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Rural Teachers and Local Curricula. Teaching Should not be a Bubble Disconnected from the Community

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ABSTRACT

The national core curriculum plays an important role in the Finnish education system as the backbone for teaching and learning. Municipalities as local education providers are obliged to organize education by developing their own curricula in relation to the core curriculum. In this article, we look at how local curricula are developed and implemented in rural schools in Finland. The data consists of interviews of 21 subject teachers in two rural schools. We focused on how the development and implementation of local curricula are experienced and interpreted by teachers working in rural contexts. Developing and implementing local curricula challenges rural teachers at different levels. There is a disconnect between a policy level relating to a predominately urban frame of reference and a more practice-oriented local level based in rural viewpoints. Teachers' lack of local knowledge makes integrating local contents more challenging, and exploring the local possibilities requires active teachers.

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Introduction

Providing all citizens with equal educational opportunities regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender and place of residence, constitute a main goal of the Finnish education system. Finland is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Europe, with an average population density of 18 inhabitants per square kilometer in 2016, compared to the EU average of 117 (EuroStat statistics, 2016; Tilastokeskus, 2018). Ensuring that high-quality education at all levels is available in sparsely populated rural areas is therefore particularly important in the Finnish context, as is educating and retaining high-quality teachers (Sahlberg, 2011). The national core curriculum (NCC) plays an important role in the Finnish education system as the backbone for teaching and learning. One of the main foundations for the core curriculum is that municipal authorities are granted autonomy when it comes to providing and organizing education through a *local curriculum*. Teachers are regarded as valued experts who are central when it comes to developing school-based curriculum as a source for different approaches to schoolwork. The local curriculum constitutes a steering document at the local level (Vitikka, Krokfors, & Hurmerinta, 2012), and is an important tool in the decentralization of education in Finland. In theory, then, this approach to education could open up for a school well suited to be successful in a range of different contexts. In this article, we investigate whether this is indeed the case when we look at how local curricula are developed and implemented in rural schools in Finland. This is done through focusing on how the development and implementation of local curricula are experienced and interpreted by teachers working in

rural contexts. Our aim is to contribute to the research on rural schools through focusing on how national curriculum relate to local curricula and on how principals and teachers in rural schools respond to this part of their work.

As emphasized by Vitikka et al. (2012), the reason for granting schools and municipalities autonomy when it comes to organizing education and implementing the core curriculum, is to ensure freedom to make choices based on local needs, with the core curriculum serving as a common national foundation. Also, the active involvement of local officials and teachers is a means for ensuring their commitment when it comes to the implementation of the curriculum and their ownership of the curriculum (ibid.). Other researchers have pointed out additional benefits of engaging teachers in curriculum work, for example that it contributes to teachers' professional development (Voogt et al., 2011, 2015; Tronsmo & Nerland, 2018).

There is a growing body of research suggesting that *place-based education* can increase students' interest in learning and also strengthen the relationship between school and the community (e.g., Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). The place-based education movement is well developed, especially in North America (see e.g., Alsop, Diplo, & Zandvliet, 2007; Corbett, 2010b; Takano, Higgins, & McLaughlin, 2009) and in Australia (see e.g., Bartholomaeus, 2013; Papatraianou, Strangeways, Beltman, & Schuberg Barnes, 2018). Local curriculum as an approach to school-based learning takes local experience as the foundation for learning, and research shows that situating learning in meaningful contexts contributes positively to students' learning processes (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2004). In the case of rural schools, such an approach is thought to complement the experiences of rural children and meet the needs of rural communities (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Howley, 2004; Roberts & Green, 2013). Literature in the field suggests several ways in which localizing curricula can benefit students; learning will be experienced as more meaningful and relevant, the relationship between school and its surroundings will be strengthened by including local environments and institutions in the teaching, and it may help the students to see opportunities within their own contexts as they become more familiar with them. Also, studies document a direct link between introducing local curricula and learning outcomes in specific subjects, for example in reading (Egcas, Tabotabo, & Geroso, 2017).

However, the literature also points out some constraints when it comes to developing and implementing local curricula. Priestley and Drew (2017), for example, show that teachers' involvement in processes such as these is dependent on their opportunities to exert agency, which should not be understood as an innate capacity or quality of the individual, but as something that is achieved in relation to a context (see also Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). As pointed out by Tronsmo and Nerland (2018) in their comment to Priestley and Drew's (2017) study, teachers' space for maneuvering in accordance with local needs are affected by the material and social configurations of the context.

Research on the use of local contents in teaching has mainly focused on studying national and local curricula documents or standards (e.g., Jennings, 2000; Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005). Thomas (2005) studied the decisions that teachers make when planning instruction within a standardized curriculum, and how do the processes that teachers use to select content relate to standardized expectations. However, the research referred to above makes it clear that it is important to keep in mind that policy enactment, like developing curriculum, is a socially constituted and contested process (Hardy, 2015). To understand the dynamics behind such processes it is crucial to recognize the importance of contextual factors; that they are influenced by the availability of resources, limited by practical constraints and also unique to every situation. The aim of this article is not to assess the value or effectiveness of local curriculum in Finland. Instead, we focus on how teachers and school leaders experience the process of developing and implementing local curriculum in schools, taking local conditions, constraints and opportunities into consideration. This is done by addressing three research questions: 1) How are local curricula developed in rural municipalities? 2) How do rural teachers use local contents in their teaching? 3) What are the challenges in using local contents?

Curricula as Part of Education Steering System

Basic education in Finland is composed of nine years of comprehensive school preceded by 1 year of preprimary education. The basic education grades 1–6 (starting at age 7), are called primary education; grades 7–9 are called lower secondary education. Class teachers teach pupils in grades 1–6, whereas specialized subject teachers, who may teach in general upper secondary schools as well, teach pupils in lower secondary. After basic education, students can choose between general upper secondary leading to matriculation examination, and vocational upper secondary leading to a vocational upper secondary qualification. Teachers in Finland are required to hold a master's degree, and teachers are allowed an extensive pedagogic freedom in their work (e.g., Toom & Husu, 2012).

At the national level, the Parliament decides on educational legislation and the government and the Ministry of Education and Culture prepare and implement education policy. The Ministry sets the aims and core content of instruction in different subjects in a national core curriculum (NCC). The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for implementing the Ministry's policy aims: developing education, enhancing its effectiveness, and monitoring education provision. At the local and regional levels, local authorities – in most cases the municipalities¹ – provide education for preprimary and compulsory school-age children. Less than 2 percent of comprehensive school pupils go to private or state schools (OECD, 2015; Finnish National Board of Education, 2017).

NCC frames the objectives of different subjects, planning of the contents of teaching, and steers pupil assessment, special needs education, pupil welfare, and educational guidance (Opetushallitus, 2016). NCC is not only a steering document, but also a pedagogical document guiding teachers' work. It is renewed approximately every ten years. NCC addresses principles for good learning environments, work approaches and the concept of learning. Evaluation of learning outcomes is not used for ranking the schools or pupils' performance, but to monitor how national objectives have been reached. Testing is considered a diagnostic tool, and it is not used for streaming purposes, for example when it comes to access to secondary education (Vitikka et al., 2012).

Nationwide standardization through the NCC is seen as promoting spatial equality and equity in education for the whole country (OECD, 2013). The Finnish education system has moved from being highly centralized through the comprehensive school reform in the 1970s, to becoming more and more decentralized in the sense that more responsibility and decision-making power have been transferred to local education providers (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Nevalainen, Kimonen, & Hämäläinen, 2001, p. 130.) Today, the municipalities are relatively autonomous actors, responsible for organizing basic education, implementing the NCC, and allocating funding (OECD, 2015; Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Vitikka et al., 2012).

When it comes to local curriculum, the municipalities as local education providers are obliged to organize education and implement NCC by developing their own curricula. Local curriculum can be municipal or include school-specific sections. The idea is to enhance children and pupils' motivation and learning by linking the schools to the local or regional activities and specificities. Local curriculum serves as a basis for how the daily work in the classrooms is planned, as well as for each school's annual plan. It addresses local lesson hour distribution, language programs, home-school cooperation, and defines the contents of teaching for pupils belonging to different language and cultural groups or requiring special support. Within national guidelines, each school is awarded substantial latitude for local curriculum design, even if it has to be confirmed at the municipal level. An important aspect of the curriculum reform has been to enable a shift from the didactic teacher-centered philosophy of the previous NCCs, to a more learner-centered approach to teaching.

According to the National Agency for Education, the objectives of local curricula are to enable increased engagement with the surrounding community, more project-based learning and

¹Municipalities are self-governing administrative units. In 2018, Finland had 311 municipalities. Local authorities have broad responsibility for the provision of basic public services to their residents. They have strong self-government based on local democracy and decision-making and the right to levy taxes. (Local Finland, 2018)

collaboration between different subject teachers and stakeholders outside the school (Opetushallitus, 2016). Local curricula also serve to diversify learning environments, since local culture, nature and built environments can be integrated into the teaching of different subjects. A school may for example organize a multidisciplinary learning module involving a theme, project or course, in which perspectives of different subjects that are based on local needs and interests can be combined.

Research Context, Materials and Methods

The analyses in this article are based on empirical data collected in 2017–2018 as part of a larger comparative study of geographical education differences in Finland, Canada and Norway (the RUR-ED project).² For this article, the data from Finland has been utilized. The study was founded in a case study design, enabling us to access a deep understanding of the particular phenomena at hand (Mabry, 2008). Using context as a main point of departure, the case study design implicated a prolonged engagement with the case municipalities and profound contextualization of our research sites, as described by Yin (2013). This was seen as crucial in order to be able to investigate the role of local environment and local adjustments to the questions at hand, namely the development and implementation of local contents in education. In case study research selection of cases includes considerations about typical versus atypical cases (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2008; Mabry, 2008). Our study was conducted in two rural municipalities, which were initially chosen because of their remote locations in northern Finland, and in this sense represented cases that could be said to be typical for the most sparsely populated regions of Finland. Also, a crucial selection criterion was that both municipalities had an upper secondary school. First, by including more than one case in the study we sought to address variations within the rural (see also Beach, Johansson, Öhrn, Rönnlund, & Rosvall, 2019). Second, we took note of the possible limitations of the results based on a single research site. In case study design particularly, it is important to consider the issue of generalizability. The selected municipalities represented two different contexts and therefore possibly two different learning environments for both pupils and teachers. While Research site 1 (RS1) is more remote, with more limited educational options and with educational alternatives further away, Research site 2 (RS2) is closer to a big city, which is a significant feature when it comes to the spatial dynamics and mobility within the area. The proximity to a city provides educational options, job opportunities and a bigger potential work force for filling the teaching positions in the municipality. By including these two cases, we were able to provide a fuller picture and a deeper understanding of different aspects affecting the implementation of local curricula in rural schools. Understanding the variations within the rural also increased the reliability of the study. As pointed out by Bæck (2015), this form of contextualization is crucial when it comes to understanding spatiality as a factor affecting the functioning of schools in rural and remote settings.

Despite the differences between the two case sites certain similarities frame the lives of local people in both places, as also shown in Table 1. Both municipalities are characterized by a scattered settlement structure with a municipality center surrounded by many small villages. Both sites are currently undergoing a population decline, among other things leading to a weakening of basic services. Education attainment levels are lower and unemployment rates are higher than the national average. The primary sector is significantly bigger in the two sites compared to the national average, with agriculture and reindeer herding as important industries.

Rural municipalities in this part of Finland often rely on one or two main livelihoods (such as forestry or mining), and this makes them especially sensitive to economic fluctuations. Municipal financial problems are common and providing the citizens with the services they are entitled to through the legislation can be a constant struggle. Increased independent municipal decision making, changes in state funding and in population structure have led to a situation where municipalities have closed small schools and centralized their network of schools to solve financial problems.

²RUR-ED Spatial Inequalities and Spatial Justice in Education (UiT 2017–2022) <http://site.uit.no/rured/>

Table 1. Municipality key figures 2017. (Statistics Finland, 2018)

Key figure	Finland	RS1	RS2
Population	5,513,130	3,310	8,103
Population density per square km	18	1.1	1.4
Population change from previous year (%)	0.2	-3.3	-1.0
Population under 15 years old (%)	16.2	9	16
Population 15–64 years old (%)	62.5	55	55
Population over 64 years old (%)	21.4	37	30
Unemployment rate % 2016	13.5	24	19
Primary sector posts % 2015	3.2	22	14
Secondary sector posts %	20.5	11	18
Service sector posts % 2015	75.1	64	67
Upper secondary education (>15 years old) (%)	71.3	61	62
Tertiary education or more (>15 years old) (%)	30.4	16	15
Pupils in basic education ^a	556,742	249	883
Students in general upper secondary school ^b	103,800	30	90

^aSchools' web pages; Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2017.

^bSchools' web pages; Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2018.

During two decades starting from the 1990s, three out of four small rural schools have been closed in northern Finland (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Käyhkö, 2016.) In RS1, all small village schools have been closed down, the last one in 2013. Pupils from the villages now attend the school center, where all RS1 schools from pre-primary to general upper secondary are located. In RS2, ten village schools have been closed down since the beginning of 2000. At the time of the fieldwork, five small primary schools remained in RS2. One of them is in a new school center that was opened in August 2016, which is comprised of a comprehensive school and an upper secondary school. The situation in the case municipalities when it comes to school closure is not unique. Lind and Stjernström (2015) show in a study on organizational challenges of rural schools in three Nordic countries, that rural municipalities are moving in the direction of school structures consisting of well-equipped and well-staffed schools in the municipal centers and with as few small village schools as possible.

During the fieldwork there were around 250 pupils in basic education in RS1 and around 600 pupils in RS2. Children living in the villages are transported to schools by taxis, with a travel distance of up to 80 kilometers in both municipalities. Some children spend 3 h in a taxi every school day. (Schools' webpages; teacher interviews.)

Both municipalities provide secondary education in local general upper secondary schools. At the time of the interviews, RS1 upper secondary school had around 30 and RS2 around 90 students (Schools' webpages; teacher interviews.) Young people in RS2 have more local possibilities than those in RS1, as the municipality has a few options in the local vocational school. Also, shorter distance (90 km) to the closest city provides more options both in secondary and tertiary education in RS2. From RS1, the closest vocational schools and other secondary schools are 60 km away, but the range of available study programs is quite narrow. The closest tertiary education is in the province capitals of Rovaniemi or Oulu. For rural areas, having a city nearby with teacher education constitutes an asset when it comes to recruiting teaching staff in local schools. Most of the 32 teachers who worked in RS1 at the time of the fieldwork, resided within the municipality. For RS2, the situation was somewhat different. Almost 40 percent (RS2 school documents) of the subject teachers in RS2 schools commuted from outside the municipality, with the majority commuting from the province capital Oulu. In Oulu, as is the situation in many urban areas in Finland, the competition for available teaching positions is high, and especially for novice teachers securing a job during the first years of their teaching careers can be difficult. Many teachers residing in Oulu therefore look for jobs in nearby municipalities.

The time period when the fieldwork for this study took place, can be considered as somewhat of a transition period, since it coincided with the implementation of the latest core curricula implemented in all Finnish schools as of autumn 2016. This meant that at the time of the fieldwork, only 7th and 8th graders followed the new curriculum. In addition, as touched upon in the previous paragraphs, both municipalities in the study had undergone other changes that influenced the

schools and teachers' work. RS2's new school center was recently opened in 2016. Although most teachers transferred from previous schools, two of the three principals were new. In RS1, the municipal authorities had in 2013 decided to locate all pupils in a school in the municipal center. There were also changes in the municipal administration which influenced the school administration. It is important to keep this as a backdrop for understanding some of the dynamics taking place within the education sector in these two municipalities, as negative experiences and sentiments may have been exacerbated by the instability and sometimes turmoil that is often a companion to processes taking place in times of transition and change.

After receiving research permits from the municipalities, we presented our research project at a teacher meeting, after which we sent the teachers an email and asked them about their interest in participating in the research. Qualitative interviews were conducted among subject teachers and school principals, mainly on school premises during and after working hours. Interviews were carried out as semi-structured interviews based on an extensive interview guide. The teachers were asked questions about how they experienced working as a teacher in a rural location, about the curricula, students, and local communities. In the interviews, place and location were emphasized as a framework for teachers' work. An ethical problem in rural research is that contextual information can give clues to identify the small research sites and through this also identify individual teachers. At the same time, to understand the challenges of rural education and the incompatibilities between national and local curricula, presenting some contextual information is necessary. In this study we have anonymized the interviewees as well as the research sites. We have only included information about the research sites that we considered necessary in order to understand the processes taking place. In instances where teachers talked about their views on rural children and their schooling, the conversations were held on a very general level and individual students were not discussed.

Twenty-one individual qualitative interviews were carried out; 10 in RS1 and 11 in RS2. 12 of the interviewed teachers were women and 9 were men. Five of the teachers in RS2 were daily commuters living outside the municipality. The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The data were analyzed with qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The research questions structured our analysis, and we paid special attention to how the interviewees talked about their participation in developing curricula and using local contents in their teaching. In accordance with the case study design, we sought to spend as much time as possible in the case municipalities, including multiple visits to the schools. Also, the main interviewer was already familiar with RS2 through previous research projects.

Developing the Local Curriculum in Rural Schools

As local education providers, the municipalities are responsible for developing local curricula within the framework of the national core curriculum. In the schools in this study, the principal would serve as a link between metalevel curricula and microlevel practices by implementing the assignments of the municipalities. The school principals would invite the teachers to be part of the planning process by organizing teamwork and meetings on pedagogic planning. The teachers discussed general guidelines and alignments when developing local curricula, and this process is continuous, as expressed by a RS1 principal:

We have 32 teachers and we have put down curricula for early childhood education, pre-primary education, basic education, upper secondary education and upper secondary education for adults. The process is ongoing; you cannot finish it and think this is it for the next ten years. We have pedagogic afternoons at least once a month; we go through curricula, evaluate and continue the process. Our curriculum, including the annual working plan, goes to the municipal board once a year, so it constantly changes. (RS1 principal)

Teachers in Finland have considerable pedagogical freedom (see e.g., Toom & Husu, 2012). In practice, teachers are the ones involved in the actual development and writing of the local curricula.

Individual teachers make the concrete decisions on how (and whether) to use local contents in their subject, as one teacher explains:

I do not discuss with my colleagues what kind of local contents I use in my teaching. I do not even expect them to be interested; they do not need to be. They have their own subjects. (RS1/5 teacher)

When a small number of teachers cover all subjects, as we found in our study and as has also been pointed out by other researchers (Glover et al., 2016; Smit, Hyry-Beihammer, & Raggl, 2015), school size will influence local curriculum development processes. Rural teachers, teaching multiple grades and multiple subjects, are obliged to develop local curricula in all of their subjects and for all the grade levels they teach. The challenges to this was evident in both of our case sites. With small staffs the responsibility was largely in the hands of individual teachers. In the case of RS1, the teachers did not have other subject colleagues to cooperate with and to exchange ideas with, and this would challenge their motivation for engaging in local curriculum development. In RS2 there were 41 subject teachers and in some subjects there were more than one teacher. These subject colleagues and teachers of related subjects could choose to develop a local curriculum together. They were also encouraged to cooperate with primary school class teachers (interview RS2/P2), but none of the interviewed teachers had done so. As also shown by Smit et al. (2015), teachers' engagement with other school-related actors, such as school inspectors, teacher trainers, and school counsellors, are also rarer in remote areas.

Some of the rural teachers we interviewed experienced both the development and the implementation of local curricula as difficult.

The whole system is very badly planned, it serves only the bigger schools and bigger cities, where they have the resources to put up a committee that does the work. In a place with only one school, a single teacher has to do a lot. It feels insane that every municipality has to do a lot of work to have their own curriculum. (RS1/1 teacher)

The development processes caused a lot of administrative work for the small staff, and in the end the teachers felt that the work did not provide enough tools for the implementation processes to function well. According to the teachers, they were tired of the ever-increasing amount of administrative work, and this seemed to have an impact in their attitudes towards making an effort with the local curricula. The teachers did not disagree with the importance of local curricula, but they had a problem with the increased workload that followed as part of developing a curriculum. In the end, administrative work takes time away from teaching. The teachers in our study expressed a desire to focus on teaching, and not on administration. Also, many of them perceived curricula to be relevant more at the policy level than for the actual teaching that they took part in. Even though we were not able to detect any actual acts of resistance when it comes to taking part in curriculum processes, we cannot exclude the possibility that the attitudes expressed by the teachers negatively impacted their motivation to engage.

Small, rural municipalities face other forms of administrative and financial challenges than larger municipalities. Local administrations in rural municipalities are often simplified and reduced due to inadequate resources and low number of inhabitants. A single municipal official may cover several areas of responsibility, which in urban municipalities would be covered by several persons. In small, rural municipalities the roles of the education provider, the municipal head of education, the director of basic education and the school principal, can be one and the same person. Moreover, it is not always easy to recruit qualified administration officials to small rural municipalities, and it can be the case that the person serving as the municipal head of education in fact has limited substantial knowledge about education. This was also the case in RS1, where the boards of education, security and health care had been merged to form a single board of welfare. All administrative tasks related to the education sector took place in school, as a municipal school office no longer existed in the city hall. The decisions concerning education were approved in the welfare board. A single service leader led the sectors of education, security and welfare. As a health care expert, the service leader had no qualifications in education and her office was located outside of the school. The service leader was the

school principal's superior and she was the one presenting the proposed local curriculum in the welfare board meetings. However, as she had limited knowledge on the subject matter, the principal would prepare the presentations and participate in the welfare board meetings as a consultant. This added to the principal's workload.

Sometimes they ask me to go there as a principal, to explain some issues. We are quite flexible, but it is a burden, too. I am also substituting the service leader. At the same time, I am the education provider and the principal in this municipality, sometimes I have to send myself the same documents that I sign in different roles, also as a teacher and a parent. (RS1 principal)

Since the funds allocated to the municipalities from the state are no longer ear-marked for specific sectors, the municipalities themselves are left to decide how much to invest in for example education (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). As already mentioned, many small, rural municipalities in Finland struggle with financial difficulties. Cutting down on administration expenses is one solution to such difficulties, but this is a solution that often causes functional problems. This was clearly felt at RS1. With a situation characterized by scarce resources, and with both school and city hall being under-staffed as a result, the principal of the school in RS1 ended up sending documents for herself to be signed in different roles. For small staff both in school and the city hall, the constant administrative reorganizations, evaluations and curriculum reforms were almost too much to cope with. The school principal at RS1 strongly criticized the system, which she felt had a very metro-centric outlook:

In the state administration and in the national evaluation, they should acknowledge that the actors differ in size and kind. For example, the data they ask for in the national evaluation is not valid in small municipalities and cannot be compared with urban sites. Now they bombard me with questions about how much bilingual early childhood care we have. It is not enough that I answer them that we have no bilingual day-care. I have to fill in a long 80-page questionnaire that will be of no use to anyone. I am the principal from preschool until upper secondary, and the same evaluation was done four times by the same person, me as a principal, as an education provider, as a teacher and as a parent. (RS1 principal)

The national core curriculum in itself can also be experienced as too demanding for small, rural schools. The core curriculum is developed by the National Agency of Education, and mostly in reference to bigger schools in urban environments. Many of the teachers who were interviewed criticized the educational authorities for disregarding the challenges connected to implementing the NCC under circumstances different from what it had been developed for, such as rural and remote contexts. The NCC constantly brings in new ideas that the schools are expected to follow up on. "They want to be new and revolutionary and develop, even if the situation is already good", one of the teachers at RS1 stated (RS1/7 teacher). The teachers questioned the purpose of the constant changes that were imposed upon them. They felt that the national level steering system had a life of its own, that was disconnected from the practices of rural schools. With less resources, rural teachers experienced it was more difficult to introduce projects that promoted digitalization, internationalization and new learning environments.

The Important Role of the Teachers

The interviews showed that teachers' work experiences and personal histories tended to influence how local content was perceived and incorporated in their teaching. Teachers' attitudes are also significant: their interest in local matters and to what degree they acknowledge the significance of local curriculum are key factors. Dependence on a single teacher for developing local curriculum for a specific subject becomes problematic if the teacher has low interest in local matters. In the interview data, both locally active and inactive teachers were identified.

In the data material, we found that teachers who use local contents and understand its significance to a rural community usually reside in a rural area. They often have rural backgrounds themselves, as did many of the teachers in the schools in our two research sites. These teachers are active members of the community and are interested in local matters. Active membership may include taking part in

local politics and being involved in local associations or hobby groups. Locally active teachers often had extensive work experiences, and they had gained wide knowledge about the rural specificities. Furthermore, the locally active teachers had a positive attitude towards using local contents in their teaching, and they were actively looking for new ideas from their network of colleagues or through social media or other sources, such as facebook groups, teachers' trade union webpages or their own networks of colleagues working elsewhere. These were strategies that helped them overcome the problems of size and distance, and that enabled them to learn about and to share good practices and ideas concerning the development and implementation of local curricula.

Taking local context into account and integrating this in their teaching seemed to be important to these teachers, and for some this interest rests on an aim to increase students' place attachment and appreciation of their home environment (e.g., Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Low & Altman, 1992). Being aware of the fact that young people are likely to leave their home municipality for studies or work elsewhere, locally active teachers felt that it is an obligation of a rural school to help the students realize that it is also possible to stay or at least return home after finishing their studies in vocational institutes or universities:

Most of the students leave at an early age. We should teach them some appreciation for the local community. Teach them that this is a place where people can live. I think it's a school's duty to make them stay here, continue in the local secondary schools and so on. You can't force them but show the opportunities at least. People have to have roots. (RS1/4 teacher)

These teachers also saw the pedagogical benefits of local curriculum. If the topic to be taught is combined with already familiar knowledge, the student will find it easier to relate to, and the learning experience may become more fluent.

It is important to use local contents in teaching. With a local aspect, it is easier for students to get a hold of things. I use it whenever possible, but without compromising the entity. You have to teach the basic knowledge and skills even with the local aspect included. At best local and national curricula are complementing each other. Absolutely. (RS2/2 teacher)

Experienced teachers with rural backgrounds had understood the significance and benefits of local curricula. The situation was very different with the teachers we identified as locally inactive. Teachers who were reluctant to use local contents in their teaching were often young and with less work experience. They tended to have an urban background, or they lived in a city and commuted to work. These teachers only had minimal contact with rural community members, and they had a limited interest in local matters.

This was the case for some of the teachers especially at RS2. At RS2, many teachers commuted daily from the city 90 km away from the school. Since the commuting teachers did not live in the community where they worked, they were not very familiar with the community and its features, happenings or opportunities. This had an impact on their interest in local matters and on their eagerness to use local contents in their teaching.

Interviewer: How do you get information about the local happenings here?

Teacher: That is a good question.

I: Or are you interested in the local matters?

T: No not really. I assume the students will tell me, if there should be something interesting going on here. (RS2/5 teacher)

The fact that young teachers have less teaching experience can be a source of professional uncertainty. Especially young teachers fresh out of university would stick to the national core curriculum and the basic contents of their subject. This seemed to give them reassurance of operating within the right framework. In a situation like this, there would be no room for integrating local contents. During the interviews some young teachers did not even understand the term "local contents"

and asked the interviewer to define its meaning. Novice teachers seemed to struggle with knowing how to apply the demands of the national curriculum in a rural environment. It was a steep learning experience for them: A novice teacher with an urban background talked about how his students had explained him about harvesting the potatoes:

Students said that they had been harvesting the potatoes, I was like oh you do it now, can you get a holiday for that ... I cannot relate to their lives, their milieus are so different from mine. My own studies had nothing to do with the local culture, nor do I have my own experience of this community. It feels a bit stupid to teach something as more like a tourist, something that is completely new to me. (RS/61 teacher)

Teachers need guidance in practices of local culture (Brown & Crippen, 2017; Corbett, 2010a), and some of the novice teachers in our study recognized their lack of knowledge in local matters and talked about their need to familiarize themselves with the local community. Some of them were taught local knowledge from their pupils. Several of the teachers criticized teacher education for being incapable of addressing the specificities of rural schooling.

Moreover, the teachers had to deal with the ambivalence of rural kids leaving or staying. This was especially obvious in the interviews at RS1, where there were no other education opportunities after basic education besides the upper secondary school. For any kind of future occupation, students were forced to leave for studies elsewhere. Limited local opportunities had an impact on their attitudes towards leaving or staying and on the expectations for the pupils to do so. Teachers tended to focus on preparing the students for their future studies elsewhere—and this made some of them question the role of the local curriculum. Are you supposed to teach the students to leave or to stay? This question was made relevant in a literature lesson, where the teacher talked about the significance of the district of Kallio in the capital of Helsinki. Kallio is a former working-class neighborhood that has undergone a serious facelift and has been transformed into a center for arts and popular culture, with trendy galleries, boutiques, cafes, restaurants and bars. The district is often used as a backdrop for books, films and compositions. None one of the students in the literature class at RS1 knew exactly where Kallio was or had any knowledge about its meaning in popular culture. The teacher started to wonder whether it was foolish to explain the profile of a capital neighborhood to rural pupils. However, he justified his teaching by the increasing mobility of people: *Many students may move very far away, and they need to know things of other places as well.* (RS1/6 teacher). Bartholomaeus (2013) points out that rural students in some ways may differ from their metropolitan peers in their cultural and social experiences. For some rural students this means that they have limited opportunities to integrate their locally specific experiences and knowledge with the learning taking place in school.

Implementation of Local Curriculum

Most of the interviewed rural teachers leaned on the national core curriculum as a framework and a basis for their work. It helped the teachers to plan and carry out their teaching. The NCC also gave teachers tools for assessment and ensured spatial equality.

The NCC is the core and it gives the teachers significant support for teaching. The teachers' knowledge of their subject and their teacher personality convey the curriculum-based teaching and the things the teacher decides to emphasize. Curriculum is the skeleton that remains the same in different parts of Finland with different teachers. (RS1 Principal)

Besides the support given by the NCC, many teachers mentioned the school textbooks which follow the national curriculum. As pointed out by Howley (2004), textbooks are usually generically written to appeal to large market and must be useable in all parts of a country. Using NCC based textbooks assured the teachers that they were operating in a valid framework. At the same time, the relationship between macro level steering documents and micro level practices were not experienced as unproblematic, and the administrative language and the aims of the NCC, which were expressed in very general terms, could make it challenging for the teachers to relate to. From the rural teacher's point of view, the NCC was perceived as detached from the practical work in classrooms. The teachers

criticized the core curriculum for representing “fine sentences” or “ideal pictures”, with no connection to actual teaching or to a rural context. In the interviews the curricula were also described as difficult to understand.

National curriculum is in the background. But I am not sure if it is any help (laughing). There are mostly empty phrases. How to combine it with reality, it is a different thing. (RS2/9 teacher)

The curriculum is too heavy to read and understand, even for a teacher. It is quite desperate and it does not give you that much support. It is too far between theory to practice. (RS1/1 teacher)

In the same way as for the NCC, and even though teachers have a central role in developing local curricula, many teachers would also regard the local documents as empty words without any connection to classroom practices. It seems that one reason for this is that the NCC-like administrative language had found its way into the local curricula. RS2 had invested in developing local curriculum as part of the Osaava program (Kangasoja, 2017), led by the Ministry of Education and Culture. A project worker had mapped all the local and regional possibilities that could be used in the local curriculum. The mapping produced a thick guidebook on local possibilities. However, the approach and work method resembled the NCC developing process in its bureaucracy. Thus, the information remained too theoretical:

When we were writing the local curriculum, we tried to figure out what the finely written sentences actually mean. (RS2/5 teacher)

The mapping project ended up being a huge book. But from that, it is a long way to refine those ideas into school life. It takes time to change those ideas into action. (RS2/6 teacher)

According to the teachers, much work had been done that did not really help their teaching: “The new curriculum of RS2 has 700 pages, so I don’t use it that much” one teacher said, laughing. (RS2/8 teacher).

Another teacher talked about the importance of being able to see that it makes sense to implement local curriculum in different subjects. She used arts and crafts as an example:

The main guidelines come from the national curriculum. The evaluations have changed, and using different media should be imposed into arts teaching. Of course I take the national curriculum guidelines into consideration, and try to somehow place them. But it is the basics, really, that we study. The visual matters must be the main thing, not media. (RS1/5 teacher)

When teachers bring in local knowledge to the classroom, a weaving of schema and the new content occurs (Azano, 2011). The concrete ways of using local contents in teaching depends on the school subject being taught. In some subjects, it is easier to use local contents (e.g., in biology), while in others the possibilities are narrower, for example in music, since local concerts are rare and there are no music halls in the vicinity. To what degree local contents is used depends on the possibilities that the local environment has to offer. Both municipalities studied here are surrounded by forests and natural environments. Students are taught to know local nature – they go hiking, visit nature sites, and get to know local flora and fauna. They also familiarize themselves with the local livelihoods and industries, like tourism, agriculture, reindeer herding, and the industries based on forestry. Local curricula also include cooperation with the enterprises in the community, the municipality, congregations and various associations. In history and civics classes the students learn about local history, local politics and local services. For example, the changes in the national economy are studied in reference to local demographic changes and weakening services, local mining industry or energy politics and their impact on local economies and environment.

The rural setting does, however, cause many challenges for the teachers. Applying the NCC to local circumstances requires local knowledge and creativity. Local possibilities are limited, and visiting other places is made difficult because of the long distances. The teachers would compare the rural circumstances to the broad possibilities of urban schools:

In a city school you get to visit various places, art exhibitions and sports sites, many places for short distance visits. (RS1/1 teacher)

To be able to offer their rural students a similar range of activities and experiences, the teachers would need collaborators and support from local actors, such as different community enterprises. However, in sparsely populated municipalities, the number of businesses and possible cooperators is limited, and following the objectives of the NCC and offering students similar possibilities seem difficult. This, combined with a remote location, makes it even more problematic to fulfil the objectives of the NCC: distances to theaters, concert halls, sports arenas and educational establishments are long, and visits require extra resources. If a teacher wants to take their class to visit an art exhibition, organizing transportation and other practicalities can be expensive and take a lot of effort.

Conclusions

In this study, we set out investigating how local curricula are developed in rural municipalities. We found that developing and implementing local curricula in reference to the NCC would challenge rural teachers at different levels. At the steering system and administration levels there seem to be a disconnect between a policy level relating to a predominately urban frame of reference and a more practice-oriented local level based in rural viewpoints. For many of the teachers in this study, the phrases in the NCC are perceived as “fine words with no connection to actual teaching”. The NCC is developed mostly in reference to urban schools and to the possibilities offered in urban locations. These features of the NCC process tend to be repeated when local curricula are developed. In our study, the incompatibility of macro level steering documents and micro level practices was obvious in the way principals and teachers talked about their work. The two groups had different approaches to and viewpoints on developing and implementing local curricula, as their responsibilities for these processes were also different. The principals approached the developing processes as team leaders and municipal education officials. They would stress the administrative and municipal decision-making process, and talked about their work at a meta level, emphasizing the administrative processes and responsibilities. Teachers’ attention, on the other hand, would be directed towards the concrete teaching that was part of their job and towards the process of preparing the classes in reference to the NCC.

When it comes to developing and implementing local curricula, the teachers in the study talked about this as their own responsibility. Again, the teachers would emphasize the planning and implementation of the concrete teaching, instead of general definitions of national and regional policies. The NCC is supposed to enable teachers to develop their pedagogy and deepen their commitment to it. As pointed out by the International Bureau of Education (2013), the NCC has the potential of influencing teachers’ views on knowledge, learning, and education in a more progressive direction, but this change is not always reflected in the same way in actual teaching practices at individual schools. When we looked at the challenges of using local contents in teaching, we found that the rural teachers need to balance and prioritize, which makes the gap between meta level objectives and local practices very visible. For the teachers, it is clear that teaching the students the basic contents of their subject is vitally important. At the same time, the matters emphasized in the NCC and in the local curriculum must be integrated into their teaching as well. For some of the teachers, this is experienced as frustrating because they do not really see the point of adding local contents. For these teachers, local curriculum work is perceived as yet another obligation, or even as a burden that takes time away from the basic contents of the subjects they teach.

Our findings are in accordance with Waller and Barrentine’s (2015) findings from a study of whether literacy curriculum and instruction supported rural students in making connections to their rural settings. Their findings suggest that “the curriculum fell short of integrating the community and the world”. For the students, the rural teacher was the source of guidance to make place-based connections, but since the curriculum did not support the teachers enough, they themselves needed to facilitate place-based connections. As shown in our study, teachers’ lack of local

knowledge makes integrating local contents more challenging, and exploring the local possibilities requires active teachers. Many of the interviewees talked about limited local possibilities, especially when it comes to the cultural sector. Looking at rural in reference to the NCC and comparing it to urban sites, the possibilities are in fact sparse. However, it could be possible to find pathways for using local contents by relating to the rural context as a different kind of starting point, instead of viewing it as a pedagogical problem. Creativity and ability to apply curricula in different circumstances are needed, but not sufficient. Primary prerequisites for obtaining such a perspective would be to recognize and appreciate local possibilities and the diversity of different educational environments. Between the lines, the national curriculum puts forward a metrocentric ideal, which small schools in rural areas are unable to reach. In doing this, the NCC implicitly questions the value of the rural.

Teaching should not be a bubble disconnected from the community, one of the teachers stated during an interview (RS2/4). The planning and implementation of local curricula are very much in the hands of individual teachers, which means that teachers' personal history, place of residence, length of teaching career, interests and commitment to the community will affect their commitment to use local contents in their teaching. As stated by among others Beach et al. (2019), place matters. There are differences between rural areas, between the communities and the people residing in them. And there are differences when it comes to how teachers relate to place as a factor in their work as teachers. While some teachers encourage their pupils to leave the rural areas for better educational futures and life opportunities elsewhere, others present the rural communities in more appreciative terms also through curriculum content selections. For the teachers in our study who were most eager to include local contents in their education, getting the students to value their birth place and local environment were put forward as important objectives. These teachers recognized the significance of having roots, and of being familiar with, appreciate and make use of things within their local communities and environments. Knowing where you come from builds students' self-confidence, which in turn is an important base for success in life. Corbett (2010b) claims that there are a number of place-based tensions for rural students: individualization, globalization and other contemporary forces of change that put pressure on students to both perform well in standardized academic assessments while at the same time constructing a unique project of the self. These tensions also involve the teachers. Even though teachers acknowledge the importance of using local contents, in practice developing and implementing local curricula in rural areas is extra work that the education steering system does not do enough to support. The forms of constraints documented in our study can be considered examples of what Priestley and Drew (2017) describe as severe threats posed against teachers' when it comes to their opportunities to exert the agency necessary to engage in processes connected to including local contents. When the contextual premises are not present, lack of agency can materialize as resistance to change among teachers and local educators, which can hinder implementation.

The findings from our study show that rural spaces provide certain challenges when it comes to education that are less prevalent in more urban spaces and that teachers are not sufficiently prepared for work in rural areas. Therefore, there is a need for an increased *rural* focus in teacher education. However, a focus on a spatially just education system is relevant not only when it comes to a rural-urban divide. Since the municipalities in Finland have gained more independence as education providers during the last decades and local curricula have become more important in the education steering system, this calls for an increased focus on contextual variations in general, as urban spaces are no more homogenous than rural spaces. In Finland, highly educated and competent teachers are seen as a means to ensure a spatially just education system, but teacher education has very little focus on the spatial variation that teachers will face in their profession. White and Kline (2012) state that it is not enough that teachers are school ready, they also should be community ready, and based on our study an increased focus on this issue in teacher education seem to be called for. Also, there seem to be a need for an increased focus in teacher training on how place can be taken into account in their teaching. To create schools that are better suited for local conditions, the teachers who are doing the actual work in this regard need to be given the chance to become place-conscious teachers.

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