Eds.), *School education in Nepal: History and politics of governance and reforms* (pp. 291–324). Martin Chautari.

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Critical Pedagogies for Reappraising Indigenous Knowledge and Diversity in Rural Peru: The Voices of Two Rural Teachers

Silvia Espinal-Meza
University of Bristol
s.espinalmeza@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

Rural schools and communities in Peru are rich in cultural diversity in Indigenous languages and traditions, but rural areas remain the most disadvantaged regions. Peru's educational policies are neoliberal and have hindered opportunities for the rural population to receive a high quality education with a critical reappraisal of their cultural backgrounds. Within this scenario, critical perspectives in education have emerged from the voices of historically marginalised educational actors: rural teachers. Two rural teachers from small towns in Cusco and Ayacucho (in the southern highlands of Peru) participated in narrative research to explore their practices of social justice in education. The aim of this paper is to examine their practices through critical pedagogies. The findings reveal that a crucial role of the Indigenous language, Quechua, is in making an inclusive reappraisal of the local culture. The teachers sought to empower their pupils by applying Freirean concepts of critical consciousness and dialogue through creative activities. They acknowledged the role of parents and the community who value diversity and local culture and support their critical pedagogical practices in schools. In this case, social justice in education was addressed by valuing Indigenous culture and placing it in dialogue with Western knowledge.

Keywords: *critical pedagogies, Freire, Peruvian rural teachers, Quechua, social justice in education*

Introduction

Diversity is one of the main characteristics of rural education in Peru. The country hosts 48 Indigenous languages across the Amazon and the highlands, with Quechua the most widely spoken. Although Quechua has been an official language beside Spanish since 1975, historical exclusion and discrimination against native cultures have been a constant throughout the 20th century. These issues have impacted rural education; children from rural areas live in poverty and do not achieve expected competencies in literacy and numeracy skills compared to students in urban areas.

In the Latin American context, neoliberalism has become hegemonic in the last 30 years, with Peru adopting this model in 1990. Within neoliberalism, the purpose of education is conceived in human capital terms and can be reduced to the economic production functions of investment, choice and results (Banya, 2010; Rizvi, 2009; Schultz, 1961). For Harvey (2007), neoliberalism implied a maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms which emphasise private property rights and individual liberty. However, neoliberalism has affected communities differently, creating further disparities between a minority who have benefitted from this model and more than one third of the population still living in poverty and exclusion.

Even though some policies have been approved since 1972 in favour of Indigenous populations and intercultural bilingual education in Peru, there are social issues related to racism and

historical exclusion that could be addressed by critical approaches in education. Critical pedagogies (Fischman & Haas, 2009; Giroux, 2010; Kincheloe, 2012) offer an approach for reappraising Indigenous knowledge and building fairer societies under a social justice paradigm where teachers have a key role. Critical pedagogy is rooted in principles which promote the construction of equitable power relations in different areas of human life through participation (Jara Holliday, 2018). Within critical pedagogy, teachers have a central role in maintaining or challenging educational systems. They need to engage in debates in order to promote spaces for taking critical stances and enacting social justice within their own and others' practices (Giroux, 2013).

Within this scenario marked by profound injustices under the hegemony of neoliberal policies, rural teachers in Peru remain severely affected by deep-rooted inequalities. Those who are engaged in the practice of critical pedagogies do not have a relevant position within official channels. To expand their voices, this paper explores social justice practices through critical pedagogies from the voices of two rural teachers. Through narratives (Jones & Walton, 2018), the paper explores their practices in their communities in Cusco and Ayacucho. Narratives are a tool for engaging with issues of diversity, inequality and injustice by fostering identification, facilitating reflexivity and historicity, and understanding context (Jones & Walton, 2018).

The first section of the paper contextualises rural education in Peru, highlighting the main features alongside key elements of the three periods of Peruvian rural education (Ames, 2010). A summary of the main social indicators illustrates the current situation of rural education. The section that follows focuses on the study's theoretical framework and gives an overview of the concepts of critical consciousness and dialogue within critical pedagogies. The next section introduces the methodology. The findings and discussion are integrated for analysing teachers' practices of social justice, and the conclusion offers a summary of the paper's key arguments.

Contextualising Rural Education in Peru

Defining rurality in Peru is complex as there is no single definition. Based on official statistics, rurality can be linked to residence in one of the natural regions (coast, highlands, or the Amazon). The distribution of the total population among natural regions shows a pattern of urban concentration, due to migration from rural to urban areas since the 1940s (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017). Although the population in the highlands has decreased over the last 70 years, 28% of the Peruvian population still lives in these areas (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017; Montero & Uccelli, 2023).

Furthermore, rurality in Peru is closely linked to ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to official statistics, 25.8% of the total population identify as Indigenous peoples (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017). From this group, 16% declare a native language such as a mother tongue (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017). Among these Indigenous languages, Quechua, Aimara and Ashaninka are spoken by the majority of speakers.

Ames (2010) identified three distinct periods in modern Peruvian history, offering an overview of rural education from the mid-20th century until the present. A description of these follows.

1950–1970: Modernisation Led by the State

The first period between 1950 and 1970 was characterised by a process of modernisation led by the state. It included two important milestones: the agrarian reform of 1969 and the educational reform of 1974 during the military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado. The pedagogical critical movements led by popular organisations and social movements emerged during this period, inspired largely by Paulo Freire's work (Jara Holliday, 2018).

This period was characterised by the developmental state, an economic model of import substitution industrialisation which promoted a leading role for state apparatus through the

explosive growth of schooling rates and promoting access to free education. From this model in Latin America between 1960 and 1970, the growth rates of higher education and secondary education were 247.9% and 258.3% respectively (Torres, 2001). In Peru in 1960, 40.6% of children and youth between 6 and 23 years old were enrolled in the educational system (Degregori, 1991). Regarding enrolment, Schiefelbein (1997) pointed out that during these decades the expansion of educational provision allowed access for the majority of school-age children and, as a consequence, the years of schooling were thus extended.

In the same way, the provision of nutrition services was achieved, as well as the minimum resources necessary for educational tasks (Schiefelbein, 1997). Likewise, as part of this state model, there was a massive incorporation of women into basic education, thus contributing to the universalisation of education and including many of those who were not previously part of the school systems (Puiggrós, 1999).

Decades later, the military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975) undertook a set of reforms under the *Inca Plan* (Cuenca, 2013). One of the most important actions was the agrarian reform which was implemented in 1969 to dismantle the powerful landowning oligarchy in the country and thus end the subordination and exploitation of peasants and Indigenous communities (Eguren, 2006). The other significant reform was carried out in the educational field. For the government, education was one of the fundamental pillars of change in society. In this regard, the educational model sought to establish education for the transformation of the entire society, thereby contributing to the self-assertion and independence of the country. According to Oliart (2011),

> *an important part of this process was to propose and disseminate a specific vision of the country and its history, not only within the educational system, but also throughout society and through all possible means. Each person and each medium then became a vehicle and an opportunity to raise awareness and educate … to free people from cultural domination. (p. 38)*

Within this period, critical pedagogy emerged elsewhere in Latin America. According to Jara Holliday (2018), critical pedagogy refers to a sociocultural phenomenon linked to Latin American history and connected to multiple practices with a transformative purpose. It is based on a philosophy of educational praxis as a political-pedagogical process which conceives of the human being as a creative subject. In particular, critical pedagogy conceived the school as more than just a place where knowledge is disseminated. It had to be a place where students could interpret and process their own experiences as part of a whole society marked by poverty, gender disparities and discrimination (Moragues, 1996). Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher, is credited as the founder of critical pedagogy through his renowned book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1967.

This period is also important for diversity and for multilingual matters. In 1972, during the Velasco government, the Peruvian state approved the first *National Policy on Bilingual Education* (Trapnell & Neira, 2004). Although it did not mention the concept of interculturality, where Western knowledge is in dialogue with Indigenous culture for mutual enrichments, it was the first to recognise the multicultural reality and diversity of the country (Trapnell & Neira, 2004).

1980–1990: Civil War and its Impact on Education

The second period, between 1980 and 1990, revealed a deep crisis, including the armed conflict when rural regions such as Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Apurimac were deeply affected by civil war. Education was impacted significantly by violence, conflict and authoritarianism.

This period was marked by the beginning of armed conflict through a civil war declared by the Peruvian Communist Party Sendero Luminoso (in English, Shining Path). Given the existing inequalities in the educational sector, Shining Path sought to normalise and instrumentalise

violence and ideological dogmatism, in order to gain an important foothold within the educational sector (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003) found veiled racism and discrimination in Peruvian society against peasants, rural communities and Indigenous peoples, with a particular indifference and tolerance towards acts considered clear human rights violations.

As a result, the instrumentalisation of an authoritarian pedagogical discourse within the educational sector was a key factor which subversive groups like the Shining Path took advantage of to attract and involve teachers and students in their fight against the Peruvian state (Sandoval, 2004). During this period, there was no office specifically dedicated to rural education. The general directorates by level (pre-school, primary and secondary) were in charge of all schools without distinction to type of residence (Montero & Uccelli, 2023). Even in this difficult period, the Peruvian state approved the *Intercultural Bilingual Education Policy* in 1989. This policy was the first to include the concept of intercultural education, but the approach limited the inclusion of the knowledge and culture of Indigenous speakers (Trapnell & Neira, 2004).

1990–Present: The Expansion of Neoliberalism

The third period, from 1990 until the present, began with the expansion of neoliberalism imposed by the World Bank. It was characterised by liberalisation, privatisation and a diminishing role for the state within these reforms. This period marks the onset of neoliberal policies being enacted in Peru.

Following these principles, structural adjustment programs were imposed by the World Bank. Fujimori's government (1990–2000) applied neoliberal policies, ostensibly to recover Peru from the economic crisis inherited from the Garcia administration during the 1980s. The Peruvian state approved the *Intercultural and Bilingual Intercultural Education Policy* in 1991, where interculturality became a guiding principle of education, with the diversity of cultures and languages recognised (Trapnell & Neira, 2004). Subsequent governments have maintained the policy, but it has not received priority attention in terms of budget and the development of interculturality in education. Moreover, intercultural bilingual education in Peru is a declaratory policy that has not removed the historical structures of power and exclusion affecting Indigenous populations (Walsh, 2009).

Although rural education is not limited to intercultural bilingual education, interculturality has been important to make rural education visible. Having a comprehensive policy was made to seem urgent. Likewise, Peru ratified the *International Labour Organization Convention 169* in 1994 to recognise the cultural and linguistic rights of Indigenous communities, alongside important policies like the *Intercultural and Bilingual Intercultural Education Policy* (Trapnell & Neira, 2004).

Years later, in 2016, the *Sectoral Policy on Intercultural Education and Intercultural Bilingual Education* (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2016) was approved. This policy aims to guarantee relevant and quality learning for young children through the reappraisal of their cultural and linguistic diversity, and includes general aspects of interculturality, implementation routes and complementary national policies. Another important milestone was the approval of the *Education Policy for the Population in Rural Areas* (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2018). This seeks to ensure quality education and the expansion of opportunities for children, adolescents, young people, adults and older adults living in rural areas. Despite these advances in policies for the rural sector and intercultural bilingual education, rural education continues to face serious problems, in terms of the quality of educational provision and a lack of pedagogical materials and teachers prepared to deal with diversity and complexity.

Key Social Indicators of Rural Education in Peru

Regarding social indicators, rural areas of Peru have historically lagged behind their urban counterparts. Due to the historical abandonment by the Peruvian state and the lack of social services in these areas, statistics show a complex panorama. For instance, poverty in rural areas is higher (41.1%) than urban areas (24.1%). The rural highlands have 44.1% of their population living in poverty, the highest percentage when compared to the coast and the Amazon regions (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2022). Only 6.7% of the population with a native mother tongue is able to access university studies, compared to 22.8% of the population without a native mother tongue (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017).

Housing is another indicator that shows that 50.6% of those with an Indigenous mother tongue live in adobe or bamboo housing, compared to 23% of the population without an Indigenous mother tongue (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017). Similarly, 50.2% of the population with an Indigenous mother tongue uses firewood for cooking, compared to 23.1% of those without an Indigenous mother tongue (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017).

Regarding educational indicators, the illiteracy rate has reached 16.1% among those whose mother tongue is an Indigenous language, compared to just 3.6% of those whose mother tongue is not a native language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2017). National assessments on quality education reveal that 66.4% of children in Huancavelica do not achieve the expected level in literacy for Year 2 (primary level). The other rural regions in the country have similar statistics: Cajamarca (72.6%), Apurímac (62.5%), Ayacucho (65.7%), Cusco (59.3%). By contrast, urban regions show better results: Tacna (44.4%), Moquegua (47%). In numeracy the results are even lower. For instance, more than 80% of students do not reach the expected level for Year 2: Huancavelica (87.6%), Cajamarca (90.6%), Apurimac (85.1%), Ayacucho (89.2%), Cusco (86.4%) (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2022).

Although these challenges are historic, rural education in Peru has not been prioritised as an educational policy. Across decades, rural education has been overshadowed by investments in quality education, infrastructure and technology in urban areas. Moreover, rural education as a category for tracking public expenditure in Peru is one of the biggest absences in government policies. Initiatives and efforts in the rural field are disconnected and non-articulated in public policies (Montero & Uccelli, 2023). As Montero and Uccelli pointed out, the commitment to improve rural education has been fragile and belated in the neoliberal governance of the last 30 years, as rural spaces are considered to be historically backward with a tendency towards extinction, and therefore not worth investing in. Despite this difficult panorama, most rural teachers, parents, children and whole communities in the Andes of Peru have been trying to deal with these issues while implementing social justice practices through critical pedagogies.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogies emerged from Paulo Freire's work in north-eastern Brazil during the 1960s. The approach combines "*liberation theology ethics and critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany*" (Kincheloe, 2012, p. 151). The publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed in* 1967 had a profound impact over pedagogical practice, teacher education and educational scholarship in Latin America and across the world (Kincheloe, 2012). Within this approach, schools are seen not only as spaces of instruction or socialisation, but also as cultural and political spaces which activate empowerment and the self-transformation of students and their communities.

In this sense, schools are spaces of both domination and liberation (McLaren, 2002). This critical view opposes the neoliberal model of education, where education is seen as an investment and schools are seen as the places where students need specific skills, attitudes and knowledges to succeed in the solely market-oriented workplace. In contrast, through a Freirean lens,

> *pedagogy is not a method or an a priori technique to be imposed on all students but a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. (Giroux, 2010, p. 716).*

This is pertinent in contexts which are marked by deep injustices, such as rural contexts within Peru, where "*there are many sides to a problem, and often these sides are linked to certain class, race, and gender interests*" (McLaren, 2002, p. 62). Critical educators struggle for a better life through a society based on social justice and non-exploitative social relations (McLaren, 2002). Hence, critical pedagogy emphasises the intrinsic relationship between educational and social transformation, in order to break all forms of oppression and injustice (Fischman & Haas, 2009).

In particular, Freirean concepts such as critical consciousness and dialogue are necessary for breaking social injustices. Critical consciousness is characterised "*by depth in the interpretation of problems, by the substitution of causal principles of magical explanations, by the testing of one's 'findings' and by openness to revision … by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics*" (Freire, 1974, p. 14). In particular, the concept of critical consciousness implies the relationship between consciousness, human action and the world that we are trying to change (Darder, 2015). For Freire, social circumstances were crucial to the formation of critical consciousness (Darder, 2015).

Dialogue refers to the encounters between women and men who name the world in an act of creation and re-creation. According to Freire (1970), this is only possible "*with love*" and without "*a relation of domination*" (p. 89). Furthermore, dialogue is expected between humans with cultural differences, in order to enrich their experiences and fight against oppression. To promote dialogue and critical consciousness, teachers have a central role. For Giroux (2013), educators must be "*transformative intellectuals,*" rather than being reduced to technicians who are engaged in formalistic tasks (p. 33). Giroux pointed out that teachers should combine the mutually interdependent roles of critical educators and active citizens. This implies a dynamic role with students, since education does not have the unique function of training students for a job; rather, it has "*to educate them to question critically the institutions, policies, and values that shape their lives, relationships to others, and myriad connections to the larger world*" (Giroux, 2013, p. 30).

Based on the review of the previous key concepts, I embrace critical pedagogy as a framework to challenge social structures and institutional contexts where injustices have occurred, like the Peruvian case. In this sense, critical pedagogy rails against the oppressive structures imposed by neoliberal governance as already discussed. Through the concepts of dialogue and critical consciousness, critical pedagogy highlights the importance of struggles for emancipation in the educational field.

Methodology

To select the teachers as research participants, I established contact with the non-government organisation Tarea and the Fe y Alegría Jesuit network, which both have a long work history in rural education and in critical pedagogies in settings like Ayacucho and Cusco. The decision to focus on these regions was based on two reasons. Firstly, the Tarea and Fe y Alegría Jesuit networks had been working with teachers from these regions, so initial contact was established through these gatekeepers. Secondly, these are two of the poorest regions in Peru with a significant percentage of rural inhabitants (Ayacucho, 42%; Cusco, 39%). Cusco was the capital of the Inca empire before the Spanish colonisation and Ayacucho was one of the most affected regions after the armed conflict (1980–2000). In Ayacucho, more than 40% of its population live under the poverty line, while in Cusco this percentage is 30% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2022).

The teachers who took part in the whole study were seven rural teachers working in rural schools in Cusco and Ayacucho. They were selected using three criteria:

- at least five years of teaching experience working with critical pedagogies/social justice approaches in rural areas of Peru;
- identified themselves as critical educators;
- had trajectories not only as teachers, but also as activists, leaders or members of networks working in line with critical pedagogy, social justice education, or related areas within their communities.

For this paper, I have included the voices of two teachers: one male teacher from Cusco and one female teacher from Ayacucho.

The study followed a narrative approach, because people are inherently storytellers who tell about the plural ways they "*experience the world*" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Narrative inquiry embraces narrative "*as both the method and phenomena of study*" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). Within the educational field, the experiences of and stories from teachers and learners may help to illuminate larger scale social narratives (Dwyer et al., 2017). As Clandinin (2013) pointed out, an exploration of what individuals constitute, express and enact can provide insights into social, cultural, familiar and institutional narratives.

Within my study, narrative inquiry provided a way of understanding how the voices of teachers in relation to their pedagogical practices of social justice were working in rural Peru. Narrative inquiry allows for the possibility of exploring multiple contexts, such as spatial, cultural, institutional and social contexts (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Riessman (2008) explained that

> *individuals use these stories to mobilise others and to foster a sense of belonging. Narratives do political work. The social role of stories – how they are connected to the flow of power in the wider world – is it an important facet of narrative theory. (p. 21)*

This political dimension is fundamental for Peruvian teachers working in rural areas because they have been historically marginalised from the official channels. In summary, following a qualitative perspective, the evidence was generated in contextual settings which are understood as value laden. In this sense, the use of narratives within a qualitative approach allowed me to gain deep immersion into teachers' stories.

The narrative inquiry method uses in-depth interviews (also known as unstructured interviews). I used this tool to grasp the teachers' stories about their experiences and meanings around social justice in education. From a qualitative approach, in depth-interviews are understood as a form of conversation (Burgess, 1982). Following Ritchie et al. (2014), the interviews used open questions to allow the participants to express their ideas without the restrictions of closed questions that require yes/no answers. In this sense, based on the model of Riessman (1993), the following broad questions were used in the interviews:

- How did you decide to become a teacher? Could you share about this experience?
- You said you had … (Example: a very difficult experience teaching in rural schools). Can you tell me a bit more about this experience?
- How did you start your engagement with critical pedagogies? Could you tell me about this experience?
- How do you apply critical pedagogies in the classroom with children? Could you provide some examples?
- In your own words, what is social justice in education for you? Why?

From these broad questions, I held extensive dialogues with the two teachers in their local schools over a period of four months. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and I translated them into English. Given the narrative inquiry approach, the in-depth interviews were

conversations delving into the teachers' experiences and values of social justice in education. My role as a researcher was to be an effective listener and see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than a respondent (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007).

Following Polkinghorne (1995), I used paradigmatic analysis (analysis of narratives) for the teachers' stories. This type of analysis is focused on descriptions of themes across stories or in taxonomies of types of stories including characters and settings. I chose this analysis since I was interested in finding common elements from the teachers' stories. A paradigmatic analysis "*looks for patterns, narrative threads, tensions and themes across an individual's experience and within a social setting*" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132). Two common themes related to community work to reappraise Quechua and the practices of social justice are presented in this paper.

The study was given ethical clearance through the University of Bristol, UK.

Findings

Teachers' Voices from Rural Cusco Reappraising Indigenous Culture and Diversity

Amaru and Urpi (pseudonyms) were two teachers from rural Cusco and Ayacucho. Amaru was an art teacher at both primary and secondary level and Urpi taught all subjects at primary level in an intercultural bilingual school (where studying Quechua was compulsory). Both were working with students and the community to reappraise native culture in the Andes through critical pedagogies. From here on, the teachers will be referred to with the title *Teacher*. In Peru, that title precedes the name of a person who teaches. It is used as a sign of respect and it gives prestige to the teacher.

Teacher Amaru was born in Tinta, Cusco. His hometown is an historical place; this was also the hometown of Tupac Amaru II, a cacique (hereditary chief) who led the largest uprising in Peruvian colonial history which raged across the Andes from 1780 to 1783. Teacher Amaru studied arts at the Bellas Artes School (School of Fine Arts). Critical thinking was integral to his conception about art and education. He held a critical view of Spanish colonisation and its influence. He started as a teacher influenced by pedagogies. He explained:

> *Teaching is a job that I love. But the education system is where they have taken art out. They do it on purpose; we do not want someone to sow here; they get to primary school; it is also a "filler" course; they do not have a specialist art teacher. In high schools they do not train the teacher in initial training [about] what they are going to do with art with the children. They focus on mathematics, communication, but they don't focus on creativity.*

Teacher Amaru was making the argument for creativity in education by critiquing the focus in teacher training on numeracy and literacy, which are subjects included as part of national assessments led by the Ministry of Education.

Teacher Urpi was born in Ayacucho in the south highlands of Peru. She was a female rural teacher with 13 years' experience in rural schools in the Ayacucho region. Although she was not a Quechua native speaker, she decided to learn Quechua after her first engagement with children as a student teacher:

> *I was not a Quechua speaker. When I went to school all the children spoke Quechua; I was desperate; it was a very helpless situation, because I could not understand what they wanted to say to me. That is when I said to myself: I have to speak Quechua. I said to the teachers at school, you have to speak to me in Quechua. It was difficult for me; I understood some of the language, but very little. So, I said to my parents at that time: You have to speak to me in Quechua, otherwise I won't answer you. The rural school where I started working was a very different reality from the city, very precarious, and I needed to do something for the children and the community.*

Urpi graduated as a primary school teacher and started as an intercultural educator in rural Ayacucho.

Showing the Value and Pride of Being Quechua Through Social Justice Practices

Both teachers encouraged their students to reflect critically on their own heritage and history. For example, Teacher Amaru illustrated how he was working with his students to think about the local culture, their culture, and to think about it positively:

> *Teacher Amaru: Let's see. What are your surnames?*
>
> *The students' reply: Mamani, Romuaja, Ñaupa*
>
> *Teacher Amaru: Now I tell them, why don't they put two surnames together and come up with a name? For example, Mamami is Aymara, it is not Quechua [Mamani means eagle]; in the case of the Romuaja it is linked to nobility; they are tied to the Incas, to their nobility. The Ñaupa are the most visionary. The Ñaupa is the one who moves forth, the one who instinctively knows the way. We always need a Ñaupa as a guide. We teachers are also Ñaupa. So, I give each one a mission [based on their surnames and meanings] and they work together. So, it is how to bring that cosmovision to put each one "in their spirit." It's not monetary value; it's spiritual value. It's emotion.*

This example demonstrated one practice used by Teacher Amaru, whereby he attempted to empower the students by making their culture visible and showing its positive side. Experiencing discrimination for having a Quechua surname is a manifestation of everyday racism in Peru (Galarza et al., 2011). Most rural people are not proud of their heritage or are not even aware of these social issues (Thorp & Paredes, 2010), and Teacher Amaru was facing the challenge through these pedagogical activities. In this sense, Teacher Amaru's work regarding the identification of a spiritual side in the Inca surnames was also a practice to empower children.

Dialogue with grandparents was another teaching practice under a social justice approach. From Teacher Amaru's perspective:

> *We are in touch with grandparents. So we talked in a meeting of just grandparents, another one with parents. We discussed what kind of world we live in and what we would give their children. We are trying to encourage them to give children their culture, their pride, their cultural heritage of humanity, because we live in a cultural heritage of humanity.*

From critical pedagogies, dialogue is a key component in the process of both learning and knowing (Freire & Macedo, 1995). Furthermore, through dialogue, Teacher Amaru was promoting not only the awareness of the families' cultural roots but also the possibility to imagine what kind of world they would like to give to their children. This was a way to approach "*the world critically, recovering the power to transform our lives as historical subjects*" (Darder, 2015, p. 19).

Teacher Urpi explained that she encouraged the children to reappraise local culture through using cultural experiences beyond the classroom:

> *Now we are in the month of Chuño [a freeze-dried potato traditionally made by Quechua and Aymara communities in Peru and Bolivia.] I asked them who is going to do that. We also do Cintachicuy [a cattle dance from the region of Ayacucho], where they put ribbons on the alpacas to distinguish them. We take advantage of this as local knowledge to turn it into pedagogical tools. We also watch dances; we show videos. Maybe there are no festivities like this before, but they do it through storytellers; they share a meal; each teacher sees how the strategy shows them. Now we see the comparison of local knowledge with the knowledge of other peoples. For example, I have shown them the knowledge of Puno [a Peruvian region in the southern highlands of the country]. They watch the video and I ask them what they think: How do you do it in your community, in Quechua?*

From this example, a practice of social justice is shown through the revalorisation of local festivities such as Cintachicuy and Chuño. Teacher Urpi reminds the students about the importance of Indigenous culture by creating meaningful interactions that support children to realise the tensions of inequality associated with class, race, sexuality and other forms of difference (Darder & Cronin, 2018). Although Teacher Urpi did not emphasise the body as part of the dances, it is important to link this with the critical pedagogy of the body discussed by Darder and Cronin (2018). According to them, the significance of the body as a terrain of emancipatory struggle is essential to comprehend the impact of oppressive domestication, as discussed by Freire (1974), which can limit the life choices and emancipatory objectives of the oppressed groups. Without an explicit mention of the critical pedagogy of the body, Teacher Urpi promoted dance and festivities as tools for reinforcing cultural ties, while revalorising Indigenous knowledge.

Community Work to Reappraise Quechua

Community is central to implementing social justice practices in education, as Freire (1998) encouraged teachers to promote collective empowerment "*to unveil truths about the world*" (p. 88). Teacher Urpi was working with parents and grandparents in rural Ayacucho to build the community calendar in Vinchos [a small village in rural Ayacucho]. They included the festivities and collective activities relevant for the community, and these also became part of the workbooks for children. This was a process of wide public consultation with members of the Vinchos community, including parents, grandparents, representatives of the educational sector, churches and non-government organisations.

Teacher Urpi created a collective project using the Quechua language. The children collected stories from their parents and grandparents. Along with these narratives, children included art:

> *We collected all the stories; the children used their tablets; they recorded their parents and grandparents narrating the stories to them. I made them listen to how their parents narrated so that they could narrate as well. Then I told them: Now you are going to write it down. In the process of writing, we included grammar and coherence. Then they narrated, wrote and read in their mother tongue. It was like storytelling. We have digitalised this experience. We have also made the sequence of that story. They have drawn; that's where art comes in; we have taught them artistic techniques. And we submitted the project to the Ministry of Education as part of the Good Teaching Practices competition.*

This is an example of intercultural education, where the Quechua culture was reappraised. Moreover, Teacher Urpi was making strong connections between children and their parents and grandparents. In other words, the school and community were working together in favour of intercultural bilingual education. For some authors, storytelling is a means for making sense of everyday experience with an educative effect (Jarrett, 2019; Shank, 2006).

Within traditional societies, storytelling is an important process whereby customs and values are taught and shared (Shank, 2006). Teacher Urpi had encouraged the children to talk to their parents and grandparents about the Quechua language and their culture. After this, the children were encouraged to take notes about these stories and write them down. Additionally, she organised workshops with the parents and grandparents in the community and through dialogues helped them to contribute to the communal calendar. The inclusion of grandparents and parents as storytellers was a pedagogical tool, not only to make children aware of their culture and social world, but also as a mean by which social change was enacted (Coulter et al., 2007). In this way, the stories from historically oppressed people can counter the stories of the oppressor (Tate, 1997).

However, according to Teacher Urpi, most parents were reluctant to include Quechua as part of this project, due to the strong discrimination it often entailed. Teacher Urpi recalled:

> *At the beginning most parents didn't want to write in Quechua. They were not convinced; they wanted Spanish. I told them: No, it is important that you write in Quechua. I told them that when I came here, I did not know how to speak or write Quechua. I was taught by the children at school. If I did not know how to speak you would not know, I told them. A teacher, a doctor, a lawyer in rural areas always must know Quechua; it's not bad, I told them. That's how I encouraged them.*
>
> *As a result of her work, Teacher Urpi was awarded the first prize in a Good Teaching Practices competition organised by the Ministry of Education in 2021. This competition recognised and disseminated the pedagogical practices developed by teachers to improve student learning.*

Teacher Amaru led a project called Wawa Inti Raymi, named after a ceremony called The Feast of the Sun Child. This ceremony was created by the Inca Pachacutec in 1430, in honour of Inti the Sun God, and it takes place every winter solstice (June 24 each year). The Wawa Inti Raymi project involved around 500 students from different schools in rural Cusco. It involved playing Inca games, with the children dressed like Incas. To learn from these ancient costumes, Teacher Amaru worked with parents and grandparents in different communities:

> *We organised meetings with parents and grandparents. We discussed what kind of world we live in and what we would give our children. We asked them to give them their culture, their pride; we want them to give them their cultural heritage of humanity, because we live in a cultural heritage of humanity [city of Cusco], so we are filling the little children's thoughts with pride, and it feels super good for the emotional state of the children to wear an uncu [Inca tunic worn by men] and an acsu [Inca tunic worn by women].*

Through creating these experiences for children, the two teachers were implementing social justice practices that included language, dance, art and storytelling. The development of the individual, alongside the construction of a democratic community, is central to critical pedagogies (Kincheloe, 2012). Through dialogue and critical consciousness, Indigenous culture was being taught in the teachers' classrooms, as well as beyond these spaces by including the voices of the community. Moreover, both teachers were promoting students' agency, by allowing them opportunities to learn and to recognise themselves as agents. This is a "*way to move students away from instrumentalised forms of learning and replaces these with pedagogical activities that ignite both their passion for learning and their creative engagement with the world around them*" (Darder, 2015, p. 64).

However, Teacher Amaru was aware of the hegemony of neoliberal policies and banking education (Freire, 1970) over critical pedagogies. He reflected:

> *I see that teachers are not committed to social justice. But I am also sometimes like them. For example, I am thinking about how many young students are going to go to university, those who are preparing for university exams; even though I have a different approach, I should not be thinking about universities. I am thinking like them, and I have an intercultural approach, but the teachers who do not have an intercultural approach, can you imagine? They are thinking about cost-benefit, about the banking education. So, we talk about how much you are going to earn, where you are going to go shopping, to see what is your socioeconomical level, what your spending capacity is, to see if you are middle class, upper class or poor. I think that's what they're thinking about.*

Teacher Amaru was describing how banking education operated in his context with a focus on exam results and cost-benefit logic. As Freire (1970) pointed out, "*the theory and practice of banking education use verbalistic lessons, reading requirements and methods for evaluating 'knowledge' … everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking*" (p. 76). In

other words, banking education reinforces "*the objectification of students as static vessels to be filled with knowledge*" (Darder, 2015, p. 55).

Similarly, Teacher Urpi mentioned that her colleagues were still following Western principles and she tried to show them the power of Indigenous knowledge:

> *My colleagues are always looking for me to ask me questions. We must take advantage of this knowledge from here (native knowledge) but not just leave it there. The two forms of knowledge [native and Western] must be consolidated in the children. It is not because you are Western that you have the last word [that you are superior]. There is knowledge here that is very useful. Many people here in the rural areas heal themselves with native plants and that is not written in a scientific book.*

Thus, the experiences of Teacher Amaru and Teacher Urpi illustrated a pathway where the Quechua culture was reappraised within the model of intercultural bilingual education led by the Ministry of Education. And these two teachers were also promoting practices where critical consciousness and dialogue were key concepts to discuss issues of historical racism and discrimination against Indigenous populations in the country.

Conclusion

As the paper showed, despite some important advances such as the *Sectoral Policy on Intercultural and Bilingual Education* (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2016), rural education has never been a prioritised policy, nor has it received the necessary funding to close the educational inequality gaps. Within this complex scenario, rural education in Peru requires practices and voices from critical approaches to address these issues. Critical pedagogies (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1995) emerge as an approach to embrace diversity and break traditional ways of teaching and learning within the complex scenarios of educational inequalities.

From the voices of two rural teachers, the practices of social justice in education showed different examples for promoting Freirean (1970) concepts such as critical consciousness and dialogue. These practices included arts, dance and storytelling for reappraising Indigenous culture. For instance, festivities and the communal calendar were being promoted by these teachers to develop a critical reflection of their own identities. The two teachers also showed critical views of neoliberal governance, by questioning banking education and the historical abandonment of Quechua in Peru (Thorp & Paredes, 2010). Furthermore, these two teachers valued the role of parents and community in supporting their work around the revalorisation of the native language. These practices were aligned with critical pedagogies foundations within communities to stimulate critical thinking and reassess their Indigenous identities.

This study has limitations, because it only included two rural voices from teachers in two specific regions of Peru. Further studies are needed for analysing issues of social justice in education in other regions of the country. The Peruvian Amazon area, for example, hosts more than 40 Indigenous languages with issues around inclusion and social justice in education. Furthermore, a comparative study including countries that host important Indigenous populations, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, should be invited to contribute, as a way of enriching the debate in this field.

References

Ames, P. (2006). A multigrade approach to literacy in the Amazon, Peru: The school and community perspectives. In A. Little (Ed.), *Education for all and multigrade teaching* (pp. 47– 66). Springer.

Banya, K. (2010). Globalization, policy directions, and higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. In J. Zajda (Ed.), *Globalisation, education and social justice* (pp. 15–32). Springer.

Burgess, R. (Ed.). (1982). *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*. Allen & Unwin.

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Clandinin, D. J., & Rosiek, J. (2007). Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry: Borderland spaces and tensions. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 35–75). Sage.

Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación. (2003). *Informe final* [Final report]. http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ifinal/index.php

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, *19*(5), 2–14. https://doi.org/10.2307/1176100

Coulter, C., Michael, C., & Poynor, L. (2007). Storytelling as pedagogy: An unexpected outcome of narrative inquiry. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *37*(2), 103–122. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30054791

Cuenca, R. (2013). Cambio, continuidad y búsqueda de consenso, 1980–2011 [Change, continuity and search for consensus, 1980–2011]. Derrama Magisterial.

Darder, A. (2015). *Freire and education*. Routledge.

Darder, A., & Cronin, S. (2018). A critical bicultural pedagogy of dance: Embodying cultural literacy. *Revista Portuguesa de Educação*, *31*(Especial), 26–41. https://doi.org/10.21814/rpe.14805

Degregori, C. I. (1991). Educación y mundo andino [Education and the Andean world]. In I. Pozzi-Escot, M. Zúñiga, and L. E. López (Eds.), *Educación bilingüe intercultural: Reflexiones y desafíos* [Intercultural bilingual educaation Reflections and challenges]. Fomento de las Ciencias Sociales.

Dwyer, R., Davis, I., & emerald, e. (Eds.). (2017). *Narrative research in practice: Stories from the field*. Springer.

Eguren, F. (2006). *Reforma agraria y desarrollo rural en la región Andina* [Agrarian reform and rural development in the Andean region]. Centro Peruano de Estudios Sociales.

Fischman, G., & Haas, E. (2009). Critical pedagogy and hope in the context of neo-liberal globalization. In W. Ayers, T. Quinn, & D. Stovall (Eds.), *Handbook of social justice in education* (pp. 565–575). Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Freire, P. (1974). *Education for critical consciousness*. Continuum.

Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers and cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Westview Press.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1995). A dialogue: Culture, language and race. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(3), 377–403.

Galarza, F. B., Kogan, L., & Yamada Fukusaki, G. (2011). *Existe discriminación en el mercado laboral de Lima metropolitana?: Un análisis experimental* [Is there discrimination in the labour market of metropolitan Lima?: An experimental analysis]. Universidad del Pacífico. http://hdl.handle.net/11354/375

Giroux, H. A. (2010). Rethinking education as the practice of freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education*, *8*(6), 715–721. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.6.715

Giroux, H. A. (2013). Critical pedagogy in dark times. *Praxis Educativa*, *17*(2), 27–38. https://www.academia.edu/96866473/Critical_Pedagogy_in_Dark_Times?uc-sb-sw=37478490

Harvey, D. (2007). Neoliberalism as creative destruction. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 610*, 22–44. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097888

Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática. (2017). *Censos nacionales XII de población, VII de vivienda y III de comunidades Indígenas 2017* [National census XII of population, VII of housing and III of Indigenous communities 2017]. https://www.inei.gob.pe/media/MenuRecursivo/publicaciones_digitales/Est/Lib1539/libro.pdf

Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática. (2022). *Evolución de la pobreza monetaria 2011–2022: Informe técnico* [Evolution of monetary poverty 2011–2022: Technical report]. https://www.inei.gob.pe/media/MenuRecursivo/publicaciones_digitales/Est/pobreza2022/Pobreza2022.pdf

Jara Holliday, O. (2018). *La educación popular latinoamericana. Historia y claves éticas, políticas y pedagógicas* [Latin American popular education: History and ethical, political and pedagogical keys]. Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones Alforja. https://doi.org/10.15381/rsoc.v0i28.16899

Jarrett, K. (2019). Developing the art of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for academics. In L. Marshall, J. Canning, & S. Greener (Eds.), *Navigating with practical wisdom: Articles from the 2018 University of Brighton Learning and Teaching Conference* (pp. 83–89). https://kar.kent.ac.uk/78882/

Jones, N. N., & Walton, R. (2018). Using narratives to foster critical thinking about diversity and social justice. In A. M. Haas & M. F. Eble (Eds.), *Key theoretical frameworks: Teaching technical communication in the twenty-first century* (pp. 241–267). University Press of Colorado. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv7tq4mx.16

Kincheloe, J. L. (2012). Critical pedagogy in the twenty-first century: Evolution for survival. *Counterpoints*, *422*, 147–183. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981758

McLaren, P. (2002). Critical pedagogy: A look at the major concepts. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 69–96). Routledge/Falmer.

Ministerio de Educación del Perú. (2016). *Política sectorial de educación intercultural y educación intercultural bilingüe* [*Sectoral policy on intercultural education and intercultural bilingual education*]. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12799/5960

Ministerio de Educación del Perú. (2018). *Decreto supremo que aprueba la política de atención educativa para la población de ambitos rurales* [Supreme decree that approves the educational care policy for the popultion in rural areas]. https://busquedas.elperuano.pe/dispositivo/NL/1723311-1

Ministerio de Educación del Perú. (2022). *Evaluación muestral 2022 de estudiantes* [Sample evaluation 2022 from students]. http://umc.minedu.gob.pe/resultados-em-2022/

Montero, C., & Uccelli, F. (2023). *De ilusiones, conquistas y olvidos: La educación rural en el Perú* [*Of illusions, conquests and oblivions: Rural education in Peru*]. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos.

Moragues, M. (1996). *Hacia la escuela posible: Sistematización del proyecto educativo La Casa de Cartón* [Towards possible school: Systematisation of the educational project La Casa de Cartón]. TAREA Asociación de Publicaciones Educativas.

Oliart, P. (2011). *Políticas educativas y la cultura del sistema escolar en el Perú* [National policies and the culture of the school system in Peru]. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos & TAREA.

Pinnegar, S., & Daynes, J. G. (2007). Locating narrative inquiry historically: Thematics in the turn to narrative. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 3–34). Sage.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *8*(1), 5–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103

Puiggrós, A. (1999). Educación y sociedad en América Latina de fin de siglo: Del liberalismo al neoliberalismo pedagógico [Education and society in Latin America at the end of the century: From liberalism to pedagogical neoliberalism]. *Revista Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe: Educación y Política en América Latina*, *10*(1), 5–24. https://doi.org/10.61490/eial.v10i1.1046

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Sage.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C., & Ormston, R. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. SAGE.

Rizvi, F. (2009). International perspectives on social justice in education. In W. Ayers, T. M. Quinn, & D. Stovall (Eds.), *Handbook of social justice in education* (pp. 91–94). Routledge.

Sandoval, P. (2004). *Educación, ciudadanía y violencia en el Perú: Una lectura del informe de la CVR* [Education, citizenship and violence in Peru: A reading of the CVR report]. TAREA & Instituto de Estudios Peruanos. https://repositorio.iep.org.pe/items/2fbeab51-8273-4c80-9128-6f3e692abac9

Savin-Baden, M., & Van Niekerk, L. (2007). Narrative inquiry: Theory and practice. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, *31*(3), 459–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260601071324

Schiefelbein, E. (1997). Financing education for democracy in Latin America. In A. Puiggrós & C. A. Torres (Eds.), *Latin American education: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 31–64). Westview Press.

Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in human capital. *The America Economic Review*, 51(1), 1–17. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1818907

Shank, M. J. (2006). Teacher storytelling: A means for creating and learning within a collaborative space. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(6), 711–721. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.03.002

Tate, W. F. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education*, 22, 195–247. https://doi.org/10.2307/1167376

Thorp, R., & Paredes, M. (2010). *Ethnicity and the persistence of inequality: The case of Peru*. Palgrave Macmillan

Torres, C. A. (2001). Grandezas y miserias de la educación latinoamericana del siglo veinte [Greatness and miseries of Latin American education in the twentieth century]. In C. A. Torres (Ed.), *Paulo Freire y la agenda de la educación latinoamericana en el siglo XXI* [Paulo Freire and the agenda of Latin American education in the 21st century] (pp. 23–52). Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales.

Trapnell, L. & Neira, E. (2004). *Situación de la educación bilingüe intercultural en el Perú* [Situation of intercultural bilingual eduation in Peru]. World Bank & PROEIB Andes.

Walsh, C. (2009). Critical interculturality and decolonial pedagogy: In-Surgir, re-existing and re-living. In V. M. F. Candau (Ed.), *Intercultural education in Latin America: Between conceptions, tensions and proposals* (pp. 12–43). 7 Letras.

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Space, Place and Memories: Life Narratives About the Constitution of Subjects as Transforming Agents in the Periphery of São Paulo in Brazil

Elizabeth dos Santos Braga
Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil
elizabeth.braga@usp.br

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the production of space in rural and urban territories and the dialectical relation with agency and environmental activism. The data came from a collective ethnographic action research conducted at the Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surroundings in the periphery of São Paulo in Brazil. In this article, I analyse the narratives which are part of interviews with a primary teacher and a community leader, one responsible for the Green Unified Educational Centre Project and the other for the vegetable garden of Vila Nova Esperança. Both subjects have become environmental agents or transformative activists. I inquire if this has to do with their memories of places and their importance of such memories for their praxis and personalities and asked about their rural past or another situation which may have produced their environmental awareness. Focusing on concepts such as production of space, place as a lived and felt space, and *perezhivanie*, I analyse the dynamics of transformations through these narrative interviews.

Keywords: *production of space, place, memory, life narratives, rural/urban, perezhivanie*

Introduction

During the presentation of the research project to a group of primary school teachers, one of them asked the following question: *"If I plant a tree with a student today, will he remember it when he's an adult?"* It was Antonio who founded the Green Unified Educational Centre Project, which will be further explained later. In a village close to the Educational Centre where the research is being carried out, Lia, a resident, led a movement for the creation of a community vegetable garden and kitchen that would serve the local population, as well as other initiatives, such as a children's library. Both individuals were interviewed as part of the activities of the collective action research that is being held at the Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru, one of the 58 Unified Educational Centres in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

Unified Educational Centres have been an important inter-sectorial public policy in São Paulo involving the municipal departments of Education, Culture, and Sport and Leisure. This policy has been maintained throughout different municipal administrations since 2003. They are based on educational ideas of important Brazilian educators, writers and politicians, such as Mario de Andrade, Anísio Teixeira, Paulo Freire, and Darcy Ribeiro. In addition, they draw from previous initiatives, such as the Integrated Public Education Centres in Rio de Janeiro, the Comprehensive Childcare Centres nationwide, the Model Schools in Bahia, and the Centre for the Development of Urban and Community Equipment in São Paulo.

According to Perez (2010), Unified Educational Centres must be a combination of school, cultural, sports and leisure centres, to expand social protection networks for children and adolescents,

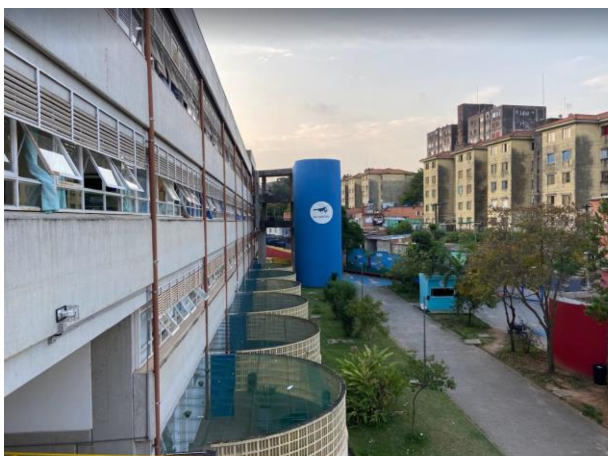
and to propose spaces for *"the rescue of our human condition"*[1] (p. 288). The principles in all the projects are *"(1) popular participation as a factor for change; (2) relationship between school and territory; and (3) culture as a link between education and territory"* (Perez, 2007, p. 127). Several studies on the effects of Unified Educational Centres consider that they play an important part in the rearrangement of the urban fabric, as they aim to promote public areas in the city periphery to reduce criminality and social, cultural, technological, and educational exclusion (Oliveira, 2017; Padilha & Silva, 2004).

This research aims to analyse Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru as part of this educational public policy, the production of its space, the impact of its architecture, and the ways that surrounding communities signify it. The research team is divided into three subgroups: memory and education, architecture, and environment.

Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru is located on the western edge of the city, and it was built and implemented (2008–2009) during a right-wing administration, with the original design modified and the average area reduced to minimise budget costs. It sits on the edge of a stream, on a marshy area in a valley floor. It serves a population in high social vulnerability and sub-standard housing conditions.

There are four buildings at this Unified Educational Centre: a schooling block (with a nursery, a preschool, and primary and elementary schools; see Figure 1); a cultural block (with a multipurpose room, an industrial kitchen, and a library; see Figure 2); a management block (with offices and a meeting room; see Figure 2); and a sports and cultural block (with courts, a theatre, and multipurpose rooms). In addition, there are swimming pools (see Figure 2), a playground, and gym equipment. Despite the variety of facilities and equipment, there are several problems concerning their conditions, use and conservation. The swimming pools, for example, could not be used in 2023 because of structural problems.

Figure 1: ***The Schooling Block and Part of Uirapuru Community on the Right***



Note: All photos in this article are part of the research group's collection.

[1] All quotations, in particular those of Freire (1983), Perez (2007, 2010), Andrade (2010), Haesbaert (2011), Halbwachs (1990), Nery et al. (2019), Santos (2020, 2021) and Gomes and Ximenes (2022) have been translated into English for this article.

Figure 2: ***The Cultural Block, Management Block, and Area of Swimming Pool***

For a megalopolis like São Paulo, with a population of almost 11.5 million and a high urban heterogeneity, an analysis developed by Nery et al. (2019) proposes a division into eight different urban patterns (each denominated by a letter: A to H), using a range of indicators: environmental, housing, health and hygiene conditions, urban mobility, crime patterns and population profile. The region where Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru is located belongs to Group H which is a peri-urban area and

> *has the second highest number of sectors with geological risk areas (18.4%) and the worst water, sewage, and rubbish collection rates (96.6%, 99.9% and 99.3%, respectively). ... The sectors in Group H are located beyond the city's suburbs, a space where urban and rural activities mix, making it difficult to determine the physical and social boundaries of both. (Nery et al., 2019, p. 27)*

The observation of educational practices, as well as considerations made possible by the interviews, led me to write this article for the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education,* and to collaborate with the Special Issue *Considering diversity in educational research exploring school-community relationships*. I agree with the organisers of a previous issue, *Connecting Rural and Urban Education Research* (Fuqua et al., 2021), on the need to move beyond the "*existing notions of a rural-urban divide*" in search of "*connections between the rural and the urban*" (p. i) in educational studies.

Before moving on to the other sections of this article, I would like to bring the perspective of diversity into my discussion. Abramowicz et al. (2011) warn of the need to pay attention to the concepts of difference and diversity, which are often used interchangeably in Brazilian research publications. According to the authors, this undifferentiation hides social inequalities under the "*aegis of tolerance*" (p. 91). They stress the importance of educational research considering diversity and difference, recognising that there are "*irreconcilable inequalities*" (p. 94) and that a "*pedagogy of the intolerable*" (p. 96) is necessary. In this sense, Gomes and Ximenes (2022) point out that principles "*such as equality, justice, equity, non-discrimination and non-violence ... are part of a democratic education project, with social quality, that recognizes diversity and stands against any form of inequality and discrimination*" (p. 1).

In the territory of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surrounding communities, the diversity is present in many senses: race, ethnicity, nationality, origin within Brazilian territory, socio-economic and educational level, religion, and so on. Many activities developed within the facility and proposed by the schools' political pedagogical projects as well as the research activities concern such diversity, are seeking to achieve a more democratic education and to contribute to social justice.

Space, Place, Territory, Memory and Subjectivity

In this section, I discuss the importance of concepts such as space, place, and territory to the understanding the constitution of subjects as transforming agents. Haesbaert (2011) calls attention to the spatial dimension on the construction of social processes. Based on the ideas of Lefebvre (2006), he states that every identity is spatial, since it is not performed in an abstract way, but is contextualised in space-time, geographically, historically, and symbolically perceived/lived. In the process of this study, the research team has dealt with memories of Unified Educational Centre and communities' agents, and has tried to understand how they compose daily life and relationships with the place and with each other, in a reciprocal dynamic. Specifically, it considers that these subjects/agents produce space, instead of conceiving them as customers.

Lefebvre (2006), influenced by Marx, prefers the category *production of space*, more concrete and dialectical, instead of *science of space*, in a particular historical-social formation (Damiani, 2012; Santos, 2020). Haesbaert (2011) distinguishes space and territory, based on Raffestin (1980). According to the latter, territory rests on space; it is a production from space, which differs slightly from Lefebvre's point of view, where the very space is produced. On the notion of territory, Haesbaert defines that "*besides the focus being put on one of the fundamental dimensions of the space, its political dimension of power relations, we could not admit its existence without the 'moment' of materialization through some type of spatial practice*" (p. 50). Santos (2020) states that "*space includes, therefore, this 'materialistic connection of a human being with another one' as told by Marx and Engels in The German Ideology*" (p. 321).

The concept of space in geography has been re-dimensioned, involving not only the physical, but also the social dimension, considering place as *lived and felt space* (Tuan, 1983). Thus, place can be understood as an appropriate, meaningful space with which people identify themselves. They are places of experience and places of everyday life (Carlos, 2007).

The lived experience creates, dialectally, our memory. Halbwachs (1990) relates the perception and experience of groups in space to the configuration of collective memory. For him, it is the individual as a member of groups that remains subject to the materiality of things and places, and memories of places that no longer exist can hold a group together. Space configures the most stable frameworks of a group's memory: "*there is no collective memory that does not develop within a spatial framework. ... We can say that there is no group, no genre of collective activity, that has no relation to a place*" (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 143). Bosi (1994), based on Halbwachs, analysed memories of elders in São Paulo in the 20th century, situating them within the collective memory of that period. One of the highlighted aspects is space: how their memories are permeated by references to their childhood house, the backyard, the street, biographical objects, the school, and a factory. These are aspects that populate memory and, at the same time, are elements for the constitution of identity.

Pollak (1992) reflects on memory and social identity and their relationship with events, people and places in the lives of individuals as social beings. According to him, the constitutive elements of both individual and collective memory are events (those experienced personally, lived by the groups to which the subjects belong, and all the events that occurred within the space-time of the person or group), people encountered during life directly or indirectly, and places.

In this regard, I think about the meanings and senses of places, people, objects, and words, which are all part of the social relations involved in the processes of belonging to living spaces – places – of subjects/agents. Vigotski[2] (2010) calls *perezhivanie* the dimension of the environment's influence on each person, particular in the sense that each person is dialectically individual and

[2] The surname of the author has different spelling in English (Vygotsky), Portuguese (most of the cases, Vigotski) and Spanish (Vygotski). I keep the spelling of the original texts for this article.

social in their concrete reality, according to the author's historical dialectical materialism roots. In Portuguese, the translation for the term is *vivência*. In English there is no specific word for *perezhivanie* and it is sometimes translated as *emotional experience* to differentiate from *experience*, which in Russian is *opit* and in Portuguese, *experiência*. Most of the time, texts in English use the Russian term *perezhivanie*. For different understandings and polemics around this concept, see Smolka et al. (2023).

Veresov and Fleer (2016) draw attention to the relation between this concept and the one of a social situation of development, a dynamic and unique unity of child and environment. They refer to Vygotsky's consideration that the child is part of the social situation and that the relationship between child and environment occurs through the child's own experience. They point to the need

> *to study perezhivanie as (a) a prism that refracts certain aspects of the social environment and therefore to identify which aspects of the social environment influence the course of child development, and how they were refracted; (b) a unique unit of individual and environmental components of a certain concrete unique social situation of development, which is the initial moment that defines the future trajectories of the development of higher mental functions; and (c) a unit of consciousness, as a developing whole where changes of a child's concrete perezhivaniya bring dynamic changes to the whole organization of consciousness. (pp. 8–9)*

Pino (2010), commenting on Vygotsky's concept, emphasises that the natural environment is also social. This is the so-called social environment where dialectics between nature and culture are considered. He also draws attention to another idea present in Vygotsky's text: the constant and reciprocal changes in environment, context, and the child/person.

Methods for a Qualitative and Collaborative Research

This research is based on the theoretical-methodological principles of a cultural-historical perspective on human development (Vigotski, 1996) and an enunciative and discursive approach (Bakhtin, 2017). It has adopted a qualitative, ethnographic, collaborative, and action research approach. A study has been carried out since 2022, in which attention has been paid to the micro-processes involved in the subjects' actions, meanings attributed to places, and experiences, aiming at emancipating and critically reflexive practices.

This approach is in line with Paulo Freire's principles of liberating and transforming education. According to Freire, everyone is *"a critical agent in the act of knowing"* (Freire & Shor, 1996, p. 46). In this sense, each subject/agent in the researched context is seen as a partner in the investigation process.

The research procedures include participant observation, socio-environmental/affective mapping, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The latter are considered a form of social interaction, a discursive, contextualised, and comprehensive practice (Silverman, 2000; Zago, 2003) and special attention is paid to life and experience narratives (Bertaux, 2010). McAlpine (2016) explains that:

> *Using a narrative methodology, particularly longitudinally with a relatively large number of individuals, enables us to document variable and shifting ways of understanding experience, both within and between individuals. Finally, since multiple views on experience can coexist as part of the narrative research report, we would argue it is possible to provide a richer and more plausible representation of lived experience. (p. 40)*

McAlpine's (2016) words lead us again to the importance of diversity, which I link to the principles of "*equality, justice, equity, non-discrimination* and *non-violence*" (Gomes & Ximenes, 2022, p. 1). In 2023, themes of anti-racist education and ethnic diversity were focused during meetings for

teacher education with the research team and in planning pedagogical practices, as well as in the observation of local reality and selecting the interviewees, many of whom were migrants or their descendants.

Research Data

The research data are composed of a) field-diary accounts from participants' observations in Unified Educational Centre environments, such as daily life in schools, meetings with teachers, and management councils; b) documents including pictures and other documents about the history of the equipment and its surroundings, architectural designs, and political pedagogical projects; c) interviews with teachers (and also conducted by them), people who have actively participated in the history of the Unified Educational Centre, residents of the surrounding communities, professionals and other agents; and d) a socio-environmental/affective mapping of the territory.

Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and the surrounding neighbourhoods present a series of problems, such as poverty, poor sanitation and housing, violence, problems with the buildings' infrastructure (lack of thermal and acoustic isolation), difficulties involved in sharing environments between schools and communities such as courts, the lack of a playground in one of the schools, and problems concerning teaching teams and students or their families. Nevertheless, the research team could observe important actions implemented by many of the agents and these have been analysed.

In this article, I focus on narratives from two interviews based on a script approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal Institute of São Paulo, process number 55508222.8.0000.5473, and conducted by the author: one with a primary school teacher of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and the other with a community leader from the area. Both interviewees authorised the publication and use of their names. The first interviewee is Antonio, the teacher, who has a rural past, as I expected. The other one, Lia, the community leader, does not. I analyse these narratives in the next sections, bringing to the discussion some theoretical aspects in a dialectical dynamic, highlighting the issue of the transformation of both subjects into *rural urban* agents. Their stories allow us to point out how one of them has turned his rural past into the present and the other has *ruralled* (Fuqua et al., 2021).

Narratives 1 and 2: Rural Past and "Rurban" Present

Antonio Marcos de Lima, born in Vicentina, Mato Grosso do Sul, has always enjoyed working with the land. He came with his family to São Paulo when he was a small child, "*in search of better living conditions, like the vast majority of people who came here*." His father (from Bahia) was a carpenter, and his mother (from Sergipe) was a cleaner (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: ***Brazil's Political Map.***

Note: Three states are labelled: São Paulo; Mato Grosso do Sul and Bahia, where the interviewees Antonio and Lia were born, and Bahia and Sergipe, where Antonio's parents were born.

Narrative 1 is about Antonio's childhood in Carapicuíba (metropolitan region of São Paulo).

> *Interviewer: You told me that you had a childhood very connected to nature there. What was that like?*
>
> *Antonio: At the time I came to Carapicuíba, it was rural. There were lots of ranches, farms, springs, and everything else. And over time, it changed and ended up turning into the rubbish it is today, which would be a [pause] dormitory town. With almost no sidewalk . ... So it's a very [hesitant] precarious town. …*
>
> *Interviewer: But in your childhood days?*
>
> *Antonio: It was very good. There were no paved streets, it was muddy, but it was very pleasant, very good to live in. Nowadays it's just houses and asphalt.*
>
> *Interviewer: And do you have any memories to tell us about your childhood there, with nature?*
>
> *Antonio: Nature was walking barefoot, bathing in the river, drinking spring water, eating fruit off the tree. ... All the things we must have nowadays.*
>
> *Interviewer: Yes. The other day you told us that you want to give these [CEU] children what they can't have, right? In this childhood.*
>
> *Antonio: Yes. Making it possible that the school can give these children this experience that they no longer have, right? They no longer have it because of the precariousness we see in families. Precarious housing and leisure. ... But the school can offer them, despite the small space we have here, this green reality and the possibility of experiencing things that they don't get to experience anymore, which is simply eating fruit off the tree, being able to climb a tree.*

Figure 4: ***City of São Paulo and the Towns of Carapicuíba (Between Osasco and Barueri), Itapevi and Ibiúna (Google Maps, 2023)***

Narrative 2 is about moving to Itapevi (metropolitan region of São Paulo) and Antonio's small farm in Ibiúna (metropolitan region of Sorocaba-SP). See Figure 4.

> *Interviewer: And you commented that before [hesitant] there were no green areas, but then there started to be a change, it seems like the construction of a park, right?*
>
> *Antonio: Yes, Itapevi [hesitant] it seems [hesitant] I even wrote to the Town Hall [hesitant] and put the title [of the message] "Town without a park." Then there was a reply saying that they were developing linear park projects, because there was no more space to build parks. And now it seems that this was true because they've created a town park. … It's a very large area, it doesn't have much greenery, but they're starting to green it up … and it's creating a huge lake.*
>
> *Interviewer: Antonio, … you have a small farm in Ibiúna, right?*
>
> *Antonio: Aha [hesitant]*
>
> *Interviewer: And what's it like there? Tell us about it. What have you been planting there, cultivating there?*
>
> *Antonio: It used to be a green area, a green belt, ... and there's a lot of vegetables, but they use a lot of agrochemicals.*
>
> *Interviewer: Um [hesitant]*
>
> *Antonio: And these pesticides have really damaged the soil. So, I'm trying to correct the soil. [hesitant] Because my area used to be planted with eucalyptus. And eucalyptus, I don't know if it acidified the soil and depleted it of nutrients. So now I'm correcting the soil, cutting down the undergrowth, letting the undergrowth settle, rotting, right? And planting [native] trees so that I can reforest that part of the land that belongs to me.*
>
> *Interviewer: … Do you go there on the weekends?*
>
> *Antonio: Every weekend I go and work there, when I can. ...It's a rural area. If you look from where I live, you can see a very large plantation of cauliflower … rosemary, cabbage, lettuce.*

> *… There's a great diversity, of birds, you can find sandpipers, toucans, white wings, teiú [and so on] there are lots of snakes.*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah?*
>
> *Antonio: Sagui, there are lots. … There's a great diversity of animals.*
>
> *Interviewer: Oh! There must be fireflies at night.*
>
> *Antonio: Yes, and you can identify constellations too.*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah?*
>
> *Antonio: You can identify Orion, Pleiades, I think [hesitant]*
>
> *Interviewer: because there's very little electric light.*
>
> *Antonio: Small Magellanic Cloud, Large Magellanic Cloud. [Hesitant] Some planets, you can identify their light too.*
>
> *Interviewer: How beautiful!*
>
> *Antonio: It's very nice, at night you can see a really starry sky.*

The rural exodus or emptying the countryside is part of a Brazilian reality that increased with industrialisation, and intensified between 1970 and 1980, when more than half the population moved to cities in an emigration movement. Many families came to São Paulo, or other large cities, in search of better living conditions, and faced a very different reality from the one they expected to find. Many people were unable to continue in their original professions, becoming factory workers and/or cleaners, earning minimum wages.

Despite the hardships, in his narratives Antonio splits his life into two parts: 1) a happy childhood in the midst of nature ("*enjoying the springs, walking barefoot*") in Carapicuíba, which he calls "*rural,*" and 2) other periods marked by degraded places, in which the towns became urban ("*almost no sidewalks, precarious, only houses and asphalt, a dormitory city*"—Carapicuíba—and a "*town without a park*" – Itapevi). Andrade (2010) explains that:

> *The contrasts between the countryside and the city are disappearing as transport and communication facilities allow the countryside to penetrate more and more into the city and the city more and more into the countryside. It can be said that there is a process of urban ruralisation and, conversely, rural urbanisation. Hence the sociologist-anthropologist Gilberto Freyre using the term "rurban" to define what has not yet ceased to be rural but is not yet urban. (p. 12)*

Andrade (2010) goes on to say that:

> *In fact, with the development of capitalism and the ease of transport, people with higher income who live in the city have started to acquire land in the vicinity of the city … At the same time, as urbanisation is expanding into rural areas, it is also spreading to the outskirts of cities, forming large housing estates for low-income people in areas where there are still some agricultural activities that benefit from the proximity of the urban market. These, however, are gradually being destroyed in the face of urban pressure and rising land prices. (pp. 12–13)*

These clusters are typical of the various communities that surround CEU Uirapuru. Even though Antonio does not live in one of them, Itapevi is located on an underprivileged area in Greater São Paulo, which has about 21 million inhabitants, while the city of São Paulo has about 11.5 million inhabitants. In Antonio's narratives, he tells us about the degradation of space which turns out to be the production of space characteristic of capitalism. The lack of green areas, the

indiscriminate use of agrochemicals, the pavement with asphalt, the transformation of rural space that "*ended up turning into the rubbish,*" the existence of dormitory towns around São Paulo, like the one reported by Antonio, are part of a concrete geography of space linked to "*a sociology of space and a history of space, in which the weight and pressure of history are dehumanising*" (Damiani, 2012, p. 262).

Antonio's memories of having lived in a rural area and closer to nature—"*walking barefoot, bathing in the river, drinking spring water, eating fruit off the tree*" (Narrative 1)—seem to shape his identity. These memories seem more linked to space than to chronological time. Pollak (1992) explains that "*there are places of memory, places particularly linked to a memory, which may be a personal memory, but may also have no support in the chronological time*" (p. 202). These places that no longer exist, linked to *collective memory of family* (Halbwachs, 1990), hold Antonio's activity at Green Unified Educational Centre Project.

Antonio's memories are supported by places—these lived and felt spaces (Tuan, 1983), places of experience (Carlos, 2007)—and so is his identity. Buying the small farm in Ibiúna, to which he travels on the weekends, seems to have been a way of reconnecting with this lost paradise ("*It's a rural area*") where he can plant, be close to animals, and enjoy the stars.

Narratives 3 and 4: Agency, Activism, and Environmental Education

In Narrative 3, Antonio tells us about Green Unified Educational Centre (*CEU Verde*). This is an after-school project that was born out of the observation of the socio-environmental conditions of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and surrounding areas. Another teacher from an elementary school, Fabiano, collaborated with the project for four years. Now there are two technical education assistants: Carlos and Beatriz. Around 1,000 trees have been planted, and today there are around 600 trees standing.

> *Interviewer: Where did the idea for Green Unified Educational Centre come from?*
>
> *Antonio: It came from seeing the lack of greenery, you know? A school that houses over a thousand children. … So I realised the children wouldn't have a favourable environment in which to live out their childhood experiences. In this case, climbing a tree, having a picnic under a tree, eating fruit, picking from their own trees. And the CEU itself, when I started to realise this, was very arid, very hot. If you needed a shade, you had to stand under a wall. Artificial shades, so to speak. And I proposed – to myself, not to anyone else – that I would change this environment through a project. And I started doing the project on my own, out of my own pocket. I didn't have much support. … These are words you hear a lot: "Oh, put it on the list, then we'll see!" … I started buying trees. … Then I joined the More Education Program [The Ministry of Education's strategy for extending public school days to 7 hours] and started encouraging students to take part. … They [municipality workers] came … cut down, damaged more than 50 trees, … then it was a very big fight, they called the Green Department . …*
>
> *Interviewer: That was at the end of last year, right?*
>
> *Antonio: They replaced 30 of the 50 or so trees … to finish afforesting the outside. This year we've completed tree-planting on the inside (see Figures 5 and 6) ... So next year we'll complete the internal and external afforestation of the school. The next step would be creating a sensory garden. ... We also have a bird-watching project, the orchard, which is for children picking fruit, native or not, inside the school and outside the school, which would benefit our external and internal community. In this case, children could eat … [many] types of fruit, make juice [hesitant] work on healthy eating [hesitant] recipes and everything else. So that's the aim of the Green CEU: to give quality of life to both our school community and the external community, the surrounding area. …*

> *Interviewer: Is Green* Unified Educational Centre *ten years old?*
>
> *Antonio: … I think it was in 2010, when I came here, I started observing, right? There are even photos you can see it was an ugly place. Very ugly, dry, arid. I think it represented, externalised, what was in people's hearts, because people passed by and didn't see these things, they lived at school and didn't realise this need.*
>
> *Interviewer: What a thing!*
>
> *Antonio: It's a look that didn't exist. People went in and out of CEU (*Unified Educational Centre*) and nothing ever changed. I think people were even afraid to do that, because when I started, they said: "No, the structure, the format, of CEU can't be changed. What was done, the way it was done, has to remain." And I think that's wrong. A school needs to be green.*

Figure 5: *Antonio Observing* Unified Educational Centre *Uirapuru from a distance*

Note: Antonio is near the temporary parking lot, by the stream, and where trees would be planted to help hold back erosion.

Figure 6: *CEU's Open Area*

Note: Antonio, Carlos and students who participate in Green CEU Project preparing the soil and planting trees in the central flowerbed, while residents cross CEU's open area.

In Narrative 4, Lia talks about the community vegetable garden. She tells us about becoming a community leader and developing a project for environmental protection and education. In 2013, she started the popular vegetable garden, an initiative that culminated with the creation of the Lia Esperança Institute, which also distributes 120 lunches a day to children in the community. Those involved in the project voted on the name. Today, the institute receives financial support

from the municipal administration and from a Canadian foundation [The Caring Family Foundation] that works to combat child poverty, domestic violence and deforestation. In addition, Lia told us that she began to identify herself as Lia Esperança (Lia Hope) after being asked at a Public Hearing where she came from.

> *Lia: My name is Maria de Lourdes Andrade Silva, but everyone knows me as Lia Esperança. I was born in a town … called Itaberaba, in Bahia.*
>
> *Interviewer: And do you have any references from the countryside? How did you learn to enjoy working with the land?*
>
> *Lia: So, I learnt in Vila Nova Esperança because [hesitant] What happened was that I came to live here in 2003. In 2006, I found out that there was legal action to remove all the families. And I had bought the land and as soon as I started building my house, I found out that I had to leave, that everyone was going to be removed. And when it came to removing everyone, I said: "Wow, the only money I had I spent here. Am I going to lose everything like this?" And in 2006, I started researching to find out why the families were being removed. I discovered that they [the Courts] wanted to remove them [the families] because, according to them, people who lived here were degrading the environment. ...*
>
> *And then what happens? … I didn't understand because I didn't know. I never even cared about the environment. Do you know when you care about earning money and working? I would leave in the morning, go to work, come home in the evening. [hesitant] I didn't care. For me, I was living, I had food, I had the things I needed, right? Then I found out that we were in an environmental conservation area and that the Courts wanted to remove us because of that. But I also looked at it like this and thought: "Wow, what a context, what a contradiction! How are you going to get nature out of nature?"*
>
> *Interviewer: Yes.*
>
> *Lia: That's when I said: "No. It's wrong." Then, in 2009, it got worse. Then people said: "Lia, you have to be the leader here" .... Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors from the Environmental Prosecutor's Office. Then I began to understand what was going on. Then I said: "Prosecutor, why? Instead of removing those people from there, from that space, who have been living there for years, since before the environmental law, why not bring environmental education?" He didn't listen. … "You don't have to take people out of the woods. You have to teach these people to live in harmony with the woods, not take them away." But they wouldn't listen to me. Then one day, when I saw that the whole community was going to be removed, I went to the residents and said: "We're going to have to do something together. We need environmental education here, but we don't have a professional, we're going to do it ourselves." Then they said: "What are we going to do?" I said: "The first thing … We're going to clean up the whole community. The second thing we're going to do is a vegetable garden." "But why, Lia? I can afford to buy a tomato; I can afford to buy lettuce." I said: "It's not a question of being able to buy it, it's a question of learning to deal with nature, of having a harmony with nature that we don't have. So, let's make a vegetable garden, because through the vegetable garden we'll bring sustainability into the community, we'll teach you how to live in harmony with nature." … And today our village is an example of sustainability (see Figures 7 and 8). ... I learnt everything I know in Vila Nova Esperança.*
>
> *Interviewer: This issue of the collective, community and nature.*
>
> *Lia: Yes, and I learnt by doing. I had to learn by doing.*

Figure 7: ***Lia Observing Residents***

Note: Lia is observing two community residents, Natan and Carol, helping to look after the vegetable garden.

Figure 8: ***Lia in the Community Garden***

Note: Lia is passing between the beds of the community garden and the greenhouse with tender plants.

I would like to explore two aspects of Antonio's and Lia's ways of life and personalities (in Vygotskian terms): their agency/activism and involvement with environmental education, as well as their preoccupation with poor life conditions.

Antonio began the Green CEU Project observing the "*lack of greenery,*" "*the children wouldn't have a favourable environment in which to live out their childhood experiences,*" and that CEU "*was very arid, very hot,*" with only "*artificial shades.*" So, he decided to create Green CEU ("*I proposed – to myself, not to anyone else – that I would change this environment through a project.*") (Narrative 3), anchored in his memories and experiences of a past rural life. In Narratives 1 and 2, he denounces the situation of the towns that make up the Greater São Paulo area ("*dormitory,*" "*precarious,*" "*with no green areas*") and tells us he used to write messages to Itapevi Town Hall with the subject "*Town without a park*" to claim for better environmental conditions. In Narrative 3, he reports the problem with the municipal workers who "*cut down, damaged more than 50 trees.*" Thus, he was not simply a melancholic observer of the degradation of towns or the arid conditions of the CEU's external areas and their surroundings. He became an environmental agent/activist.

Lia tells us about the "*process to remove all the families*" from Vila Nova Esperança because they "*were degrading the environment*" and the fight against prosecutors for the community not to be removed. In this process, she became an acclaimed leader. In Lia's case, activism was a dialectical product of participation in a social movement. In the beginning, she used to have an

individualistic vision: "*I never even cared about the environment. Do you know when you care about earning money and working? I would leave in the morning, would go to work, come home in the evening ... I didn't care. For me, I was living, I had food, I had the things I needed, right?*" (Narrative 4).

Antonio does not remember when he became aware of environmental issues. In Lia's story, activism generated praxis and awareness to her and the other families.

Stetsenko (2017) proposes an approach to agency that she calls *the transformative activist stance*, based on the dialectical premises of Vygotsky's project and the broader foundations in Marxist philosophy:

> *From the position of the transformative activist stance (TAS), persons are agents not only for whom "things matter" but also who themselves matter in history, culture, and society and, moreover, who come into being as unique individuals through their activist deeds, that is, through and to the extent that they take a stand on matters of social significance and commit to making a difference by contributing to changes in the ongoing social practices. This means that there is no way that we can extract ourselves out of this activist engagement. (p. 230)*

In addition to being inspired by Vygotsky, she is also inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, for whom praxis forms consciousness.

> *There is a plurality in human beings' relationship with the world, as they respond to a wide variety of challenges. … Their plurality is not only in the face of challenges that come from their context, but in the face of the same challenge. In the constant play of its responses, it changes in the very act of responding. They organise themselves. They choose the best answer. They test themselves. They act. They do all this with the certainty of someone using a tool, with the awareness of someone facing something that challenges them. In the relationships that human beings establish with the world, there is therefore a plurality in this very singularity. (Freire, 1983, pp. 39–40)*

The ecological awareness that, in Antonio's case, was constructed little by little emerged to Lia when she had to act: "Then people said: 'Lia, you have to be the leader here.' … Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors … Then I began to understand what was going on." Lia's development as an active agent was part of the organisation of her consciousness that, for Vigotski (2001) and Volóchinov (2018)—from the Bakhtinian Circle—is a meaningful, relational, discursive, and ideological process.

Antonio learned about plants, trees, animals, soil, harms of pesticides, and constellations slowly, during his life, working with the land in his rural/urban reality. Lia had to learn faster, during the political struggle: "*I learnt by doing. I had to learn by doing,*"

> *Human beings are active. The action he/she takes on his/her surroundings to provide the conditions necessary to maintain the species is called human action. All human action is work, and all work is geographical work.*
>
> *There is no production that is not the production of space, and there is no production of space that takes place without labour. For men, to live is to produce space. (Santos, 2021, pp. 96–97)*

The production of space involves challenges and conflicts. According to Antonio:

> *I think people were even afraid to do that, because when I started, they said: "No, the structure, the format of CEU can't be changed. What was done, the way it was done, has to remain." And I think that's wrong. A school needs to be green. (Antonio, Narrative 3)*

In this geographical and political work, Antonio and Lia learned from and taught others in *teaching relationships* (Smolka, 1988).

> *Then I started taking part in meetings with prosecutors from the Environmental Prosecutor's Office. Then I began to understand what was going on. Then I said: "Prosecutor, why? Instead of removing those people from there, from that space, who have been living there for years, since before the environmental law, why not bring environmental education?" (Lia, Narrative 4)*

From the social struggle to the community agents, faced with the threat of their homes being removed: "*We're going to have to do something together. We need environmental education here, but we don't have a professional, we're going to do it ourselves*" (Narrative 4).

Antonio considered it important that children could have the experiences that he had had as a child in Carapicuíba: "*climbing a tree, having a picnic under a tree, eating a fruit, picking from their own trees*" (Narrative 3). Children who live in underprivileged areas in São Paulo more specifically hardly ever have these experiences: "*Making it possible that the school can give these children this experience that they no longer have, right? They no longer have it because of the precariousness we see in families*" (Narrative 1).

Through the Green Unified Educational Centre Project, Antonio believes that children will have lifelong experiences (*perezhivaniya,* in Vygotskian terms) in contact with nature. This also has the pedagogical meaning of teaching them to take care of nature, and to love plants and animals. He even calls the hole where he throws the seeds a "*cradle*". In Portuguese, the word *cova* (grave) is used for the hole where one places a seed for germination. Antonio, however, calls it *berço* (cradle).

Lia also teaches adults in the community to take care of their rubbish, to plant what they will eat, and to care about the children in the village, which also has a pedagogical purpose: "*You don't have to take people out of the woods. You have to teach these people to live in harmony with the woods, not take them away*" (Narrative 4).

Conclusion

In the context of this research, understanding the process of the production of space in Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru and its surroundings is necessary to comprehend the contradictions that permeate the dynamics of its operation and the social dynamics of its agents. Many of them are children and adults living in situations of vulnerability. Analyses then are about the process of transformation of the space in places for these agents throughout the existence of this facility, and even before, in the stories of occupation and migration. This means that they are also about the appropriation and signification of Unified Educational Centre Uirapuru, as well as the territory, by its agents (team, students and communities).

In this article, I analysed four narratives about the Green Unified Educational Centre Project and the vegetable garden of Vila Nova Esperança. These came from two interviews, one with a Unified Educational Centre agent and the other with a community leader from a surrounding area. Both were concerned with serious local problems of hunger, health, housing, and education, and told us their stories of committed practices. From their narratives, I could perceive the transformation of these subjects into environmental agents, or transformative activists (Stetsenko, 2017). These aspects are now part of their personality and discourse, in a consideration of intense relation between human beings and nature: "*Wow, what a context, what a contradiction! How are you going to get nature out of nature?*" (Lia, Narrative 4).

These agents' projects are in line with proposals for the pedagogy of place, such as Paulo Freire's situated pedagogy, place-based learning (Cohen & Rønning, 2017), or the curriculum based on the concepts of emotional geographies (Webb et al., 2021), lived space (Serra, 2021) or *querência*

(Ault, 2008). This last term is used by Ault (2008) in the sense of the deepest feelings and beliefs that bind us to places linked to "*personal experience and commitment to community*" (p. 605); or, as analysed by Gouwens and Henderson (2021), *querência* is important for migrant families "*to feel a sense of belonging to a new place*" (p. 5).

In addition to learning about and working with the environment, the people from CEU Uirapuru and Vila Nova Esperança will feel part of these places which, instead of being inhospitable and "*very ugly, dry, arid*," can become lived and felt spaces, meaningfully produced and re-signified, and part of a memorable territory.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the members of the research team in 2023: Bruna Machado, Cristina Almeida, Denise Coelho, Edna Nascimento, Luzia Braga, Maria Valerio, Patricia Silva, Thais Silva, and Thiago Calandro. Also, to Lívia Paiva and Gabriela Pavesi.

References

Abramowicz, A., Rodrigues, T., & Cruz, A. (2011). A diferença e a diversidade na educação [Difference and diversity in education]. *Contemporânea*, *1*(2), 85–97. https://www.contemporanea.ufscar.br/index.php/contemporanea/article/view/38

Andrade, M. (2010). Geografia rural: Questões teórico-metodológicas e técnicas [Rural geography: Theoretical-methodological and technical issues]. *Campo-Território: Revista de Geografia Agrária, 5*(9), 5–16. https://doi.org/10.14393/RCT5911992

Ault, C. R., Jr. (2008). Achieving querencia: Integrating a sense of place with disciplined thinking. *Curriculum Inquiry, 38*(5), 605–637. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00438.x

Bakhtin, M. (2017). *Notas sobre literatura, cultura e ciências humanas* [Notes on literature, culture and human sciences] (P. Bezzera, Trans.). *Editora* 34.

Bertaux, D. (2010). *Narrativas de vida: A pesquisa e seus métodos* [Life narratives: Research and methods]. Paulus.

Bosi, E. (1994). *Memória e sociedade: Lembranças de* velhos [Memories and society: Remembrances of old people] (3rd ed.). Companhia das Letras.

Carlos, A. F. A. (2007). *O lugar no/do mundo* [The place in/of the world]. FFLCH. https://gesp.fflch.usp.br/sites/gesp.fflch.usp.br/files/O_lugar_no_do_mundo.pdf

Cohen, B. J., & Rønning, W. (2017). Place-based learning: Making use of nature in young children's learning in rural areas in Norway and Scotland. Cadernos Cedes, Campinas, *37*(103), 393–418. https://doi.org/10.1590/CC0101-32622017176129

Damiani, A. L. (2012). Introdução a elementos da obra de Henri Lefebvre e a geografia [Introduction to elements of the work of Henri Lefebvre and geography]. *Revista do Departamento de Geografia*, Special Volume – 30 years, 254–283.

Freire, P. (1983). *A educação como prática da iberdade* [Education as practice of freedom] (18th ed.). Paz e Terra.

Freire, P., & Shor, I. (1996). *Medo e ousadia – o cotidiano do professor [Fear and boldness – The teacher's daily life].* Paz e Terra.

Fuqua, M., Henderson, R., Glowrey, C., & Maton, K. (2021). Connecting rural and urban education research: Editorial. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), i–iv. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.323

Gomes, N. L., & Ximenes, S. B. (2022). Ações afirmativas e a retomada democrática [Affirmative actions and democratic resumption]. *Educação & Sociedade*, *43*, e269417. https://doi.org/10.1590/ES.269417

Gouwens, J. A., & Henderson, R. (2021). Rethinking deficit discourses in education through rural education: Research and the concept of querencia. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.300

Haesbaert, R. (2011). O espaço importa: dilemas da construção identitário-territorial na contemporaneidade [Space matters: Dilemmas of identity-territorial construction in contemporary times]. In L. Bastos, & L. Moita-Lopes (Eds.), *Estudos de identidade: entre saberes e práticas* [Identity studies: Between knowledge and practices] (pp. 45–76). Garamond.

Halbwachs, M. (1990) *Memória coletiva* [Collective memory]. Vértice.

Lefebvre, H. (2006). *A produção do espaço* [The production of space]. Éditions Anthropos.

McAlpine, L. (2016). Why might you use narrative methodology? A story about narrative. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri* [Estonian Journal of Education], *4*(1), 32–57. https://doi.org/10.12697/eha.2016.4.1.02b

Nery, M., Souza, A., & Adorno, S. (2019). Os padrões urbano-demográficos da capital paulista [The urban-demographic patterns of the capital of São Paulo]. *Estudos Avançados*, *33*(97), 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1590/s0103-4014.2019.3397.002

Oliveira, P. (2017). *O CEU na integração da periferia* [The CEU in the integration of the periphery]. [Master's thesis, Universidade de São Paulo]. Biblioteca Digital. https://teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/16/16139/tde-13062017-105806/pt-br.php

Padilha, P., & Silva, R. (2004). *Educação com qualidade social*: A experiência dos *CEUs de São Paulo* [Education with social quality: The experience of CEUs in São Paulo]. Instituto Paulo Freire.

Perez, M. A. (2007). Cidadania: Cultura, lazer e educação para todos [Citizenship: Culture, leisure and education for all]. CEE *Participación Educativa*, 6, 127–149. https://www.academia.edu/34818763/Cidadania_Cultura_Lazer_e_Educação_para_todos

Perez, M. A. (2010). *Inclusão social através da Educação: Um estudo do programa "Centro Educacional Unificado" na cidade de São Paulo* [Social inclusion through education: A study of the "Unified Educational Center" program in the city of São Paulo] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Universidade de Siegen.

Pino, A. (2010). A criança e seu meio: contribuição de Vigotski ao desenvolvimento da criança e à sua educação [The child and his environment: Vygotsky's contribution to child development and education]. *Psicologia USP*, 21(4), 741-756. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-65642010000400006

Pollak, M. (1992). Memória e identidade social [Memory and social identity]. *Estudos Históricos*, 5(10), 200–212. http://www.pgedf.ufpr.br/memoria%20e%20identidadesocial%20A%20capraro%202.pdf

Raffestin, C. (1980). *Por uma geografia do poder* [For a geography of power]. Ática.

Santos, M. (2020). *A natureza do espaço: Técnica e tempo, razão e emoção* [The nature of space: Technique and time, reason and emotion]. Edusp.

Santos, M. (2021). *Metamorfoses do espaço habitado: Fundamentos teóricos e metodológicos da Geografia* [Metamorphoses of inhabited space: Theoretical and methodological foundations of Geography]. Edusp.

Serra, E. (2021). O espaço vivido e a pedagogia situada de Paulo Freire [Lived space and Paulo Freire's situated pedagogy]. *Revista Teias*, 22(67), 133–144. https://doi.org/10.12957/teias.2021.62401

Silverman, D. (2000). *Interpreting qualitative data*: *Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. Sage.

Smolka, A. L. (1988). *A criança na fase inicial da escrita:* a alfabetização como processo discursive [The child in the initial phase of writing: Literacy as a discursive process]. Cortez Editora.

Smolka, A. L. B., Braga, E. S., & Dainez, D. (2023). Perezhivanie: Intentos de comprensión y elaboración de un concepto [Perezhivanie: Attempts to understand and elaborate a concept]. In S. Dubrovsky & C. Lanza (Eds.), *Perezhivanie: La potencia de un concepto Vigotskiano: Pensar y transformar las prácticas escolares: Teoría sociohistórica, aprendizaje y educación* [Perezhivanie: The power of a Vigotskian concept: Thinking and transforming school practices: Socio-historical theory, learning and education] (pp. 85–108). Noveduc.

Stetsenko, A. (2017). *The transformative mind: Expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education*. Cambridge University Press.

Tuan, Y. (1983). *Espaço e lugar*: A perspectiva da experiência [Space and place: The perspective of experience]. Difel.

Veresov, N., & Fleer, M. (2016). Perezhivanie as a theoretical concept for researching young children's development. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 23(4), 325–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2016.1186198

Vigotski, L. S. (1996). *Teoria e método em psicologia* [Theory and method in psychology]. Martins Fontes.

Vigotski, L. S. (2001). *A construção do pensamento e da linguagem* [The construction of thought and language]. Martins Fontes.

Vigotski, L. S. (2010). Quarta aula: A questão do meio na pedologia [Fourth lesson: The question of the environment in pedology] (M. P. Vinha & M. Welcman, Trans). *Psicologia USP*, 21(4), 681-701. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-65642010000400003

Volóchinov, V. (2018). *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem* [Marxism and philosophy of language]. Editora 34.

Webb, S. C., Knight, E., Black, R., & Roy, R. (2021). Exploring students' feelings of place. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.304

Zago, N. (2003). A entrevista e seu processo de construção: Reflexões com base na experiência prática de pesquisa [The interview and its construction process: Reflections based on practical research experience]. In N. Zago, M. Carvalho, & R. Vilela (Eds.), *Itinerários de pesquisa*: Perspectivas qualitativas em Sociologia da Educação [Research itineraries: Qualitative perspectives in the sociology of education] (pp. 287–309). DP&A.

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Thinking About Rural Education and Binary Logic

Anne Paterson
University of Strathclyde, Scotland
anne.paterson@strath.ac.uk

Loreto Abarzúa-Silva
Universidad Metropolitana De Ciencias De La Educación and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
loreto.abarzua@umce.cl

Moch. Imam Machfudi
Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia
imammachfudi@uinkhas.ac.id

Robyn Henderson
University of Southern Queensland
robyn.henderson@unisq.edu.au

Abstract

Although definitions of *rural* vary across educational research projects and from country to country, an enduring theme has been the framing of rural as a disadvantage or problem that sits alongside a view of the urban as normative. In questioning the urban/rural binary and the deficit discourses that are associated with it, the authors present four short data excerpts and their thinking about how they represent rural education in their research. They conclude that the telling of positive stories about rural education is a move towards changing the discourses that circulate.

Keywords: *binaries, binary logic, counternarratives, deficit discourses, rural education, stereotypes*

Introduction

Over the years, much has been written about rural schools, what education is like in rural schools, and what it means to be a rural school. Roberts and Guenther (2021) explained that "'*rural' is a seemingly straightforward concept, until we attempt to define it*" (p. 13). In fact, definitions of rural education are multiple, but recent literature has suggested that one way of making sense of *rural* is to consider it as "*a catchall for places situated beyond major metropolitan centres and those who identify with spaces beyond those centres*" (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021, p. 2), a definition that takes place, space and geography into consideration.

The idea for this paper came from discussions at an international educational research conference. In many of the sessions, researchers presented data from rural schools. It was apparent that definitions of *rural* varied across research projects and from country to country. Even at the simplest level, rural varied from communities situated on the fringes of large cities to communities that were very long distances from urban locations, or even separated from other populated areas by geographical barriers, such as mountain ranges or deserts. Yet, what seemed to stand out in the data was how staff in rural schools—teachers, principals/headteachers, ancillary staff—were dealing with issues that probably never make educational rulebooks or policy guidelines. Such issues can make rural education stand apart from mainstream education, which is generally urban education.

In the literature, we hear about the urban/rural binary (Guenther et al., 2023). As Roberts et al. (2024) explained, "*as educational researchers we have been disciplined to accept a binary logic of city/country; urban/rural; cultured/rustic; connected/isolated*" (p. 125). Such binaries were

discussed by Davies and Hunt (2000), who noted that difference is "*understood as a deviance*" from the characteristics that are regarded as "*normal*" (p. 108), and this can lead to stereotyping. Davies and Hunt used "*the concept of marking*" (p. 108) to explain how the out-of-the-ordinary category of a binary pair (in this article, the rural) is recognised by its difference from the unmarked category (i.e., the urban).

This makes us wonder about the question: Can we move beyond binary logic? Davies (2000) highlighted the challenges of wanting to do this, while Roberts et al. (2024) said that there are "*advantages for researchers—establishing 'rural' as 'difference' and constructing it as a research variable*" (p. 125). A recent analysis of articles published in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* highlighted that "*rural disadvantage is clearly assumed as normative*" in many articles, with multiple authors talking about "*disadvantage … problems … barriers to be overcome … complexities … and general concerns*" (Guenther et al., 2023, p. 4). In addition, Guenther et al.'s (2023) analysis of journal articles showed that deficit discourses constituted a perennial theme that frames "*rural and remote as an inherent disadvantage*" (p. 4).

Some researchers, though, have talked about efforts to move away from the use of binaries, stereotypes and deficit discourses. Roberts et al. (2024), for example, argued for engaging "*with the complexity of rurality*" as a way of countering the broad-brush approach that focuses "*on rural populations as a category of difference, 'a group' that is 'other' than a metropolitan norm*" (p. 141). Henderson (2021) talked about her conscious decision to shape her research "*around positive stories*" (p. 160), as a way of trying to move beyond deficit discourses and "*reclaim the rural in productive ways*" (Donehower et al., 2012, p. xv).

How, then, do we talk and write about the rural? Do we take up the urban/rural binary to show, for example, that the rural is not considered in educational policy? Or do we deliberately set out to not take up the rural disadvantage perspective? This question made us think further:

- Do we take up the urban/rural binary without thinking?
- Or do we deliberately try to avoid it?
- If we try to avoid it, how do we do that?

To try to answer these questions, we have each selected a small piece of data from our research about the rural. We will now reflect on those data to consider:

- How have I (or how might I) talk about the data? What is my interpretation of the excerpt?
- What assumptions do I have about rural education? How have I dealt with (or how might I deal with) the urban/rural binary and deficit discourses about rural education?
- How might researchers talk about rural education to avoid binary logic and deficit thinking?

We recognise that our thinking is tentative. We are simply exploring these ideas. However, we think that such exploration is warranted, if we are to be seen as researchers in the field of rural education. We also think that it is important to share our ideas and to engage in conversations about this issue with others in the field.

Four Excerpts of Data

From Anne's Research

The first excerpt comes from Anne's research. This is an account from a primary school headteacher in a small rural school in Scotland. The data were collected as part of ethnographic fieldwork in the small rural school.

> *Arrive at school, notice the cows have been in the playground. Get in the building, phone the farmer, ask him to come and fix the fence. Outside to try and shovel the muck before the bus arrives. Farmer arrives, says he'll fix the fence later but will drive the cattle to the next field for the meantime. I realise I've been at school for an hour and haven't put on my laptop*

> *yet. I haven't changed out of my wellies yet. … Bus arrives, help all the pupils put on their wellies. The children notice the toilets are not flushing. I phone property, fill in a property order, find a printed register because I can't actually print one because no Wi-Fi. … the phone rings to say that we are too far away for the plumber to come before the afternoon. I climb into the attic to see if I can fix the plumbing. The bell rings. Time to start the day.*

I arrived at a similar time to the headteacher, rolled up my sleeves and helped her. Working as a "*collaborative ethnographer*" (Lassiter, 2005, p. 96), I was not only observing her problem-solving skills but sharing her can-do attitude. This gave me a deep insight into the daily leadership tasks of the small rural school. On this day, the headteacher had arrived at the school to find that lots of issues needed to be addressed: cattle in the playground, a broken fence, and plumbing requiring attention. These were not what you would call educational issues, but they were essential to ensure that the school children's day ran smoothly.

As a researcher with a background in rural education, the fusion of practical knowledge with academic research gave me a lens of being, seeing, thinking and writing. Through this lens, I viewed the uniqueness of rural school leadership and saw that it was often misunderstood, with a perception that it is easy to be a rural school headteacher with a small number of children in a rural location. From the data excerpt, it is evident that the headteacher role requires skills, flexibility, knowledge, resilience and general ability to cope; yet the role is often undervalued. Thomson (2000) described the importance of the uniqueness—the "*thisness*" of rural schools and their place in society (p. 157)—and argued against the holistic approach of treating all schools the same in relation to policy and social context.

In Scotland, education leadership programs are predominately led with an urban bias. The data I have collected demonstrate that small school leadership is not just about teaching a multigrade class; it is complex, requiring a flexible style and an awareness of context. Yet Scottish headteacher salaries are linked to how many people (children and staff) a headteacher manages. Therefore, the small rural school headteacher role attracts the smallest salary, and there is an inbuilt assumption that less complex skills are required compared to an urban school headteacher with a much larger school roll and more members of staff.

In selecting the data excerpt, I wanted to demonstrate the complexities of leadership required by small rural school headteachers. They drive "*the visioning process of moral purpose and future direction whilst maintaining the day-to-day operation of the school*" (Davies, 2004, p. 19). This involves being nimble, flexible and adaptable.

From Loreto's Research

In Loreto's data, we hear from a teacher, who is also the parent of an autistic child, about some of the advantages of sending children to a rural school in Chile.

> *Having a double role here at the school is not so difficult to me, but it has been for other colleagues ... I manage to dissociate both roles. Sometimes in teacher meetings we talk about my son, as he has special education needs, and to me it is just like talking about any other student, because this has nothing to do with me as a mother. Whenever a colleague needs to talk to me about my son, I listen to them and never become defensive. … One of the things I really like about this is that I have the opportunity to have my son here with me … he struggled a lot in another [not rural] school he went to. But since I brought him here, he has really thrived, he is happy, and I can spend more time with him than what I would be able to if he went to another school.*

The data excerpt makes it clear that the parent has high regard for the education offered in the rural school where she works. The reason behind her comment has to do with the overall educational quality her child receives, especially in relation to the relationships that are built in the school. In this particular case, the rural school prides itself on being an inclusive place

oriented towards the community's care; as a result, all children enjoy spending their day there and feel they are an important part of the community.

The data come from my doctoral thesis work, which had an ethnographic focus, and was carried out in the area where I lived. These aspects allowed me to interpret what I saw and heard in the rural school separate from the deficit discourse I encountered when starting in the field of educational research. The excerpt illustrates only one of the aspects where the deficit discourse was challenged in my data, where teachers, students, parents and neighbours alike felt happy and fulfilled with the rural school. I have found that mainstream educational research has partially failed to account for these positive aspects of rural schools that yield a lot of knowledge from which other schools might benefit.

From Imam's Research

From Imam's data, we hear about teachers who were working without pay. The teacher in the excerpt was working in Eastern Java, Indonesia.

> *The teacher stated: "I am not paid for eight months now. The only information I got is that the yayasan [the private foundation running the school] don't have money." The teacher accepted this condition because it was a common practice that teachers become accustomed to helping the yayasan and the kyai [society leaders] to establish education in their area without payment or with a small salary which is called bisyaroh. This was not a payment; it was reimbursement for a number of teacher expenses, such as photocopying or the money teachers spent on petrol for their motorcycles, which were used for daily transportation to their schools in rural and remote locations. (Machfudi, 2017, p. 110)*

The data excerpt demonstrates the challenges for teachers in rural schools, as well as their dedication to their jobs and their willingness to work in difficult circumstances. Underpaid teachers, in particular, seem to have built significant complexities in their endeavour to improve quality education in Indonesia. On the one hand, many teachers have provided students with good learning materials to help them meet curriculum targets. On the other hand, they often need side jobs or extra jobs in the evening to enable them to meet their family expenses which are also crucial.

In such challenging circumstances, the teachers demonstrate a professional commitment to their students, often with devastating effects on their personal lives and their families, with no promise that the situation will improve. The positive story occurs because of the teachers' high motivation to teach and help their students build their own definitions of successful learning and teaching processes. Despite this difficult situation, there is still a hope that there will be accessible and worthy supports from the community for teachers' professional development in the future.

From Robyn's Research

Robyn's data present a conversation between three teachers who work in schools situated in Western Queensland in Australia. The schools are located in farming and sheep areas, which are approximately 10 hours' drive from the state's capital city. The teachers describe their experiences of living in that location. Although such experiences are sometimes seen as unfavourable, the teachers regard their rural and remote experiences as valuable.

> *Brady:* *When you're in a remote area, remote town, it can become the fishbowl effect or a bubble.*
>
> *Olivia:* *They know what you're eating, they know what you're drinking.*

Brady:	*What happens when you come from living and teaching in a rural area back to the big city? My direct experience of that is isolation, from going to the shops where people talk to you …*
Olivia:	*Yeah, do the shopping for you.*
Brady:	*To going to a huge shopping centre where no one talks to you; where you go to the service station and the guy won't talk to you about who's going to win the footy; you fill up the fuel yourself.*
Emily:	*In rural and remote places, there's such a lot of personal growth and social growth and you establish friendships in those places because of the situation.*

I come to these data with long-term experience as an educational researcher. More than two decades ago, I was worried about the prevalence of deficit discourses in the data I was collecting. This caused me to reflect on what it was that I wanted as the focus of my research, how I was conducting that research, and what I was achieving in relation to educational practice. The outcome of those reflections was that I made a decision to focus on positive stories in rural education. I hoped I was doing what Luke (2002) had advocated: wanting educational researchers to get their "*hands dirty with the sticky matter of what educationally is to be done*" (p. 54), rather than just critiquing the current state of play. I wanted to share what was working.

In the data I have presented here, what I see is an opportunity to present a positive story about teaching in a rural location. Interestingly, Brady's statement, supported by Olivia, sets up the urban/rural binary, with his initial focus on a perceived disadvantage of living in a rural town. He describes the experience metaphorically: "*the fishbowl effect or a bubble*." Yet, Brady goes on to manipulate the binary with a negative about the urban experience: "*isolation*." At the end, Emily adds further supportive positives about the rural: "*personal growth and social growth and … friendships*."

Although I would say that I usually try to stay away from binaries, this example enables me to use the language of Comber and Kamler (2004) to say that the urban/rural binary has been "*turned around*" (p. 302). Rather than describing rural teaching in deficit terms, a more balanced picture was presented by the teachers, with the conclusion focusing on positives.

I am not sure that I am doing the dirty and sticky work that Luke (2002) intended, but I am of the opinion that we need to share positive stories like these, especially to our future teachers. When stories come from teachers who have had rural experiences, then I think those stories can have a powerful message for pre-service and new teachers who might not have thought about a future in a rural area.

Discussion

In selecting and examining excerpts from our research data, the four of us engaged in some deep thinking about binaries and how we represent rural education in our research. Because there are only four of us and four small pieces of data, we are not trying to make any grand claims. Rather, we are trying to think through where we stand on the issue of binary logic and rural education. Despite four international contexts (Scotland, Chile, Indonesia and Australia), there seem to be several similarities in what we are thinking.

It is evident that we are all concerned by the use of binaries that establish the rural as the unmarked category (Davies & Hunt, 2000) of an urban/rural binary. In trying to counter such a view, we have been trying to promote rural contexts as diverse locations that cannot be stereotyped. Anne's excerpt highlighted the diverse and non-educational activities of a rural

headteacher's job. These were the types of jobs that had to be done; otherwise, the school could be classed as unsafe or unhygienic for children.

Similarly, Imam described some of the challenges experienced by rural teachers and the impact on their personal lives. Such actions were well beyond what we would say is a call-of-duty; indeed, the teachers were not being paid for their teaching. This is not the teaching profession that those of us in the developed world know, but it is vitally important for children living in rural and remote areas in parts of Indonesia. For Anne and Imam, foregrounding the challenges is part of making the realities of rural education visible to others. These are not the educational actions that are described in policy guidelines and teaching manuals, but they are essential for education in the contexts described.

In a similar way, Loreto focused on the positives in a rural school to show how it was inclusive and a model for what education should be like for special needs students. Loreto wanted to make those aspects visible, so that there was a challenge to the deficit stories that were in circulation. Likewise, Robyn explained her deliberate move to focus on positive stories and, where possible, to "*turn around*" deficit discourses (Comber & Kamler, 2004, p. 302). By foregrounding positive stories, Loreto and Robyn hoped to change the stories told and thus challenge the stereotypes of deficit discourses.

Conclusion

For all of us, the telling of positive stories about rural education is important, because it means we are able to offer representations that show diversity within rural contexts and difference from urban education. We want difference to be recognised as difference, not as better or worse than urban education; we want to highlight what is different as a way of showing that context, geography, place and space are important.

We do not have a plan to change the binary and put rural into the unmarked position (Davies & Hunt, 2000); our intention is to show the richness and fullness of rural education and to contribute counternarratives to the deficit stories and discourses in circulation. In this way, we are trying to debunk deficit discourses by showing their inaccuracies and by presenting detailed positive accounts of rural education. Although we think that deficit discourses are difficult to shift and that binary logic is a taken-for-granted way of thinking for many, we hope that our approach provides food for thought for thinking about diversity and difference in the rural education field.

References

Comber, B., & Kamler, B. (2004). Getting out of deficit: Pedagogies of reconnection. *Teaching Education*, *15*(3), 293–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047621042000257225

Davies, B. (2004). *Leading the strategically focused school: Success and sustainability*. Paul Chapman.

Davies, B. (2000). The process of subjectification. In B. Davies (Ed.), *A body of writing 1990–1999* (pp. 21–35). AltaMira Press.

Davies, B., & Hunt, R. (2000). Classroom competencies and marginal positioning. In B. Davies (Ed.), *A body of writing 1990–1999* (pp. 107–131). AltaMira Press. (Reprinted from the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1994, *15*(3), 389–408).

Donehower, K., Hogg, C., & Schell, E. E. (2012). Preface. In K. Donehower, C. Hogg, & E. E. Schell (Eds.), *Reclaiming the rural: Essays on literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy* (pp. xi–xvi). Southern Illinois University Press.

Guenther, J., Fuqua, M., Ledger, S., Davie, S., Cuervo, H., Lasselle, L., & Downes, N. (2023). The perennials and trends of rural education: Discourses that shape research and practice. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *33*(3), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v33i3.701

Henderson, R. (2021). Using rural education research to rethink literacies pedagogies. In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua, Eds., *Ruraling education research: Connections between rurality and the disciplines of educational research* (pp. 159–175). Springer.

Lassiter, L. E. (2005). Collaborative ethnography and public ethnography. *Current Anthropology*, *46*(1), 83–106. https://doi.org/10.1086/425658

Luke, A. (2002). Curriculum, ethics, metanarrative: Teaching and learning beyond the nation. *Curriculum Perspectives*, *22*(1), 49–55.

Machfudi, M. I. (2017). *The long-term impact of an English language teacher training program on teachers' practices in Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Indonesia* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Queensland]. UniSQ e-prints. https://research.usq.edu.au/download/d52c4d3c15f06a5af80e29afe459e76fc3eb81b6f8818c9a289e09167867dce6/4054031/Machfudi_2017.pdf

Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Reid, J.-A. (2024). Engaging rurality in Australian education research: Addressing the field. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *51*, 123–144. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00587-4

Roberts, P., & Fuqua, M. (2021). Ruraling education research. In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Ruraling education research: Connections between rurality and the disciplines of educational research* (pp. 1–11). Springer.

Roberts, P., & Guenther, J. (2021). Framing rural and remote: Key issues, debates, definitions, and positions in constructing rural and remote disadvantage. In In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Ruraling education research: Connections between rurality and the disciplines of educational research* (pp. 13–27). Springer.

Thomson, P. (2000). "Like schools," educational "disadvantage" and "thisness." *Australian Educational Researcher, 27*(3), 157–172. https://doi.org/10.1007%2FBF03219737

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Responding to Remote, Rural and Regional Tertiary Education Needs: A Conversation Between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access

John H McKendrick
Commissioner for Fair Access, Scotland, UK
jmke@gcu.ac.uk

Fiona Nash
Regional Education Commissioner
RECSecretariat@education.gov.au

John Guenther
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Laurence Lasselle
University of St Andrews, UK
laurence.lasselle@st-andrews.ac.uk

Melyssa Fuqua
University of Melbourne
melyssa.fuqua@unimelb.edu.au

Carmel Hall
Regional Education Commissioner Policy Secretariat
carmel.hall@education.gov.au

Abstract

Access to tertiary education remains a significant concern for many remote, regional and rural communities. This topic has been explored in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* since its creation. In February 2024, the Journal went one step further by facilitating a conversation between two policy leaders whose remits include fair access to tertiary education, Ms Fiona Nash, the Australian Regional Education Commissioner and Professor John McKendrick, the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access. They candidly discussed the importance of responding to tertiary education needs of regional, rural and remote communities from their perspectives. They reviewed a range of complex and compounding issues for remote, regional and rural students in accessing tertiary education in both countries, elaborated on their respective policy contexts.

Keywords: *rural, regional, remote, fair access to tertiary education, equity, widening access*

Introduction

On 27 February 2024, the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* hosted an online conversation between the Australian Regional Education Commissioner, Fiona Nash, and the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access, John McKendrick.

Ms Nash is the first Regional Education Commissioner in Australia. She was appointed in December 2021. Her role sees her as advocating for the educational needs of regional people, from early childhood education, primary and secondary school to tertiary education, and provides a national focus on regional, rural and remote education and training outcomes.

Professor McKendrick is the second Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access. He was appointed by the Scottish government in January 2023. The Commissioner's role acts as a focus for efforts by colleges and universities to promote fair access, working closely with the Scottish Government,

the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland, National Union of Students in Scotland, University and College Union, and many other stakeholders.

The Journal facilitated the conversation between both Commissioners. We wanted to hear about the importance to respond to regional, rural and remote needs in terms of tertiary education from their perspectives. We asked the Regional Education Commissioner (REC) to elaborate on the main challenges and opportunities following the implementation of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine et al., 2019), and from a further education perspective speak about the implications of the Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024) process for regional education. We invited the Commissioner for Fair Access (CfFA) to talk about the debate around targets, learners and universities' location, and fair access in Scotland. We also wanted to hear any advice or lessons that could be learned from each Commissioner's experience and policy context.

The conversation was convened by our Chief Editor, John Guenther. Two of our Associate Editors, Melyssa Fuqua and Laurence Lasselle, and the Program and Policy Officer at the Regional Education Commissioner Policy Secretariat, Carmel Hall, were in attendance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: ***Conversation Between both Commissioners Hosted Online by the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education on 27 February 2024***

Note:
Top row from left to right: Ms Fiona Nash, Dr John Guenther, Dr Laurence Lasselle
Second row from left to right: Ms Carmel Hall, Professor John McKendrick, Dr Melyssa Fuqua

Conversation

Chief Editor: The first question goes to the Regional Education Commissioner (REC) for Australia, Fiona Nash, and the question is, is equitable access an issue for regional, rural and remote students in Australia?

REC: Yes, it's a huge issue in a whole lot of ways. When we look at the comparison between rural, regional and remote students and metropolitan students, it's really quite stark in many areas. Interestingly, it's even different between rural and regional and remote, but that's probably a discussion for another day.

None of this will be any surprise. It's very much around distance and the tyranny of distance. Metropolitan students are either living at home or very near a tertiary education institution. Regional (and I'll use the term regional to mean rural, regional, and remote) students often have massive distances to actually leave home and attend tertiary education, be it virtually, be it university or be it vocational education and training (VET). They often have absolutely no choice but to move away from home to go off to attend tertiary education.

It's the costs as well. If a regional student has no choice but to leave home to physically attend university, it's around $30,000 AUD a year. A metropolitan student doesn't have that cost. That's a real inequity and regardless of the circumstances of parents or whether parents might be supporting those students, the inequity is the comparator with the metropolitan students.

It is challenging even for students who are studying online. Connectivity and the standard and the level of internet can be very different between regional students and city students. It is very different to connectivity that we're seeing in the cities.

Chief Editor: Thank you very much and let us turn to the Scottish Commission for Fair Access (CfFA), John McKendrick. Why has Scotland implemented a Fair Access to Higher Education policy?

CfFA: I think that is a deceptively simple question. It's also a question that I can't answer with insider knowledge because I wasn't involved as Commissioner when the strategy for fair access was introduced in 2016.[1] With the benefit of hindsight, I think it represents a moment in time when the interests of universities[2] and government aligned around this particular issue.

There was some politics to the decision—an opportunity, if not an imperative. In the aftermath of a referendum defeat on Scottish independence in September 2014, Scotland had elected a new First Minister to lead the Scottish National Party and Scottish government.[3] Under Nicola Sturgeon's early leadership, the pursuit of socially progressive policies was strengthened. Her administration's first Programme for Government (2014/15), included the ambition that a child born at that time in one of Scotland's most deprived communities should, by the time of leaving school, have the same chance of going to university as one born in one of the country's least deprived areas: a Commission on Widening Access was established to advise Ministers on how to achieve this ambition. By the time the Commission reported in 2016 (Commission of Widening Access, 2016),[4] the Scottish National Party had strengthened its grip on power. The election of an overwhelming majority of Scottish National Party Members of Parliament to the United Kingdom Parliament in the 2015 general election, was replicated in 2016 when the Scottish National Party also secured a majority in the election to the Scottish Parliament.[5] This was unexpected as the Scottish Parliament was not designed for majority control: the Scottish political system was designed to be collaborative. So, by 2016, we had a party that was invigorated and a government that wanted to position itself very differently to what was going on in the rest of the United Kingdom, where an austerity agenda was being pursued that was rolling back on social provision and social protection. At roughly the same time as the widening access agenda was being conceived, the Scottish Government also introduced a child poverty

---

[1] Note from Journal: The strategy was introduced in 2016 and the First Commissioner for Fair Access was Professor Sir Peter Scott.

[2] There are 19 higher education institutions in Scotland, some of which are specialist institutions such as The Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow School of Art and Scotland's Rural College. Throughout, the shorthand 'universities' is used to refer to all these higher education institutions.

[3] Nicola Sturgeon was elected unopposed as leader of the Scottish National Party on the 14th of November 2014 and installed as First Minister of Scotland by the Scottish Parliament on the 20th of November 2014.

[4] https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

[5] The Scottish National Party had led as a minority government between May 2011 and May 2016.

strategy, and a strategy in schools to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. I think the fair access to universities agenda was the logical extension of that work. So, there was a political moment when everything was in place to pursue fair access.

But I think it's too simple to reduce it to merely a matter of politics. There was already a long-standing commitment in the higher education sector in Scotland to practise widening access. Back in 2013, Universities Scotland published a report that celebrated the breadth of work that was being pursued across universities to widen access.[6] Leaders in Scottish higher education were already committed to this agenda, and seemed very comfortable with progressing it further.

Each of these separate factors—political drive, long standing commitment in higher education, a set of leaders who believed in it—are supportive of work to widen access. But I think these three factors coming together at the same time meant that this became a central focus for higher education in Scotland.

Chief Editor: Could I just follow with a context question, John, around what are the fair access parameters—here we talk about equity issues and 'rural, regional and remote' is one of those—just very briefly what are those parameters that you're working with?

CfFA: And it's a critical question, John. I think there are two very different ways of answering this question. There is one that focuses on the headline target and there is another that focuses on the broader range of activity that sits behind that.

So, to the narrow focus on the target. We have a very specific metric that we use to measure fair access in Scotland. The definition that we work toward is that by 2030—as the agenda started in 2016, this represents a generational change—20% of Scottish based students entering into full time education will be from Scotland's 20% most deprived areas. This metric has a socioeconomic focus. It uses an area-based measure which is very interesting in the context of the discussion that we're having today as rural and remote are not explicit considerations. The tool that is used to identify deprived areas in Scotland, also under-represents deprivation in rural and remote Scotland.

I view the target as a means to end. Although the target is focused on one dimension, it leads to progress on many more fronts: inadvertently, as a by-product of the focus on socioeconomic status, a broader range of marginalised populations are now accessing higher education. Furthermore, the target opens up wider debate: those drawing their intake from rural and remote Scotland now argue that there is a need to be sensitive to rural and remote realities (which the target is not).

I think that the headline target has been useful in these early stages of promoting fair access. However, I think that we are fast approaching the point at which there is a need for a more granular analysis that acknowledges the broader range of imbalances in higher education—including rural and remote access—and then tailors interventions to tackle these. But what we have just now is a very clear focus that is attractive and easy to understand. It's about tackling socioeconomic injustice and we happen to use an area-based metric to measure progress.

Chief Editor: Thank you for that, John. To you Fiona—and this is an incredibly topical sort of question in the context of Australia today, given that we've just had a report released about the

[6] https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/access-all-areas-2013/

university access just yesterday.[7] Can you tell me how do you explain the low progression from secondary education to higher education for Australian regional, rural and remote learners?

REC: This is such a good question and there are so many different things that affect progression, or tertiary education participation and attainment for regional students. What it is for one student might be different to another. Collectively, I think there's a list of reasons for the low progression.

The first one we talk about is young people in the regions not having a lot of aspiration and often that's true. But what I find occurs even more than the lack of aspiration is a lack of self-belief. These young people don't believe that they can go on to university or go on to VET, that they're not good enough. No one in their families has ever done it. They wouldn't know what to do. How would they possibly afford it? They might not know how a university works. Often, they'll have the aspiration and think "I'd love to be an engineer", but there are numerous barriers that sit in the way and they just don't have the self-belief. I think it's a real amalgam of aspiration, self-belief, and factors in their individual circumstances.

A lot of this aligns with some of John's (CfFA) work in low socio-economic status, but many regional students (or a good percentage of them) in going on to university are going to be first in their families to do so. That's really challenging for a young person who's out in the regions and does not necessarily have any sort of support around them and their own family has no experience in doing it. So, there's no family support, guidance, direction of what to do to go on to university. Not having had family members being involved in tertiary education is a real barrier for young people.

I love the phrase "*you can't be what you can't see*".[8] If young people in the regions don't know an opportunity is there, how do they take it? Again, there's this real blocker to pursuing tertiary education. If a regional student doesn't know that there's an option to be an engineer; if they don't know that there's an option to complete a vocational education and training qualification and have a trade; if they don't know there are all these opportunities, then they simply can't take them.

The issue of careers advice goes partly to the lack of progression as well, and I don't think we're starting careers advice early enough in regional areas. If regional students are not getting good careers advice about how to think about what their future path might be, what the opportunities might be, then how do they get themselves down that road? Careers advice is very ad hoc in Australia. It's done on a state-by-state basis and even within the states, there's no standard of best practice across careers advice. That's really problematic. At the moment, the low progression is partly due to the fact that regional areas have got a really strong labour market that acts as a barrier. We've got young people out in the regions that are deciding between a job opportunity that pays extremely well or an opportunity to go into tertiary education, which is actually pretty scary and they feel like they don't know how it works.

There are always financial constraints looking at the affordability for young people to be able to go into tertiary education.[9]There is also a lack of confidence and often an unwillingness—which is really understandable—to move away from family and from social networks, that's really quite

---

[7] The conversation took place just after the release of the Australian Universities Accord report on 25 February 2024.

[8] Note from the Journal: this is a quote widely used to express the importance of being able to see a future career when making decisions about pathway options for tertiary education. See for example (Kinnane et al., 2014)

[9] 28.4% of Australian regional and remote undergraduate students who seriously considered leaving their degree early cited financial difficulties as the reason, compared to 20.2% of metro students (see Figure 17 in O'Kane et al. (2024, p. 142).

scary for young people, particularly if they're just out of school in a rural and regional area and they haven't been away from their communities very much.

And even curriculum for regional students who are in regional schools, often at secondary school level, they don't have access to the subjects they actually need to do as a prerequisite for the courses that they want to go on to do and often they don't realize that until they get to the end of year 12. Many schools are coming up with creative ways to extend access to subjects and resources, but poor access to the specialist teachers and facilities needed for particular subjects can be a real problem as well.

This indicates that there is a range of complex and compounding issues for regional students.

Chief Editor: Thank you, Fiona. John, this next one I guess follows on from the focus on regional students. I want to ask what are the issues that isolated students in Scotland face in accessing higher education compared to their metropolitan counterparts? And is rurality an issue in Scotland? You might just start just by providing us a little bit of a mental picture of what 'isolated' looks like in Scotland.

CfFA: So much of what Fiona said is pertinent to Scotland too, and I'm glad you asked me to clarify the nature of rurality or rural or isolation in Scotland because, it's very different. Australia is a large continent: Scotland is a very small country. What we consider remote and rural might seem less so to Australians. But, tackling rural and remote injustice matters to us.

Fiona made the point about access to opportunities in school education; that's also an issue in Scotland. In the very large metropolitan [secondary] schools, some of which have as many as 2,000 pupils, there is tremendous subject choice, particularly in areas that have a social economic demographic that is more affluent and with pupils who have traditionally been more successful in education. There are more options offered in these schools because more pupils stay on in school to the later years. So, there's an issue about restricted subject choice which, means that some pupils—particularly those in remote and rural areas—may not have equal opportunity to pick subjects that enable their talent to flourish.

There is also the issue of the widening access work in schools, which facilitate access to higher education. While universities deliver work in rural and remote schools to widen access, there is much less activity and opportunity to do so compared to metropolitan locations. For example, three of Glasgow's universities have longitudinal projects which work with some primary schools, maintaining contact and support for their pupils as they progress into and through secondary schooling. Pupils in those schools get to experience university over a number of years. That opportunity is not available to schools in more rural and remote locations. We might have stellar examples of widening access work, but opportunity is not equally accessible to all.

And then there's the thorny issue of the fact that we use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which is an area-based metric, to measure progress. I believe that the metric has some merit, but it works against rural areas in general, and isolated remote areas in particular. It doesn't tend to identify deprivation in rural areas because the SIMD seeks to identify concentrations of deprivation, whereas deprivation in rural areas is more dispersed. Everybody understands this. It is not the purpose of the SIMD metric to identify household (let alone individual) deprivation. There are far fewer areas in rural, remote, and island parts of Scotland that are classified as being deprived areas. And this is most stark in our two most remote island communities—Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. In both, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, there are no areas of deprivation. Now, we have statistics that measure poverty at the level of the individual (such as access to free school meals) and household level (such as local area estimates of income poverty for households). We know there are families in these islands that are deprived, but they don't show up in the SIMD metric of area-based

deprivation. So, pupils in these islands are not targeted by universities in order to meet the national target to achieve fair access.

So that's three ways in which rural and remote areas are disadvantaged by the way the fair access agenda has been conceived.

But it's not all bad news. And I think we need to acknowledge that. We have in Scotland, for example, the University of Highlands and Islands, and Scotland's Rural College. Both institutions have a strong rural presence. The University of Highlands and Islands in particular, is a campus-based institution which has many colleges dispersed throughout rural Scotland. These institutions provide local opportunities to pursue higher education in the most rural and remote parts of Scotland (including the islands that I referred to).

Individual institutions are also sensitive to rural circumstance. Rural equity is an issue that taxes many institutions, including those based in our largest cities. For example, universities in the city of Aberdeen draw many of their students from a rural hinterland. It is very difficult for the two universities in this city[10] to meet their targets because their host population is largely drawn from a rural area beyond the city—there are fewer deprived areas in their midst. And even in Glasgow, the city with the highest concentration of area deprivation in Scotland, one of its universities has become acutely aware that there are island communities in the farthest flung parts of its catchment area that are not being fairly served by the way in which it acknowledges and accounts for circumstances that hinder progression to university. It is now exploring whether it can change entry requirements (known as contextualised admissions) to take account of these barriers to access.

And I think we should also acknowledge that access to higher education in Scotland is not just about direct entry to university from secondary school. University can be accessed through colleges (Further Education Institutions). Many students who go on to graduate with a university degree complete one or two years of higher education study in a college, before transferring into university at a later stage to complete their degree. Colleges have a stronger local presence compared to universities in rural Scotland, which increases access to higher education. Increasingly, there is more complexity and diversity on how we do higher education—some aspects of which facilitate access from remote and rural Scotland.

So, although there are in-built system disadvantages, there are also several actions that have been introduced to try to promote equity of access for rural and remote students.

Chief Editor: You have got me thinking on that one. Fiona, to you now, in broad terms, what do you think needs to change to make higher education more accessible for regional, rural and remote students?

REC: John, I think there's a number of things from a high level to the really specific. High level is really around decision makers, governments making sure that when they're looking at education—they don't do one size fits all policy that sits across metro and across regional areas because it just doesn't work.

You can't transpose a policy that's designed for the city, put it out in rural areas and expect it to have a good outcome because it just won't. So, I think getting decision makers to be more thoughtful around the differences between city and country is really important.

[10] The University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University.

Really a lot of it, it's the flip side of the challenges I outlined earlier. Making sure that students in regional areas are really aware of the opportunities that are there for them, of the things that they can do, so that they can be what they can see.

There's also quite a role for local community, local government at a community level providing the experiences to create that side of opportunities by bringing business and industry together with education, be it the university, if it is there, or secondary, primary, community groups at a community level to all talk about what actually is the opportunity.

And I think one of the things we've really not focused on enough in regional areas over time is this. We talk a lot about attracting people to rural and regional and remote areas. We talk a lot about retaining people, but I don't think we talk enough about home-growing the workforce. What are the opportunities for people who actually want to stay locally in their local community to connect through the business and industry, to have sight of what those opportunities are and what might be available to them? So, I think that's a real amalgam of things in there. The support is really critical. We need to do that better. If we're going to have higher education, tertiary education, more accessible, then students have got to have more support as they're going through school to think about what those future paths might be. And then how to navigate it? Support on how to navigate it to get from being a school student to being a tertiary education student. It's a really big deal and it's really challenging. It is so important that once they get into tertiary education, they have the support at that point so that they have the ability to successfully complete their studies.

And we know that so many of our regional students drop out of tertiary education simply because they don't have enough support as they're going through as they're learning. Compounding this, we have a real cost of living issue in this country at the moment, John, and for students, particularly regional students, that compounds a lot of the challenges of actually being at university or in vocational education and training.

And I think this one is pretty obvious, you know, better funding for students to relocate, better funding for students to support them when they are actually undertaking tertiary education. Easy to say, hard to do. There is no bucket of money sitting under Parliament House that politicians can just stick their hand into, unfortunately. That is a real issue, providing the appropriate funding going back really to what I said at the beginning about that relative inequity of the cost that sits with rural and regional remote students that simply don't sit with their metropolitan counterparts. So, I think things like that would be a big start.

Chief Editor: Thank you. John, this one is a little different. What has surprised you in your first year as Commissioner for Fair Access?

CfFA: This answer could be a long one, John! One thing that surprised me was how much I didn't know. I have worked in Scottish higher education for 25 years, but I have learned so many things in the past year, not just nationally but also even within my own institution and about my own practice as a university lecturer. For example, I never knew the data that was routinely available in my own institution to examine and scrutinise these issues. As a busy academic (I'm still an active researcher and lecturer), you get on with the business of teaching, you get on with the business of research, and you don't tend to have capacity or inclination to do much more than that. My work as Commissioner began to open my eyes to a different way of looking at my

practice and my sector. These are things that I should have known given my research work examining poverty in Scotland.[11]

I was struck with how many people were involved in facilitating fair access and the wide range of interest groups that have a stake in this agenda. This was a pleasant surprise. I was really surprised at how many people wanted to speak to me in my role as Commissioner.

The invites came in thick and fast. In my first year I had 111 different appointments in a 12-month period. These came from representative bodies such as Universities Scotland which is the organisation that represents universities, Scottish Government civil servants and politicians, interest groups, and individuals, like Laurence, who specialise in this field. Perhaps this level of interest shouldn't have surprised me, but it really did. The breadth of interest presents its own challenges because there are many different perspectives on what fair access should be. But it is reassuring that social purpose, progression, social justice, promoting the right to education, and facilitating means for disadvantaged students to access higher education are so embedded in the Scottish higher education ecosystem.

But I also realised that my practice could be improved and perhaps had to change. I was always somebody who was sensitive to student needs by virtue of the institution I teach in.[12] I don't like describing institutions as 'widening access institutions', because I believe that all institutions have a responsibility to widen access. But, facilitating access to a broader range of students is more central to the purpose of my institution, compared to some of the more research-intensive institutions. So, although I have been aware for a long, long time of the diverse range of student needs, I just became much more sensitive and aware of the practical things that I could change to facilitate access and improve students' experience of higher education.

Fiona had mentioned the cost-of-living crisis. I have also become much more aware in recent years of the volume of paid work that students are doing over and above their studies. And, they are working simply to exist. Being aware of this, can we change the way in which we arrange the university week? If we know that many students are juggling work and study, we should not be asking them to commute significant distances on a daily basis (and this is particularly an issue for rural students, many of whom are commuting students) to attend for one hour or two in class.

For example, I have one first year student who gets a ferry to the mainland and then gets a train (one hour each way) into the city to attend university. That particular student has childcare issues, because our university schedule is not aligned with school holidays, which simply meant, she ran out of childcare options and simply couldn't attend university during one of the school holidays. If you are asking that student to attend a one-hour lecture at 4pm in the afternoon, and that is their only class on that day, then we should not be surprised when the student makes the logical decision not to attend. Inevitably, attendance begins to tail off and therefore engagement and sense of belonging to the institution are weakened as a result.

So, through being Commissioner I thought much more about these issues than I had in the past. I was always sensitive to student needs, but I am much more attuned to it, and I think much keener to make changes to practice that can facilitate a difference. Each may be a small-scale change in the grand scheme of things, but this agenda has to belong to a range of people—more than university executives and widening access practitioners. Meeting the metrics is an issue for university executives. Raising aspirations and making school pupils aware of the opportunities that are open to them is an issue for widening access practitioners. But I think we need many

[11] Professor McKendrick is also Co-Director of the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit - https://www.gcu.ac.uk/aboutgcu/academicschools/gsbs/research/spiru
[12] Glasgow Caledonian University

others in higher education to re-examine what we do, how we behave, and how we choose to design our programmes.

So, I think in many, many ways I've been pleasantly surprised. But I've also been ashamed at the lack of awareness that I had beforehand. But this work has absolutely strengthened my resolve to do what I can in the role that I have to try and make a positive difference, by working alongside others. I can't change the system myself. I see myself as being a focal point and a bit of a pest as well. I am keen to learn about what works best (from Australia and elsewhere) and to use my position to advocate for change. I'm very comfortable doing that.

Chief Editor: That's very interesting. Fiona, you might have covered some of these before, but what are the consistent barriers to education raised by stakeholders that you have conversation for?

REC: I really do reflect a lot of the things I've mentioned before, John, because of the nature of my job, it very much is as an advocate and it's to give advice to government on regional education issues. In a lot of ways, I'm the conduit between the people on the ground, stakeholders, and government. So, the things that I say are not a result of some great brain snap that Fiona Nash has had along the way, a lot of the time it's corralling and collecting all of that information and just talking to people all of the time out on the ground about the challenges that are there. And then, far more importantly, what the solutions are. I always say the best solutions come from the people on the ground who are actually living and breathing these issues, who get what needs to be done to actually get across the challenges. One of the barriers to education is—and I'd only just thought of this after you were speaking John—was when you were making the comments about sort of the attitudes from the institutions. There are quite a different set of attitudes across institutions around the level of involvement and energy they should be putting towards solving some of these equity issues. Some universities are really good at it and they're very focused on their equity cohorts and they're doing a lot in terms of student support and encouraging students from those cohorts to attend their institutions. Others, not so much. Institutions need encouragement to be more aware of what I think really is their responsibility in doing a better job. That would certainly reduce what is one of the consistent barriers to tertiary education in addition to those I mentioned before—the cost, the tyranny of distance, the lack of support, the difficulties in moving away from families, stepping away from social networks, not having that community connectivity once they move away. These are really challenging things for regional students.

Chief Editor: Fantastic. We did have a couple of other questions, but time has moved on much quicker than we anticipated, and we want to give you some time to have a bit of a chat with each other. Our last question is about the positive cases you've seen within the education which have improved access for equity groups?

[The two Commissioners kindly agreed to provide their answers to this question in writing.]

REC: The Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024)—a 12-month review of the higher education system, of which I was a panel member—is one example where equity was a central focus, reflected in the panel's consultations, discussions and the subsequent recommendations. The Accord's final report, which is currently being considered by government, makes a commitment to increasing higher education participation from equity groups, specifically referencing regional, rural, and remote students whose participation and attainment needs to be increased.

In the regions, a student's access to tertiary education is limited by financial constraints, distance, and availability. In recent years, I've heard about and seen great results from the Regional University Study Hubs program, which addresses equity and access issues by providing regional,

rural and remote students study spaces, high speed internet access, administrative and academic support services and support from other students while they study the tertiary course of their choice on-line and remain in their local community. Last year I attended the graduation ceremony of a cohort of students from a Study Hub in the Kimberley—a remote region in Western Australia with over 100 First Nations communities—and got the opportunity to see students graduate from a range of degrees with a group of peers in their own community, hundreds, or sometimes thousands of miles from their university provider's main campus, without having missed out on the social and administrative support aspects of the on-campus experience.

My role also allows me to hear inspirational stories and positive case studies where a community has started a grassroots initiative to address their unique needs from the ground up to address equity issues. Limited subject options for regional high school students presents a barrier to choosing a tertiary education pathway, an issue which is being addressed through the Eyre Peninsula Local Delivery Program, developed by secondary schools in a remote part of South Australia. The program delivers virtual subjects to students that are not available at their own school and offers South Australian Certificate of Education subjects, vocational education and training subjects and school-based apprenticeships. This program is a great example of how to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and how flexible models could be taken to different regional, rural and remote communities and changed to adapt to their specific needs.

CfFA: There is no shortage of actions in Scotland that appear to be effecting positive change. Every single university in Scotland showcases this good practice in its annual Outcome Agreement,[13] which requires them to report on their work to promote fair access. However, if I was to highlight just one intervention then I would pick SCAPP (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners),[14] which was established in response to one of the Commission on Widening Access recommendations in 2016. Giving recognition to their work, and providing the means to share learning and engender a sense of shared purpose across institutions is to my mind the single greatest achievement of the work to widen access in Scotland … so far!

Chief Editor: It is now time to close this conversation. Thank you very much!

Links (Including both Commissioners' Reports)

Australia:

https://www.education.gov.au/regional-education-commissioner

Scotland:

https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-alliance-fair-access-annual-report-2024/

References

Commission on Widening Access (2016). *A blueprint for fairness*. Scottish Government. https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/

Kinnane, S., Wilks, J., Wilson, K., Hughes, T., & Thomas, S. (2014). *'Can't be what you can't see': The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education*. https://www.notredame.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2882/SI11-2138-OLT-Final-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf

[13] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/assurance-accountability/outcome-agreements-listing/
[14] https://www.fairaccess.scot/scapp-scotlands-community-of-access-and-participation-practitioners/

Napthine, D., Graham, C., Lee, P., & Wills, M. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy: Final Report*. https://www.education.gov.au/download/4663/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report/6981/document/pdf

O'Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* Australian Government Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/download/17990/australian-universities-accord-final-report-document/36760/australian-universities-accord-final-report/pdf

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Book Review: Azano, A. P., Biddle, C., & Eppley, K. (Eds.). (2022). The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States. Bloomsbury Academic

John Guenther
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Introduction

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States, edited by Amy Price Azano, Karen Eppley, and Catharine Biddle, is an expansive and comprehensive volume that deals with an array of topics that are important for rural educators, researchers, school leaders and policy designers. The book covers a lot of ground and draws on an impressive list of contributors.

Reviewer Positionality

As a caveat to the comments made in this review, I acknowledge my general lack of awareness of the United States context which frames this book. I also acknowledge my identity as a White, non-Indigenous male with a history of working in Australian contexts. I feel that at times my position may have flavoured some of my commentary.

Part I: Foundations in Rural Education

The book rightly begins with unpacking definitions of *rural*, posing the question: "*what do we mean by rural?*" (p. 54). It deals first with quantitative descriptors, which are more or less aligned with statistical geography approaches which tend to quantify rural in terms of distance, population or density (see also Roberts & Guenther, 2021). The section on *Theorizing Rurality* then considers definitions from a conceptual and sociological perspective, covering a good selection of various interpretations of rurality. As a brief introduction, Chapter 1 serves to provide the reader with a fairly expansive overview of the definitional issues associated with rurality, and encourages researchers in particular to critically examine their approach to rural education research.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to a history of rural education in the United States, focusing on how deficit thinking—"*the rural problem*" (p. 86)—emerged over two centuries. The chapter also discusses the economic rationales for rural school consolidation. There are, no doubt, other aspects of rural schooling that could have been discussed in this chapter, but it does capture important foundations that continue to frame the rural in deficit terms.

Chapter 3 picks up the themes of the two preceding chapters to discuss rural critical policy analysis. In my read of the chapter, it lacks focus on education, and perhaps that is reasonable as policies are often developed within a frame of rural deficit thinking which inevitably affects schools. The key point from the discussion that I took away was about the importance of centring "*social justice in a critical analysis of education policy*" (p. 116). The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* regularly receives articles that report the equity and justice issues that surround rural education (Guenther et al., 2023), so it is perhaps not surprising that this also arises in the United States.

Chapter 4 discusses the corporatisation of rural schools. The author argues that "*Corporate ideology in public education has allowed neoliberalism to become public pedagogy. Neoliberal pedagogy eliminates gendered, racial, and class views and analyses of society in favor of analyzing all relations through an economic lens*" (p. 122). The chapter ultimately encourages readers to recognise the importance of critical rural education as a counter to the economic and political priorities that squash alternative and creative ways of doing rural education.

Chapter 5 examines the role that changing demographics have on rural schools and communities. One of the issues it grapples with is rural out-migration, which creates sustainability challenges for schools, as young families move out and school resources dwindle. But it also notes that the opposite can happen, and the authors use the example of unconventional oil and gas development (which might also be termed *fracking*). The authors point to the diversification of rural communities. To me, the theme of *change*, as both a problem and an opportunity, is important to consider for rural schools.

Chapter 6 addresses the topic of rural poverty and rural schools. The author frames rural poverty around theoretical constructs of spatial inequality or spatial injustice. However, the working definition of poverty relies on government metrics based primarily on income inequality, which to my mind does not capture the more relevant concept of spatial injustice. Income inequality does not necessarily reflect "*racial oppression and exclusion*" (p. 158) which I am glad the author addresses. The latter part of the chapter discusses poverty as it relates to rural schools, offering an analysis that was already covered in Chapter 2 and, to some extent, in Chapter 4. I was a little disappointed that this chapter offered only a limited critical analysis of theory and issues and drew on outdated literature to make its case.

Chapter 7 provides a justification and framework for the enhanced use of data as a tool to "*capture the complexities and integration of schools embedded within the rural communities they serve*" (p. 173). The conceptualisation of schools as an *economic force*, a *social force*, as places to *prepare democratic citizens* and to *prepare workers* provides a reasonable theoretical foundation on which to base data linkage projects. The authors then provide three case studies that broadly address these conceptualised theories. While the challenges and data tips provided are quite reasonable, I felt the chapter could have been better rounded out with a more critical critique of the use of data to tell a story. The recent work by scholars who use a *quantcrit* approach for analysis (see for example, Garcia et al., 2023), could shed new light on the apparent 'rural problem'. The limitations of objectivity in quantitative analysis in favour of more reflexive approaches (see for example, Jamieson et al., 2023) might also be discussed. It is easy for quantitative researchers to fall into the trap of using established metrics and measures (as I think has occurred in Chapters 2 and 6) to draw conclusions about the *rural problem*, when the real problem lies elsewhere. The need for critical approaches (as suggested in Chapters 3 and 4) remains.

Australian scholar, Simone White, rounds out the discussion of topics in Part I. She highlights key themes related to place neutrality, rural place and rural standpoint. She comments on the similarities between Australia and the United States, but also notes the significant impact of colonisation on First Peoples of the continent. I am pleased she has made this point, because it does not come out in the contributions of any of the chapters in Part I.

Part II: Rural Schools and Communities

Part II moves to a more specific focus on rural schools and communities. The issues raised here are relevant for rural schools anywhere, not just the United States, though the way they present themselves may of course differ from country to country.

Chapter 8 addresses the important issue of governance. The first section of the chapter is a useful explainer for how public schools in the United States are governed, with a helpful

summary of the structures and functions of governance at state and local levels. The second section provides historical policy development relating to equity, standards and accountability, to help frame two vignettes that serve to provide examples of how complex governance arrangements play out. The authors conclude that "*the politics of rural education remains an area of need for empirical research*" (p. 238). Specifically, they argue that "*further research is needed as well where rural geographies, racial inequality, and White privilege intersect with policymaking and educational governance*" (p. 239). These are, of course, contested issues that may present challenges for researchers.

Chapter 9 picks up on the discussion raised in Chapters 2 to 5 about rural school consolidation, and then moves on to the topic of charter schools. I find it interesting that the author focuses on the structures and constraints of charter schools, while hardly mentioning the merits of local community control of schools. The author concludes that "*the neoliberal intentions of charter law and characteristics of rural communities make charter schools a particularly poor fit for rural areas*" (p. 256). I also find it interesting that there is no mention of independent or private schools as an alternative to public schools.

Chapter 10 discusses rural school leadership. Much of this chapter is a literature review that provides a useful background to theoretical and pragmatic considerations for rural school leaders. The conclusion, however, does offer some direction for future research, with recommendations for a focus on asset-based perspectives, the micropolitics of rural school leadership, issues of diversity and difference, along with a focus on research conducted by principals in graduate programs.

Chapter 11 offers insights into research on teacher labour issues, with a focus on activism. The author argues that there is "*a paucity of scholarly attention to rural teacher labor issues*" (p. 295). The author raises a set of questions that could guide future research in this space. I would expect that readers from other countries would have a different set of questions, but I think the assertion of paucity in scholarship and research is valid.

Chapter 12 addresses the important topic of rural school-community partnerships, with a focus on community-aware practices. Three case studies serve to illustrate these ways of partnering. I often wonder what difference changing the order to community-school partnership would make to the discourses that shape collaborative action (see for example, Kilpatrick et al., 2020; Kilpatrick et al., 2023). I also wonder what a more positive, strengths-based framing of the raised issues would make. The use of deficit-oriented language, such as is used here—"*lack of economic opportunity, poor nutrition, poor health, family stress, and obstacles to family stability*" (p. 297)—perhaps only serves to reinforce the *rural problem* theme that comes up repeatedly in this book. This is not to suggest that problems do not exist, but that they can be framed differently by researchers so that the strengths of rural communities can come to the fore, rather than describing them as "*small, isolated, and fragile rural ecologies*" (p. 310).

Chapter 13 describes collective impact processes in rural areas, though I expect that the principles described would apply to non-rural areas too. The description of the processes and principles resonated with my own experience of collective impact processes that I have been involved with in Australia. A couple of aspects of this chapter left me wanting more. First, while the collective impact examples included rural schools, there was very little discussion about what the actual outcomes were for schools and school communities. Second, I would have liked to see some critical reflection at the end, not only about how it works, but what the challenges are—particularly in the context of rural schools.

Chapter 14 discusses post-secondary transitions and attainment. As with other chapters in this handbook, the premise for the discussion is the *rural problem*. But perhaps worse than this is the premise that the problem is the individual and the family (p. 338) before shifting blame to rural schools (p. 340) and rural geographies (p. 342). In my view, a couple of case studies that

demonstrate how rural schools and communities support students would have given a more balanced—less deficit-oriented—approach. Some discussion about the systemic issues and the policy parameters that either enhance or limit transitions and attainment would have improved this chapter.

Canadian rural education researcher, Michael Corbett, provides an international perspective on each of the chapters in this part. His commentary is nuanced and critical and picks up on what I think are some of the omissions in Part II. His concluding comment is particularly pertinent: "*When our work engages critical and messy intersections of settler colonialism and the constitution and maintenance of real and imagined rural space, new, yet long overdue questions emerge*" (p. 363). I think what Corbett is hinting at is that many of the questions that should be asked haven't been asked in this set of chapters.

Part III: Curriculum Studies in Rural Schools

Part III of the book is titled *Curriculum Studies in Rural Schools*. However, in reality, this part of the book deals with a range of interventions and supports in rural schools, starting with early childhood education, before covering a range of topics including rural literacies, trauma-informed approaches, mental health models and student achievement.

Chapter 15 starts by describing the landscape of rural communities, before discussing the pros and cons of rural contexts for early childhood education. Two case studies of early childhood programs, designed to support family engagement in early learning, are discussed as exemplars of the kinds of support that can be successful in rural communities. These cases are presented somewhat uncritically and do not speak to what makes them different from the same programs that are run in non-rural communities. Given the importance of place (Webb et al., 2021; Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) in rural communities, it would have been helpful to understand how rurality expressed through place did or did not make a difference in the interventions described. Nor is there a discussion about what makes them successful or not, beyond parent reports of benefit.

Chapter 16 introduces readers to the concept of rural literacies as "*literate behaviors with the social purpose of sustaining rural communities*" (p. 388). The discussion that follows points to the ways that literacy practices contribute to rural identities, social capital, social justice, schooling, mobility and aesthetics. The idea of literacy practice creating "*rhetorical space*" (p. 394) in relation to social justice is interesting. Among all the points raised in this chapter, this concept provides a fruitful rationale for literacy as a tool for democratic and civic participation, for demanding rights, and for speaking truth to power. For people living in rural and remote communities—who might feel unheard—rhetorical space is essential.

Chapter 17 discusses trauma-informed approaches in rural education. The chapter takes a landscape approach (similar to Chapter 15), where the rural community is the site for trauma-informed practice, and the problems of rural spaces are a background to the need for trauma-informed care. As noted for Chapter 15, it would be helpful to know how trauma-informed practice is different in rural communities.

Chapter 18, which focuses on school-based mental health models, again tackles the topic from a deficit orientation, describing what the rural lacks, in terms of "*anonymity*" (p. 427), "*professional support*" (p. 425), "*opportunities for collaboration*" (p. 425), "*resources*" (p. 423), and more. A model of school-based mental health support is offered, with support from research evidence, though one might wonder what is different about this model compared to what might be offered in a non-rural school. The authors suggest: "*This model of place-conscious professional preparation for rural counselors is a key innovation to help reduce the barriers to mental health services experienced in many rural communities*" (p. 442). If this is truly innovative, one might ask what standard practice is for mental health support in other rural communities.

Chapter 19, the final chapter in Part III, discusses student achievement in rural America. The authors acknowledge the limitations associated with comparing rural and non-rural communities on the basis of standardised tests. That said, the results between rural and non-rural locales are remarkably similar, which runs counter to the argument of rural disadvantage that, in Australia at least, seems to dominate discourses of rural and remote student performance (see for example, Guenther et al., 2014). The good news then is that geography does not determine success. The not so good news presented in this chapter is that, *within* the rural, there are pockets of lower performance that appear to be related to race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Again, this mirrors data from Australia, where First Nations people living in rural remote areas record lower test scores than their non-Indigenous counterparts (see Guenther, 2015). This does not mean that these ethnic groups are inherently disadvantaged, but it does mean that the systems that are meant to support them are not doing their job properly. Unfortunately, the author has missed this possibility.

Philip Roberts rounds out Part III with a discussion from an Australian perspective. One of his first comments is: "*It immediately strikes me then that these chapters may not all fall into the curriculum studies field I know*" (p. 461). This is a fair point. Roberts also quite reasonably critiques the way that rural problems are constructed in Part III in the absence of meaningful engagement with place, knowledge and, importantly too, curriculum. While not denying the issues raised, he sees that the solutions to "*the rural problem*" (p. 461) must be accompanied with "*curriculum work*" (p. 469). Roberts also makes a very pertinent comment about rural educational outcomes:

> *When one cannot see themselves in the value system of the nation, or even the dominant global knowledge system, what impact does it have on one's sense of belonging, especially when they are forced by law to attend institutions that reinforce this each day? (p. 469)*

Part IV: Identity and Equity in Rural Schools

Part IV of the book turns to matters of identity and equity in rural schools. The topics covered are all issues of significance. I note the editor's regret about not being able to include topics related to gender and sexuality and Asian/Pacific Island studies. I agree that these would have been valuable.

Chapter 20 explores the intersection of rural and Indigenous education. The authors encourage readers to explore the intersection using lenses of land, sovereignty and survivance as starting points. In part, the issue of *survivance* is a counter to the assimilationist intents of education generally, recognising that there has been a long history of dispossession, the taking of land. The authors acknowledge the importance of place in the discourses of rural education, but challenge this in the context of education on reservations, which they say are often stereotyped as exotic and disconnected. The need to connect rural education with culture, communities and nations within a "*place-based locale*" (p. 493) is seen as a process of resistance against the "*neoliberal defaults*" (p. 495) of education that "*embeds Indigenous cultures into the fabric of the institution and connects people through relationships*" (p. 494). In the Australian context, the discourse of rural place sits somewhat uncomfortably in remote First Nations' contexts where *Country* offers a similar contrast.

Chapter 21 focuses on English Learners (ELs) in rural education. In Australia, we would describe such students as learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect or coming from backgrounds with Languages Other Than English. The chapter reflects the reality that the United States continues to be populated with migrants and refugees. Those that settle in rural communities may challenge the stereotypical monocultural whiteness of those places. The chapter turns to the challenges faced by ELs (for example, educational interruptions and limited first language literacy), and the challenges faced by teachers who may not be trained to work in that area. From an equity perspective, the authors argue a role for dual language programs

coupled with better preparation for teachers in these contexts. Chapter 22 addresses *African American Education in the Rural South*. Place recurs as a theme here. But this time race and geography are seen to be responsible for marginalisation, along with under-resourcing. The authors argue for contextually relevant policies and "*equitable access to high-quality teachers*" (p. 538) as potential solutions. Chapter 23 continues the theme of race as a determinant of educational equity for Latinx students in rural schools. A point of distinction from the previous chapters appears in this quote:

> *The marginalization of rural Latinx youth is also perpetuated by formal and informal school policies, such as tracking and policing and surveillance related to language. Rural Latinx students are tracked into lower-proficiency courses that will not qualify them for college admissions. (p. 545)*

The response suggested by the authors is aligned to improving school climate. Several times, they refer to educator-student and family relationships as critical for student success.

Chapter 24 again picks up the theme of race, with the author examining the issue of *Whiteness in Rural Education*. The author defines whiteness in terms of "*(a) colorblindness, (b) whiteness as ontological expansiveness, (c) whiteness as property, and (d) whiteness as assumed racial comfort*" (p. 558). She argues for a disruption of whiteness, through the actions of educators, through the curriculum, and through research. In Australia, discussions about whiteness in rural or remote education are often met with resistance from white people themselves who resent being labelled as such or having to engage in reflexive self-examination (Macdonald et al., 2023; Schulz, 2014). The challenges of disrupting whiteness in the United States are significant for anti-racist educators and researchers, as they are in Australia—but perhaps for different reasons.

Chapter 25 moves away from race to a discussion about special education in rural schools. This is an issue that has not received much attention in rural education research in Australia (Guenther et al., 2023) and is ripe for exploration. The authors of this chapter promote *Rural Tier Systems of Adaptive Support*, which is a way of suggesting a resourcing model that takes account of student need. This is not a particularly new idea and is probably not only an issue for rural schools (Roberts & Webster, 2022), except that access to services in rural communities can be difficult.

Chapter 26 considers the *Challenges and Innovative Responses in Rural Gifted Education*—another issue that is seldom discussed in Australian rural education research literature. This is clearly set out by the authors as an important issue for rural students, partly because of access issues, and the perception that differentiated approaches for gifted students might encourage them to leave their rural community, which relates to "*concern of the effects of out-migration on rural communities*" (p. 595). The interesting contribution of this chapter, though, is in its conclusions: that a redefinition of giftedness to encompass a broad range of characteristics, rather than a narrow focus on test scores, resulted in identified gifted students outperforming a group of students who were identified through conventional measures.

An international response to the chapters in Part IV is given by Cath Gristy, who provides a European perspective on the issues raised. She points to the different definitions of *rural* and how this to some extent ameliorates the "*recalculation of emiseration so prevalent in rural education literature of the past*" (p. 616). She argues that these chapters offer stories of positive experiences of rural education, which is perhaps partly true, but the nature of research is itself defined by what problems it addresses. Clearly, Part IV does address some serious problems associated with rural education.

Concluding Remarks

The 26 chapters and international reflections about rural education in the United States provide comprehensive commentary on a range of issues that represent challenges and opportunities for

academics, education practitioners, policy designers and implementers, and researchers. While it is comprehensive in its coverage, it is not exhaustive and gives space for further investigation and scholarship.

I think the *rural problem* is overstated in this book. The chapters are replete with examples of rural education problems, but there is little discussion or examples from thriving rural communities and thriving rural schools. Some examples of positive rural education and positive outcomes from initiatives would have balanced some of the more deficit-oriented thinking that comes through in many of the chapters.

Another area that I think could be included is the role that evaluation plays in assessing change in rural school communities. I appreciate the importance of research, which is strongly represented in the book, but I think there could have been more examples from evaluations of rural educational programs and policy, and there could have been a more specific focus on the role that evaluation plays in making improvements.

The editors and other contributors to this volume are all well-respected researchers and academics, many of whom have a strong publishing history. As such, the book demands attention from emerging scholars and academics outside the United States. One minor concern I had, though, was the dated nature of many of the references. In presenting a handbook like this, I feel that evidence of the latest research and scholarship should be presented. However, the editors have done an excellent job structuring the book and including international insights. It will be a valuable library addition for anyone working in the field of rural education.

References

Garcia, N. M., López, N., & Vélez, V. N. (2023). *QuantCrit: An antiracist quantitative approach to educational Inquiry*. Taylor & Francis.

Guenther, J. (2015). Analysis of national test scores in very remote Australian schools: Understanding the results through a different lens. In H. Askell-Williams (Ed.), *Transforming the future of learning with educational research* (pp. 125-143). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-7495-0.ch007

Guenther, J., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2014). Red dirt thinking on remote educational advantage. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *24*(1), 51–67. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v24i1.678

Guenther, J., Fuqua, M., Ledger, S., Davie, S., Cuervo, H., Lasselle, L., & Downes, N. (2023). The perennials and trends of rural education: Discourses that shape research and practice. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *33*(3), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v33i3.701

Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *17*(4), e12735. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735

Kilpatrick, S., Burns, G., Katersky Barnes, R., Kerrison, M., & Fischer, S. (2020). Parents matter: Empowering parents to inform other parents of post-year 10 pathway options in disadvantaged communities. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *30*(3), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v30i3.275

Kilpatrick, S., Fischer, S., Woodroffe, J., Barnes, N., Groves, O., & Austin, K. (2023). A whole-of-rural-community approach to supporting education and career pathway choice.

Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, *33*(3), 82–102. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v33i3.697

Macdonald, M.-A., Booth, S., Mills, H., & Somerville, R. (2023). The power of role-modelling: White teacher educators normalising anti-racism and cultural reflexivity for White pre-service teachers. *Whiteness and Education*, 1–18. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2023.2275120

Roberts, J., & Webster, A. (2022). Including students with autism in schools: A whole school approach to improve outcomes for students with autism. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *26*(7), 701–718. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1712622

Roberts, P., & Guenther, J. (2021). Framing rural and remote: Key issues, debates, definitions, and positions in constructing rural and remote disadvantage. In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Ruraling education research: Connections between rurality and the disciplines of educational research* (pp. 13–27). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0131-6_2

Schulz, S. (2014). Images of a good white teacher. In L. Michael & S. Schulz (Eds.), *Unsettling whiteness* (pp. 175–190). https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848882829_017

Webb, S. C., Knight, E., Black, R., & Roy, R. (2021). Exploring students' feelings of place. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *31*(3), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v31i3.304

Wynhoff Olsen, A., Fassbender, W., Long, D., & Olsen, K. (2022). Schools, communities, and teachers: How rural sense of belonging holds impact for English teachers in place. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *32*(2), 108–125. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v32i2.330