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Community School Model: Is It an Alternative for School Closures in Rural Territories?***

Abstract

In the light of rural depopulation and a decreasing number of schoolchildren, municipalities with rural territories face a question regarding whether to close small rural schools or seek alternatives for school operation. The analysis of a quantitative survey of rural municipalities and rural schools is focused on these main questions: what are the extended functions of rural schools with pupils less than 100, and whether the community school model in rural municipalities may be considered as an alternative to school closures in the context of depopulation of rural territories. The results of quantitative surveys are supplemented and explained by the data of 58 in-depth interviews with different stakeholders, living or working in rural areas. The main findings show that rural schools and municipalities positively evaluate the approach of community schools with extended functions, and partly it is an adaptation strategy for the diminishing number of pupils. However, extended functions and the community school model do not serve as an important argument for keeping a school open, but as a means for attracting pupils from neighbouring municipalities, and is a form of competition between municipalities. The article is prepared with funding from the EEA/ Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009–2014 under Project Contract n° NFI/R/2014/014.

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Introduction

The idea of a rural school as a community school with extended functions is well known in various countries (Miller, 1995; Campbell-Allen et al., 2009), but not Latvia (Kļave & Tūna, 2014). Until recently, most schools in Latvia operated as self-sufficient entities focusing on mainly fulfilling the role of formal education (Tūna, 2014; Katane, 2013). Sharing resources, both intellectual and physical, with the community and involving the resources of the community in achieving goals set by curricula, are currently developing practices in rural schools in Latvia (Katane & Laizane, 2012).

The 2008 *Latvian financial and economic crisis*, which stemmed from the *global financial crisis* of 2008–9, was a major *catalyst for different austerity measures, including resource optimisation in education*. The closing of schools or restructuring of the school system in Latvia is a current issue due to the processes of depopulation and ageing of society. The most depopulated areas are rural regions, including small villages and towns, although shrinking can be observed almost throughout Latvia. The decisions to close or reorganise schools are made by school owners, the municipalities, and negotiated with the Ministry of Education and Science.

The monitoring studies on how rural schools in Latvia go through the process of transformation into multifunctional community centres (BISS, 2013; Tūna, 2014) suggested that understanding of the role and potential of the school as a multifunctional community centre have recently deepened among local communities, schools, administrations and politicians of municipalities. Schools have become more aware that in order to expand their functions, they must develop cooperation and build a partnership with other players or agents in the community – houses of culture, community centres, libraries, local NGOs, the parish administration and district municipality, entrepreneurs, local farmers, etc.

However, literature reviews of several authors (Åber-Bengtsson, 2009; Hargreaves, Kvalsund, Galton, 2009) demonstrate that the role of schools in local societies is rarely exposed publicly as important, and the relationship between elementary schools and a local community is under-communicated externally (Kvlasund, 2009).

School monitoring studies (BISS, 2013; Tūna, 2014) allow to bring up an assumption that schools as multifunctional community centres will be recognised by local communities, schools and administrations of municipalities as important resources necessary for rural communities, thus hindering the closure of rural schools. The analysis is focused particularly on these questions: what are the extended functions of rural schools in the Latvian context, and is the community school model used as an argument for keeping schools in discussions on school structure in rural municipalities. To answer these questions, the survey data of administration of municipalities with rural territories and the survey data of school principals are used. The results of quantitative surveys are supplemented and explained by the data of 58 in-depth interviews with different stakeholders, living or working in rural areas.

Literature Review and Theory

Research on rural schools and local communities in many European countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and UK) and other countries like the US, Canada or Australia reveals different aspects of the relationship between schools and local communities. Many social scientists in their studies ask the questions: what does a school mean to a community, what are the effects of school closure, is the centralization of education services the best solution in the context of depopulation (Villa, 2015). In most cases, the decreasing population also decreases financial resources, and municipalities are forced to save funds (Hannum, Irvin, Banks & Farmer, 2009; Assmo & Wihlborg, 2012). Rural depopulation means also a decrease in human resources, and rural schools face difficulties to get sufficiently qualified teachers (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves & Salgado, 2005).

Supporters of maintaining rural schools usually draw attention to the positive role of schools in rural communities. A rural school is perceived as a centre of civil society, 'the shining beacon' of a community, the last public service available in a village (Woods, 2006; BISS, 2011, 2013). If schools are closed, this may disadvantage those families and school children who still live in the particular area (Lind & Stjernström, 2015) and makes the place less attractive to new families – incomers (Assmo & Wihlborg, 2012). Witten, McCreanor and Kearns (2007) have found that the closing

of a local school can change people's feelings for their community in the sense of a feeling of weaker local ownership, due to the increased travel distance to schools. The study of rural areas in the State of New York, USA, shows (Lyson, 2002) that rural areas with local schools are more prosperous and social and economic welfare there are higher. This study reveals how important schools are, especially for welfare in the smallest societies with fewer resources, institutions and meeting places. Lyson suggests that the money saved through consolidation of education services is in fact lost through lower tax income, lower real estate value and losses for local businesses.

In Latvia, teachers of rural schools stress the role of small rural schools in the integration of early school leavers in the education system (BISS, 2013). Their opponents present the advantages of scale of larger schools. For example, the possibility to provide competition both among the teachers and pupils, and a larger social network. The disadvantages of small rural schools mentioned among different stakeholders are unpreparedness of teachers to teach in a multi-grade classroom and teachers' negative attitude to multigrade teaching (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel 2010; Lind & Stjernström 2015; BISS, 2013).

The performance indicators of the PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) suggest that performance in rural schools is significantly lower than in urban schools in Latvia (Geske, Grinfelds, Kangro, Kiseļova, Mihno, 2015), and those who support closing small rural schools use this as an argument in the discussions on the learning environment in rural areas (Turlajs, 2017). However, several authors in Scandinavian countries stress that there is no research documenting a correspondence between size of the municipality and educational results (Åber-Bengtsson, 2009; Villa, 2015), and performance indicators of the PISA should be carefully interpreted and can be criticised (Fernandez-Cano, 2016).

All in all, a decreasing number of school children and budget considerations are the most common reasons for school closures, and this is not only a trend in Latvia, but also in other countries such as in Norway (Solstad, 2009; Villa, 2015). Concurrently, there is also local opposition to school closures in cases where the local school is seen as a good and safe learning environment and if it seems important for active community members (Villa, 2015).

Several studies have aimed to show different alternatives to closing schools. One of the alternatives is using information and communication technology (ICT) as a distance-bridging technology in small village schools, making for closer cooperation with other schools (Lind & Stjernström, 2015). However, distance-bridging technologies also have some constraints, which mainly are associated with limited economic resources, because these solutions require additional competences, work and money, and the legal organisational framework at a national level (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009).

Another alternative to closing schools is transformation of small rural schools into multifunctional community centres by expanding their functions and reconsidering their role in local communities. A review of literature on community schools shows that there is little doubt that schools as educational, culture and social centres are important for local communities. These schools have been called in different terms, such as community schools (Campbell-Allen et al, 2009), extended schools, integrated services (Press et al, 2011; Tayler et al, 2008), and full-service schooling (Dryfoos 1994; Smith, 2004). They all share common features and have an important role in the community (Tūna, 2014). According to the definition of the Coalition for Community Schools in the USA, 'a community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, and youth and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalised curriculum that emphasises real-world learning and community problem-solving' (Coalition for Community Schools website, 2019).

If the term 'community school' is used in the USA, then in England and Northern Ireland we can find similar schools referred to as 'extended schools', which provide services such as childcare, activities to extend and enrich learning for students, parenting and family support, access for the broader community to ICT, sports, arts facilities, adult learning. (Kļave & Tūna, 2014). This approach suggests that a rural school is more than just a place to educate children and has social significance also for the community, because the school is additionally perceived as a producer and maintainer of local social capital (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014).

Miller has identified three interrelated approaches that build strong linkages between schools and communities (Miller, 1995). The first approach reflects the school as a community centre, serving a wide range of services, including lifelong learning. School resources such as buildings, technology, and staff are involved in providing a range of educational and retraining opportunities for the community. Schools serve as cultural centres and provide possibilities for involvement in sports, drama, music and other social activities. A second approach places a major emphasis on the community in the curriculum, with study of the community in all its various dimensions and involvement of students in conducting needs assessments, documenting local history and monitoring the environment. A third approach is directed to development of rural entrepreneurship, supporting students in establishing businesses within school-based enterprises. All three approaches differ from the traditional understanding of schools and school curricula; therefore, as emphasised by Miller (1995), they require policy support from those organisations and individuals whose endorsement may be critical to the success of programme efforts.

The results of research in Latvia indicate that rural schools expand their target audience, formal and informal education and training offers, thus becoming lifelong learning providers for the whole rural community (Katane, 2013). The extended functions of small rural schools have been analysed in the context of the discussions of multifunctionality and its relation to sustainable development. As mentioned by Brandt and Vejre (2003), the concept of multifunctionality is getting increasing attention not only in the landscape sciences, but in society in general, since it seems to be an important aspect of sustainable development. The notion of multifunctionality has been used in landscape planning, agriculture and sustainable development literature (Ling et al., 2007; Maier & Shobayashi, 2001; Shi & Woolley, 2014). Here it refers to the integration of different functions within the same units, at the same time with the aim of producing multiple outputs and to contribute to several societal objectives.

Considering the aforementioned ideas and findings from previous research, this study analyses whether community school in small rural municipalities may be considered an alternative to school closures in the context of depopulation of rural territories in Latvia. The next section is devoted to the research methods used for the study.

Research Methods

To answer the research questions about the development of schools as multifunctional community centres, survey data and in-depth interviews are used. The survey data used for this article are two web-based surveys. One survey was organised with representatives of municipalities with rural territories (municipality administration), whilst the other survey was with principals of small rural schools (school administration). A web-based survey with the municipality administration was undertaken from April-May, 2016. Given the specific area of interest of the study, only municipalities with rural areas were included in the sample, i.e. 110 municipalities out of 119 (nine municipalities are the biggest cities without rural areas around them). The sample frame included municipality officials responsible for educational matters and development in general. During the active fieldwork stage, invitations to participate in the survey were e-mailed to 152 officials (directors of municipality education departments, education specialists, members of education committees or local council members, municipality development specialists and other municipality officials). Each message included a project overview, brief information about the survey objectives and a unique link to the electronic questionnaire. The total achieved sample size reached $n=103$, and the response rate in relation to the sample frame was 67%. Among the survey respondents were directors of municipality education departments (24%), education specialists (23%), members of education committees or local council members (12%), municipality development specialists (37%) and other municipality officials (4%).

The web-based survey with principals of small rural schools was undertaken from September-December, 2016. The total achieved sample size reached $n=200$, and the response rate in relation to the sample frame was 67%. The number of the pupils in surveyed schools varied between 15 and 236. The average was 73 pupils. 83% of schools were rural schools with the number of pupils below 100. The number of pupils in class in surveyed schools varied between 2 and 20, on average 7–8 pupils. Schools with fewer than 10 pupils in class comprised 85% of the sample. 79% of surveyed schools had experienced a decrease of pupils in the previous five years. 71% of surveyed schools were organising learning processes in multigrade classes.

The questionnaire for school administrations and the questionnaire for municipality administrations contained comparable questions and questions designed only for this particular target group. For example, school administrations were asked in detail about the functions besides formal education and the participation of the local population in the offered school activities. Municipality administrations were asked about the closing and reorganising of schools, and particularly about the importance of different arguments in these discussions. Another question to municipality administrations was about adaptation strategies municipalities choose to deal with changing socio-demographical, political and economic conditions in their municipality. Both target groups were surveyed about their support for the concept of schools as multifunctional community centres and whether the community school model can be used as an additional argument for keeping the small school open.

To deepen the understanding of the answers gained in quantitative surveys, 12 case studies were conducted. Information has been collected by implementing a complex set of methods: document analysis, in-depth interviews, and telephone interviews with all most significant agents/stakeholders: the representatives of municipalities' administration; local stakeholders (NGOs, entrepreneurs, local farmers); the representatives of schools (administration, teachers) and parents. However, the in-depth interviews were the central method used to collect data for case studies. Each case has at least four in-depth interviews, but some cases have more, and there are in total 58 in-depth interviews undertaken in Latvia. The collected information characterises three types of municipalities/communities: 1) municipalities with ordinary schools; 2) municipalities with schools as multifunctional centres (in Latvia, during the period from 2009 to 2013 the model of a school as a multifunctional centre was adapted in more than 50 local municipalities in Latvia (the Soros Foundation – Latvia initiative); 3) control group – communities with closed rural schools - to assess the impact of closing of the schools on sustainable development of municipalities. The fieldwork was organised during March and April 2016. All in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. On average, the length of the interviews was between one hour and one hour and a half. The interviews were organised mostly at the premises of schools and municipalities. Participation in the study was voluntary by all the participants, and they were granted confidentiality.

Questions for the in-depth interviews differed according to the stakeholder group interviewed. However, all interviews included questions regarding the experience of development of schools as multifunctional centres and the prospects of school development in the context of a decreasing number of pupils.

The analysis of the survey data was undertaken by IBM SPSS Statistics 22. The in-depth interviews were analysed, using the classic grounded theory analysis techniques of coding, constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling.

The analysis of the results of the survey data and case studies is presented with a focus on findings on small rural schools as multifunctional community centres, particularly scrutinising the questions: what are the extended functions of small rural schools in the Latvian context, and is the community school model used as an argument for keeping schools in discussions on school structure in rural municipalities.

Findings

Role of small rural schools in community and extended functions of small rural schools

87% of the surveyed school principals reported that their school ensures extended functions other than formal primary education. In most cases, the extended functions provided by schools are different educational services. Almost 80% of surveyed schools provide compulsory preschool education (5–6 years), and almost two thirds of surveyed schools provide pre-school education (kindergarten) for younger children. More than half of schools provide summer and winter camps for different target groups, and parental education and family support functions. Lifelong learning activities for adults are provided by 20% of schools. These activities include teaching of languages, ICT skills and vocational training (Table 1).

Providing additional functions, especially if the additional functions are only educational services, does not always promote the active cooperation and involvement of community members in school activities. In many cities in Latvia, schools are still perceived as fully autonomous units, closed to other inhabitants in the neighbourhood, except parents. For example,

schools in the capital, Riga, are monitored both by municipal police and by school staff to ensure that only pupils, teachers and parents are entering the school building and the pupils are safe. In some elite schools, there are electronic systems of surveillance for pupils and school staff, and even parents are not allowed to enter the school building. Many schools there have walls to protect them from others.

Table 1. Implementation of additional functions

<i>What functions does the school perform or what services does it provide besides formal education?</i>	School principals (N=200)
Further education of adults, incl. vocational training, languages, ICT skills	23%
Hobby activities, including sports, for adults and (spending) the leisure time	22%
Compulsory preschool education (5–6 years)	79%
Pre-school education of younger children	65%
Parental education and family support functions	50%
Services supporting the local population (for example, access to showers, washing machines)	10%
Summer and winter camps	53%
Other functions	20%

Fully different is the situation in the case of rural schools. These schools are open to community members, especially for using school premises for sports and hobby activities. The survey of rural schools shows that 78% of them are an open space for all inhabitants in the community, and the school resources and premises, for example, a sports hall, are accessible to the whole community. In 12% of cases, there are certain limitations and rules, and visitors need to ask for permission, and only in 10% of cases are exclusively pupils of the school allowed to use the premises of the school.

All school principals were asked to evaluate the level of participation of the local population in the offered school activities. On average, 46% of school principals tend to consider that the level of participation of the

local population in the school activities is high, 21% say that it is low. 25% stated that it depends on the particular place and cannot be generalised.

The in-depth interviews with representatives of municipality administrations clarify the situation in relation to additional functions of rural schools. They show that schools are developing additional functions to survive, mostly to gain additional finances for staff salaries, but also to be more important for the community and in the eyes of municipality politicians and the administration. Unfortunately, according to the views of municipality administrations, implementation of additional functions is not always connected with good performance indicators in formal education. In general, schools as agents have rather been weakened during the last years, because of a decrease in finances. It should be stressed that municipalities support the initiative of schools to widen their functions, and this is a general trend among many rural institutions such as libraries and cultural centres.:

In our strategical plan, we have defined that because of a decrease in population among all institutions, not only schools, should become multi-functional. [...] But five or six years ago this was not perceived as a norm or acceptable. However, the development of the concept of life-long learning gave us an understanding that a multifunctional approach is inevitable. [...] However, it is still open to discussion. The main function of the school is to provide formal education. This is disputable, because teachers are doing different additional things, but do they really provide a good quality of education? Our story is about surviving. (A representative of a municipality administration in a municipality with 10,001–15,000 inhabitants).

Community school model as an argument for keeping a school

Obtained data show that a majority of surveyed representatives of municipalities (87%) and principals of schools (78%) support the very idea that the school can implement both formal education and undertake extended functions (Table 2).

Table 2. Support to community school model with extended functions

<i>To what extent do you support that the school implements both formal education and undertakes extended functions?</i>	School principals (N=200)	Administration of municipalities (N=103)
Fully support	34%	35%
Rather support	44%	52%
Rather do not support	9%	1%
Do not support	1%	0%
Difficult to say, depends on circumstances	12%	12%

However, the general support to schools implementing additional functions does not mean that this is an utmost argument for keeping small rural school operating. 72% of school principals and 65% of municipality representatives believe that being a multifunctional community centre is an additional argument for keeping a small school open. Concurrently, 16% of school principals and 23% of municipality representatives have the opposite opinion (Table 3).

Table 3. Opinion on community school as an argument for keeping the small school open

<i>In your opinion, could such school model where a school provides additional services, thus functioning as a multifunctional community centre, provide an additional argument for keeping the small school open?</i>	School principals (N=200)	Administration of municipalities (N=103)
Yes	25%	25%
Rather yes	47%	40%
Rather no	13%	19%
No	3%	4%
Difficult to say	12%	12%

The review of the main arguments for closing schools in the survey of representatives of municipalities shows that economic argumentation prevails in the discussions on closing small rural schools. According to the survey results, the most powerful argument in discussions about school closures is the number of pupils (Table 4). The second most significant factor is an economic one: the need to save the municipality's funds.

Table 4. Importance of arguments in discussions about school closure. Administration of municipalities (N=103). Mean

<i>What weight was given to different arguments in discussions about school closure? Please, evaluate the importance of each of the factors on the scale from 1 to 5 when 1 means 'not important at all' and 5 - 'very important'.</i>	Mean
Number of pupils in the school	4.86
A need to save money in the municipality	4.29
Secure a good learning environment for the pupils	4.00
Distance from the next closest school (how far pupils would need to travel if the school was closed)	3.95
Parents' wishes	3.88
Costs associated with pupils attending school in another municipality (financial transfers between municipalities)	3.85
Effect on the community life (for the community to stay an active and attractive place)	3.71
The need to maintain the school facilities anyway to ensure other functions	3.59
Secure a good work and professional environment for teachers	3.56
Importance of the school as a cultural heritage, historical object	3.31
School performance in terms of educational outcomes: results of national standardised exams, test scores, competitions etc.	3.23
School ensures a range of education services: the school hosts a pre-school, evening school, boarding school, adult education services etc.	2.75

Table 4. Importance of arguments in discussions about school closure. Administration of municipalities (N=103). Mean

<i>What weight was given to different arguments in discussions about school closure? Please, evaluate the importance of each of the factors on the scale from 1 to 5 when 1 means 'not important at all' and 5 – 'very important'.</i>	Mean
Decision makers' personal interest (they themselves are directors of schools, teachers)	2.37
Establishment of an other/alternative school	1.75

A significant role is played by the argument for securing a good learning environment for the pupils. Quite similar ratings were given to the argument about the distance to the next closest school (“How far pupils would need to travel if the school was closed”), and the effect of parents’ wishes. The least significant argument in support of small schools is a possibility of establishing another, alternative school, and decision makers’ personal interest. Although the answers to other questions suggest that provision of additional functions is evaluated positively, in discussions on school closure, comparably little significance is attributed to the opinion that a school ensures a range of educational services: it hosts a pre-school, evening school, boarding school, adult education services, etc.

The study shows that in the schooling context the main adaptation strategies to deal with changing socio-demographical conditions in their municipality are connected with initiatives to sustain or increase the number of pupils in the small schools at the expense of human resources of neighbouring municipalities. More than half of surveyed municipalities (56%) reported that they implemented programmes aimed at increasing the number of pupils in small schools on a regular basis. The in-depth interviews with representatives of municipalities reveal that among the initiatives to attract pupils are support with free transportation, material rewards for pupils, provision of free meals at school, provision of boarding school services, including free meals and diverse offers of additional education for pupils without charge (sports and music classes, visits to a swimming pool, etc.).

In-depth interviews with school administrations and teachers highlight emotional attitudes and criticism about the prevalence of economic

argumentation. During in-depth interviews, mostly pessimistic views are presented, and both principals and teachers already expect that all schools with fewer than 60 pupils will be closed:

I have the impression that everything is focused on saving money. I don't have the impression that anybody is thinking about the people. Do we need to look only at finances every time? Especially in education. (Teacher, a municipality with 10,001–15,000 inhabitants).

I think we have to find a solution urgently. If the current financing system, with the principle that the money follows the pupil, is not changed, we will not be able to finance our school. (Teacher, a municipality with 10,001–15,000 inhabitants).

The in-depth interviews with representatives of municipality administrations give a rather controversial picture of their views on the role of small rural schools in municipalities. There are representatives who stress how it is important to keep every small rural school in the municipality, and there are opposing opinions:

Believe me. Most people use the demagogic argument that there is life only in places with schools. "If there is no school in a village, there is no life". That is demagogic. There is life in places where there are jobs. (Representative of a municipality administration in a municipality with 10,001–15,000 inhabitants).

Closing a school means that the number of inhabitants will continue to diminish, and rural areas are going to die. As one man said: "First, we close a school, then – a church, and then – an overgrown cemetery". Closing a school is a very sad decision. (Representative of a municipal administration in a municipality with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants).

Both school administrations and municipality administrations report their plans, future prospects and self-evaluation reports prepared during recent years. All these reports present the performance indicators of pupils in terms of results in centralised exams and participation in competitions among pupils. Concurrently, schools and municipalities are also forced to generate data about future prospects, evaluating the possible number of pupils in future and considering the possibility of school closure in future.

Decisions on school closure are made by taking into account both current performance indicators and future prospects on the expected number of pupils. One representative of a municipal administration in a small municipality with fewer than 5000 inhabitants characterised the decision about school closure in their municipality:

There were 38 pupils and several factors were taken into account. Every time we discuss the possibility of closing the school, we carefully consider many factors. First, there were no children in pre-school. Second, the level of educational quality was low. [...] The criteria were the results in centralized exams and the fact that many pupils did not reach the necessary level. We have municipality competitions, but they do not participate. At the same time, other schools are very competitive, participating in competitions.

The analysis with focus on size of municipalities shows that smaller municipalities with no big cities as a centre are more willing to keep all rural schools, because they are afraid that parents of pupils will choose schools in bigger cities in other municipalities, and their municipalities will have to pay for educational services in another municipality:

For every child who is declared and lives in our municipality, but is attending school in a neighbouring municipality, even if it is just near the border, we are paying money to the other municipality. Therefore, municipalities are maximally concentrated to keep children within their territory. If we close a school near the border, children living in this area will choose the nearest school, and it will be in another municipality. (Representative of a municipal administration in a municipality with 5000–10,000 inhabitants).

I will stand for all schools in our municipality as long as I can. I will stand against school closure, because it has consequences. [...] We have to keep everything we have. And we also do not want small municipalities to be dissolved. (Representative of a municipal administration in a municipality with fewer than 5000 inhabitants).

As the last quotation shows, the case of small municipalities can also be characterised with a strong will to keep this small municipality intact and

not for it to be joined with another municipality, and schools have been used in argumentation for maintaining small municipalities.

Discussion

In the context of declining rural populations and diminished financing, rural schools in Latvia were invited to manage school resources for multiple uses. Most of the surveyed schools provide compulsory preschool education (5–6 years), pre-school education (kindergarten) of younger children, summer and winter camps for different target groups, parental education and family support functions. However, they are not so successful in providing services for the adult population. Concurrently, not only rural schools are becoming multifunctional in rural areas in Latvia. It appears that when implementing extended functions, schools are competing with local NGOs and other municipality institutions, for example, public libraries, cultural centres, adult education centres, and day centres for different target groups. However, the level of competition is not equal in all rural areas, and it varies greatly. The policy context for the work on multifunctionality of different institutions favours local libraries, which also have become multifunctional and provide “a social space which enables socialising and networking”, education, culture and free access to various information sources, for example, the use of PCs and Internet (Strode et al., 2012). It can also be concluded that making schools, libraries or other institutions “more” multifunctional has become a policy objective. Not only schools and libraries, but also concert halls and health care centres are termed as multifunctional. However, further analysis of the multifunctionality of different institutions would allow answering the question whether we can talk about multifunctionality as a characteristic with multiple outcomes or an objective as a “normative” concept of multifunctionality (Maier & Shobayashi, 2001).

If reflecting on three interrelated approaches that build strong linkages between schools and communities provided by Miller, it can be concluded that we can find mostly the first and the second approach in Latvia. First, schools provide different additional services, mostly educational services, and school resources (buildings, technology, and staff) are available for the

community. Second, in-depth interviews with teachers in rural schools show that students are involved in community-based learning and work on small research projects relevant for the community. A third approach cannot be attributed to Latvian rural schools. No successful examples of school-based enterprises were mentioned in our survey. In terms of policy support from those organisations and individuals whose endorsement may be critical to the success of programme efforts, the results of the study are controversial and are of limited possible interpretation. On one side, administrations of municipalities support schools which have adapted the approach of schools as community centres. However, their attitudes are influenced by opinions and decisions at national level, which are negative or ignoring the approach of the school as a community centre, and more focused on formal performance indicators and economics. For example, K. Šadurskis, the Minister of Education and Science (in office 2002–2004; 2016–2018), has said that we should change our understanding of secondary schools as implementers of social functions to an understanding of schools as implementers of educational and developmental functions, to raise the indicators of competitiveness (Leta, 2017). In this interview, he has also stressed that the Ministry of Education and Science is currently “working on a mathematical formula to ascertain the value added of school in the development of pupils”.

Both representatives of municipalities and rural schools are convinced about the importance of a school to village and small-town life, and they stress that once the school is gone, a significant part of the life and vitality of the community goes with it. However, in the context of declining rural populations, already-stressed school administrations and often also municipality administrations are forced to generate data and a rationale for the survival of a school in their community. School and municipality administrations prepare different plans and school programmes, because every year the school is reviewed and its prospects are evaluated. This also illustrates some key features of current education policy, particularly those that enact forms of ‘governing by numbers’ (Ball, 2015).

As mentioned by other authors (Assmo & Wihlborg, 2012; Ball, 2010; Ozga, 2008), declining rural populations in the context of neoliberal performativity regimes operate in a situation where communities stressed on multiple fronts with diminished resources face requirements of performativity from central governments, Ministries of Educations, and school

boards. As defined by Ball (2010), this performativity is a new mode of state regulation, which requires individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations, through governance by numbers and comparison. Further analysis of the argumentation on school closures could be developed in the light of discussions of governmentality and neoliberal policy technologies, particularly of performativity as a particular contemporary mode of power relations.

Conclusions

The study on the rural schools in Latvia has shown that most rural schools in the country are implementing additional functions other than formal education, and both schools and municipalities are evaluating this positively. However, extended functions and the community school model do not serve as an important argument for keeping a school. As noticed by other authors in analysing school closure in different countries, for example, Egelund and Laustsen (2006), the main reason for closing small rural schools is a decrease in the number of pupils.

Generally, data suggest that the organisational culture of schools has changed during recent years in Latvia. Many schools are implementing additional functions, and schools are becoming more open to diverse groups in local communities. However, this is not an important argument in discussions on school closure if the number of pupils has diminished significantly. Applying alternative school forms has constraints, associated with limited financial resources and a lack of policy support and organisational framework on a national level. Another challenge is building a strong partnership with the school for community development purposes, because it is not generally viewed as a traditional element of schooling.

The main strategy of municipalities to adapt to the diminishing number of pupils is an offer of different services to pupils and their parents in competition with other municipalities. Among the services Latvian municipalities consider as means of attraction are free transportation, material rewards for pupils, provision of free meals at school, provision of boarding school services, including free meals, and diverse offers of additional education for pupils without charge (sports and music classes, visits to a swimming pool, etc.). These services are partly included in the

extended functions of small rural schools. Like in other countries with high decentralisation and municipalities as owners of schools (Lind & Stjernström, 2015), local politicians do not want to close rural schools for fear of losing the next election.

The author concludes that the links between the development of schools as community centres and support to them at national, municipal and community level have to be seen in a dynamic context. Further research is needed to analyse the dynamics after five or ten years. Finally, a more in-depth discussion of the research results and their relevance to neoliberal performativity regimes in education would require an additional work effort, which could be an area for further research.

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