

Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector – FINNUT

RUR-ED Spatial Inequalities and Spatial Justice in Education

The RUR-ED project raises the question of the causes behind systematic variations in academic performance between students residing in rural versus urban areas. The project also opens up for a discussion of how we can ensure a spatially just education system.

Goal

The research project focuses on how space impacts educational inequalities. The overall objective of the project is to investigate whether there is a disconnect between the processes and practices of schooling and rural individuals' social and cultural resources, that can explain differences in learning outcomes between rural and urban students.

The overall objective will be reached through the following:

- 1) Investigate how space is taken into consideration in national and regional educational policy and in practices in schools.
- 2) Investigate whether teachers in rural contexts have other work experiences from teachers in urban contexts that affect the learning environments of students.
- 3) Investigate whether a disconnect between the cultural resources of rural students and families and the social practices of schools is a cause of spatial inequalities in education.

Background

The main rationale for focusing on spatial inequalities in education in rural areas is that educational outcomes of students residing in rural areas are lower than for students residing elsewhere, which creates uneven opportunities for individuals depending on where they live. There are for example regional differences in 5th and 8th graders' test scores on standardized national tests in mathematics, reading and English. Also, regional differences in educational attainment in upper secondary education have been well documented, both when it comes to attainments and throughput.

Previous knowledge

Spatial differences in academic performance have been attributed to several factors in previous research. Researchers have pointed out geographical differences in governance and management in the educational sector, school characteristics and school staffing profiles, and access to educational institutions and travel distances. Also, some researchers have focused on rural students' school experiences and shown that rural students possess other forms of cultural and social capital from that valued by school.

Education research in itself causes a challenge for the area of rural education. There is a strong urban bias in education research and a corresponding lack of studies explicitly focusing on rural schools and rural education. Lack of contextualization is another short-

coming in education research, even in studies focusing explicitly on rural education. There is therefore a need for studies that have education in rural settings as the starting point of investigation, and that also are designed in such a way that enables comparisons between rural and urban places.

In this project, we turn our attention to an under-investigated intake to spatial inequalities in education, namely the influence of social and cultural processes taking place in rural contexts and their effect on academic outcomes.

Research questions and methods

In order to address spatial inequalities in education, we will investigate three main research questions. Firstly, we will explore how space is taken into consideration in national and regional educational policy and in practices in schools. Secondly, we will explore whether teachers in rural contexts have other work experiences from teachers in urban contexts that affect the learning environments of students. Thirdly, we will explore if a disconnect between the cultural resources of rural students and families and the social practices of schools is a cause of spatial inequalities in education.

The project will be carried out in Norway, Finland and Canada. The rationale for this is that the question of spatial differences in education is highly relevant in all these countries, and they represent different angles from which it is interesting to compare the Norwegian case, which has the analytic primacy in the study. Thus, we will be utilising a causal comparative design with between-country and within-country variations, based on a multiple case study design employing multiple research methods. Through these studies we will identify variables worthy of experimental investigation through developing and testing research based innovations. Sociological case studies including observation, qualitative interviews and surveys in selected places will be carried out.

Relevance to society

This project will contribute to ensuring a spatially just education system based on knowledge about the interconnections between social practices of schools and rural students' social and cultural resources.

The RUR-ED project is managed by UiT The Arctic University of Norway, with collaboration partners from University of Oulu, Finland, Acadia University, Canada, and University of Tasmania, Australia.

Web page: <http://site.uit.no/rured/>

Project manager: Professor Unn-Doris Karlsen Bæck, Department of Education, UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Contact: +47 92468024/unn-doris.k.back@uit.no

About the programme

The *Programme for Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector – FINNUT*, is a ten-year research initiative on education. The programme finances research projects on themes linked to ECEC, primary and secondary school, upper secondary education and training, higher education and adult skills. The main goal of the programme is to develop new high-quality knowledge that is relevant for policy development, administration, the practice field and the individual, to contribute to renewal of the research field, and to encourage innovation in the educational sector.

For more information go to: www.forskningsradet.no/finnut



Photo: Unn-Doris K. Bæck