

Local community development – the case of school policy in rural Norway

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The local rural school in the context of Norwegian regional policy and rural discourses

School policy and rural development rises questions like:

- Quality of education in small/rural schools
- Rural communities against rural communities
- Price and valuation of school in rural communities
- Emptying of local/rural communities
- Democracy, equality, power

Regional policy discourse in Norway

- Regional policy institutionalised in Norway 1960-1970's
- Agricultural policy established with a regional policy goal
- A policy for rural areas as valuable
- A policy for maintaining settlement in rural areas

1980's: Neo-liberalism, state withdrawal from rural affairs, difficult to legitimate a rural policy (and difficult to identify the rural), more focus on robust/resilient *regions*, civil society

Today's regional policy:

Maintain the settlement pattern (since 35 years) – parallell with 'do we afford to keep the settlement in rural/small communities?'

The right to choose where to live – and local actors responsibilities for themselves

Attractiveness and competition

Agricultural policy without regional policy (2014)

'Regional' is edited from Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation (2014)

Local rural school policy & development

1980-1990's: Desentralisation policy

New income system for the municipalities; state withdrawal, earmarked economic transfers stopped, less state interference in communal affairs, but...

Strong advice not to close down schools for economic reasons!

...increased sentralisation/closing down

...economy the most important reason (covered with pedagogic arguments)

...increasingly larger schools sentralised/closed down

Discussions of 'the nordic welfare model'

Challenges:

- Population growth and urbanisation, older population, less working population, increased international in-migration, «uttynningssamfunnet» (Aasbrenn 1989)
- How to secure good living conditions in rural areas?
- What is the price of centralisation?

Rural research on mobility – relevance to the case of local rural schools

- National and international research: idyllic conceptions of the rural
- The rural idyll as reason for in-migration

- Criticism:
 - Conceptions of the rural and of rural idyll are contextual
 - Settlement in familiar areas
 - Internasjonal migrants
 - One-dimensional focus on social and cultural representations neglects the physical/material, politics, economy

Data

- 3 Counties (Northern and Mid Norway)
- 4 rural communities
- 7 group interviews (teachers and local population)

Stories of the rural local school re-presents:

The capacity of the rural

- diversity, mobilisation, local socialisation and knowledge building, the self-righteous rural

Signification of the rural

- Respectability, self-respect, integrity

The loss for the rural

- out-migration, emptying of community

What is the comprehensive symbolic of rural local schools?

- Social and cultural representative (attractivity, existential)
- A building for meetings, arena (material)
- A general public welfare good/claim (political)

- Insight into centrum – periphery dimensions
 - a) Rural communities against (more or less) rural communities
 - b) Distance ignorance
 - c) No advantage to the periphery (untidy processes; Knutas & Liland 2014)
 - d) The rural as showcase

The roads in this area are not straight, but winding up and down the mountains. The bus driver transports our children with everybody's life at stake. It ought to be forbidden to transport children under these conditions! A couple of years ago when the politicians started their campaign to transfer the lower secondary children to the municipality school the mayor and the chief (head) of the municipality board came to our village to brief us on the dramatic numbers of the economy to convince us the urgent need of transferring our children. Two shivering men arrived (too late) for the meeting after a horrifying ride up the mountain on slippery roads. When they had to go back again they asked us what would be most secure way back down the hill. "Take the same road as the school bus, we answered". These are well-educated intelligent people who were scared to drive down the mountain one night – the same road that they argue we have to send our children every day. (Man 50 years) (Liland and Knutas 2014)

Untidy Processes

The municipality wanted to close down our school. First of all we refused to accept the closing. We – the parents sent a letter to the municipality and applied to start a Montessori school. We were exposed to serious lobbying behind our back. The municipality sent correspondence to the government without including us in the process – it was our application and we ought to have received copy, weren't we? They withheld us the right to respond and argue our cause. We got the message quite clearly worded from some representatives from the municipality; “if you keep arguing it will have consequences” We found it pretty harsh coming from the politicians! (Woman, 30 years) (Liland and Knutas 2014)

Paradoxes and contradictions

- Ideas of desentralisation made the smallest localities more powerless
- An economic poor Norway could afford to maintain local schools for equality principles - the world's richest country cannot
- Fight against private schools were political motivated to secure equality - today private schools secure local schools for rural people
- Small communities shall live – main local institutions are downscaled

To be continued in research and local community development

- Explore processes of powerrelations, local democracy, broader consequences of centralisation (broader than economy)
- Health and welfare issues
- Rural resilience and resistance
(see also Liland and Knutas 2014; challenges to the hegemonic political dominant discourse)
- Equity/sense of justice/fair play
- Not adequate/enough research on local school's contribution to the local community and vice versa
- Not adequate/enough research on centralisation of school's consequences for children, places and local communities

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