School Closures in Rural Finnish Communities

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The network of small rural schools in Finland has been radically weakened since the global recession of the 1990s. This article focuses on the social role of rural schools and the phenomenon of school closures. Our aim is to look at rural schools from the viewpoint of local residents and examine how they experience school closures. We seek to hear the local voice that often remains silent in closure processes. The contributions to rural education research rise from the Finnish context and from the interview data, which incorporate multiple local stakeholder perspectives regarding rural schools and the rural school-community connection. The study uses empirical data collected from interviews with people who have experienced school closures in their villages or municipalities. Social capital is used to understand the role of a school in the community: We study its role as a producer and maintainer of local social capital.

The essential goal of Finnish basic education is to provide all citizens with equal opportunities for education regardless of geographic residence or socioeconomic background. Rural schools (in this article also *village schools*) have formed a meaningful part of this effort to ensure educational equality, providing good basic education possibilities in sparsely populated rural areas. These schools have also been the heart of their villages' social life. However, as in many other countries, in the past several decades, many rural schools have been closed. The closure of small schools is often explained in economic terms: Rural schools are too expensive, and it is cost-effective to transport children

from villages to bigger schools. The pedagogical and social significance and possibilities of small rural schools are largely ignored when authorities close them.

The Finnish education system is widely admired because of Finnish youngsters' success on the international Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is arranged by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In the PISA results, the gap between low- and high-performing students is examined; the gap in Finland is narrower than in other OECD countries on average (Välijärvi et al., 2007). The 40-year-old Finnish comprehensive school system is a significant contributor to these results.

In this article, a small school is defined as a school with fewer than 50 students.[1] Usually, small schools are and located in rural areas and function as primary schools that enroll children aged 7 to 12 in grades 1 to 6, but they often include a preschool. Typically, two or three teachers teach different grades in the same classroom, which is called multigrade or multiage teaching. A comprehensive school is defined as a school with grades 1 through 9, divided into

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[1] Statistics Finland defines a small school as belonging to one of three categories based on the number of pupils attending: fewer than 20 pupils, fewer than 50 pupils, or fewer than 100 pupils (Tilastokeskus, 1991).

a primary school with grades 1 to 6 and a secondary school with grades 7 to 9.

In Finland, this structure has been the same for all children during their first nine years of school since the beginning of the 1970s, when the comprehensive school system was reformed. According to the Official Statistics of Finland, however, in the last two decades, 65% of small Finnish comprehensive schools have been closed (see Figure 1). From 1990 to 2010, 2,117 comprehensive schools closed in Finland.[2] The number of rural closures has remained consistently high since 1992. Although schools have been closed in outlying regions, new schools have been built in population centers.

In this article, we discuss the phenomenon of school closures and the social role of village schools as experienced by local residents in the Finnish context. Decisions regarding rural school closures are made without any formal or substantive input from members of the affected communities. Our article attempts to shed light on the local people's perspective. Rural schools are often analyzed on a meso level, examining the relationship between the school and the local community, or on a micro level, examining teaching and learning in a small class or the teacher's experiences (Fend, 2008). We pay attention to the voices of residents of rural villages, but also discuss the conditions that have caused a significant rise in school closures in Finland, as well as in other European countries.

To these ends, we formulated the following research questions.

1. What is the value and meaning of a small, rural school from the local residents' point of view?

2. How do local residents experience the school closure process?

To answer these questions, we collected empirical data from interviews with people who have experienced school closures in their villages or municipalities. We analyzed the data using the concept of *social capital* from two different angles: the role of the school as a producer and maintainer of local social capital and the role of local social capital in preventing school closure.

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[2] A quick look at Figure 1 makes this number seem inaccurate. However, one has to bear in mind that although schools have been closed in the countryside, new schools have been opened in population centers.

Literature Review

The *International Journal of Educational Research* published a theme issue on rural schools in 2009 that included reviews of research into rural schools and their communities in Norway (Kvalsund, 2009), Sweden (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009), Finland (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009), England (Hargreaves, 2009), and Scotland (Dowling, 2009). The issue focused on the status and nature of educational research on rural schools and their community relationships, as well as the quality of the research in this field. The authors' conclusions indicated a need for research studies in every country that more fully incorporate the perspectives of students and other local stakeholders. This approach requires greater use of the local voice, the life-world perspective, longitudinal and comparative studies, and multiple purposively sampled case studies (Kvalsund & Hargreaves, 2009).

Egelund and Laustsen (2006), studying Danish school closures in the 1990s, regarded school closings as a sign, rather than a cause, of the death of local communities. The main problem with community decline, the scholars contended, was a lack of people and the resulting lack of human capital. Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, and Witten (2009) studied the effects of proposed school closures on rural communities in New Zealand and concluded that neither the centrality of schools to their communities nor the consequences of a school closure on communal well-being are considered when a school closure is threatened. Kučerová and Kučera (2012) studied the effects of elementary school closures on local rural communities in the Czech Republic. According to that study, the effects of elementary school closures on the daily life of local communities in the Czech Republic were no different from those in Western European countries, but the "unique characteristics of the totalitarian regime previous to 1989 manifest themselves more dramatically in the manner in which closures were carried out and thus in the perceptions of their consequences" (Kučerová & Kučera, 2012, p. 13).

Research into village schools in Finland has been meager, and most was conducted more than a decade ago. Kalaoja studied the pedagogy of small schools (1988a, 1990a) and the relationship between schools and local communities (1988b, 1990b). Korpinen (2007, 2010) has conducted studies on the atmosphere and well-being of small schools and explored parents' relationships with village schools. Several dissertations in the 2000s examined the pedagogy of small schools (Karlberg-Granlund, 2009; Kilpeläinen, 2010; Peltonen, 2002). Responding to the
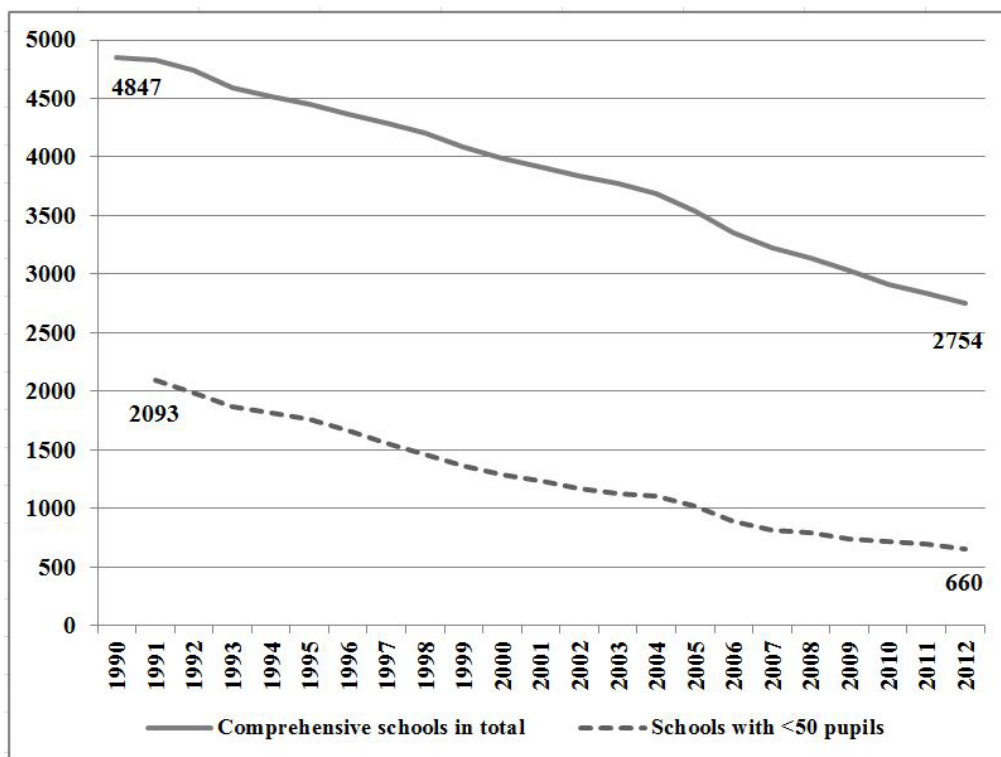
Figure 1. Comprehensive schools in Finland from 1990 to 2012 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, & 2013; Tilastokeskus, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, & 2006).

continuing trend of annual school closures and a lack of recent research, we aim to clarify the current social role of small rural schools.

Finnish Rural Schools in the Historical and Political Context

Finland is one of the most rural countries in Europe.[3] In 2010, the average population density in Finland was only 17.6 inhabitants per square kilometer, and the most sparsely inhabited region was Lapland, with two inhabitants per square kilometer on average. Settlement in Finland is centralized in southern Finland and in the largest urban areas (Halonen, 2013).

The national education administration is organized at two levels. The Ministry of Education and Culture is

responsible for education policy. The Ministry decides on the aims and core content of instruction in different subjects, codifying them in a national core curriculum, which education providers and schools use as the basis for their curricula. The Finnish National Board of 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, providers are the main actors in the education sector. Local authorities provide education for preprimary and compulsory school-age children living in their areas, and the government shares the cost by granting statutory government transfers to them. In most cases, education is provided by municipalities, and many matters are decided by the providers themselves—such as decisions on allocation of funding, local curricula, and personnel recruitment.

Basic education is composed of 9 years of mandatory comprehensive school preceded by 1 year of optional preprimary education. The first 6 years of basic education, grades 1 to 6 (starting at age 7), are called primary education; the last 3 years of basic education, grades 7 to 9, are called lower secondary education. Basic education, as well as

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[3] According to the 2010 Statistical Yearbook of European Countries, 41.2% of the approximately 5.4 million Finnish residents live in rural areas, and 99.4% of Finland's 338,100 square kilometers is rural. The yearbook classifies rural population density as being fewer than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer (Eurostat, 2010).

general upper secondary education,[4] are provided free of charge.

Rural schools have had an important role in Finnish education. The goal of a school in every village was set after the district division decree of 1898. According to the decree, provinces were to divide regions into school districts so that no student had to travel more than 5 km to attend school. The number of schools in Finland increased, and soon almost every village had its own school (Varjo, 2011). After the compulsory education law of 1921, the need for schools increased further. The Finnish state had just become independent in 1917, and an important part of the emergent state policy was the land settlement policy, according to which state land was given to people who did not own land (Moisio & Vasanen, 2008). A consequence of this policy was that more Finnish citizens were able to remain in rural areas because they came to own farmland, rather than rent it, as they had in the past. After World War II, the school-age population was large, and transportation routes and methods were still rudimentary. In the 1950s, settlements spread all over the parishes (now called municipalities), reaching the northeast parts of Finland. Many new schools were needed, and unprecedented growth in the number of village schools began (Kuikka, 1996). The number of schools continued to increase until the mid-1950s.

The regional development of the Finnish state after World War II, the period of the "decentralised welfare state" (Moisio & Vasanen, 2008, pp. 25-26), lasted until the late 1980s. The state's perceived social responsibility extended to the entire country, and social unification was considered necessary to retain independence. Nonetheless, small schools began closing in the late 1960s, due to declining birth rates—the baby boomers already had basic education—and structural changes in the countryside, including increasing out-migration and advances in rural infrastructure. Small rural school closures increased significantly, not only in Finland but also in other Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom. Large, powerfully resourced, single-grade schools were favored, and the goal was to transport children from small villages to these big schools (Sigsworth & Solstad, 2005).

In Finland, the position of small rural schools improved at the end of the 1970s when the current comprehensive school system was founded and educational equality was meant to ensure equal educational opportunities for all citizens (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). The national political situation in the 1980s resulted in the redefinition of the core of Finnish education policy in 1987, however. Instead of equal opportunities for education regardless of residence and socioeconomic background, "equality meant the right

of every pupil to receive education that corresponded to his or her prerequisites and expectations" (Simola, Rinne, Varjo, Pitkänen, & Kauko, 2009, p. 166). Economic growth in the 1980s allowed the Finnish state to maintain the network of small schools for a considerable period by adjusting exceptionally low pupil minimums according to how much government aid was received. The state subsidy can be interpreted as sociopolitical support to preserve small schools.

The early 1990s witnessed the collapse of the Eastern European economies, which contributed to a severe recession in many countries in Western Europe. Finland's depression in the early 1990s was mainly caused by the collapse of its major trading partner, the Soviet Union, and the sharp rise in European interest rates. Finland's real GDP dropped by about 14% from its peak in 1990 to 1993. By 1994, unemployment had reached nearly 20%, up from 3% just 4 years earlier (Honkapohja & Koskela, 2001).

A new wave of school closures began during the recession of the 1990s as part of strict municipal money-saving policies that continue to be enforced today. School closures have been mostly explained and justified along economic lines ever since. In a political environment favoring institutional decentralization, more decision-making power was transferred to municipalities. The Finnish state ended additional funding for small schools in 2006, which led in turn to municipalities' closing local schools to solve financial problems. The effects were visible in the 2006 figures for school closures: A record 186 schools were reported closed (Official Statistics of Finland, 2007).

A legislative change ratified in the beginning of 2010 led to an increase in independent municipal decision making about education. Previously, the state had allocated separate compensation for the upkeep of small schools, but the funding provided by the state to municipalities was no longer earmarked. The state currently pays municipalities for operating costs resulting from organizing educational services according to legally defined bases for calculation. If a municipality organizes elementary education services more cheaply than the base unit price, the state funding that the municipality receives does not decrease. If the educational costs exceed the level designated by the base unit price, however, the municipality must cover all extra costs. In the current situation of extended worldwide economic stagnation, closing a small school and centralizing students in larger units may be justified as a significant money-saving opportunity for municipalities.

Social Capital and Power Relations as a Theoretical Frame

This study uses *social capital* to understand the role of a school in the community. Social capital refers to the

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[4] General upper secondary education is optional. It lasts 1 to 3 years and consists of general education and vocational education and training leading to a qualification.

relationship between the individual and the community and the characteristics of formal and informal social networks. Putnam (1995) defined social capital as features of social life that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. The term refers to social connections and the attendant norms of reciprocity and generalized trust. A current common definition of social capital, strongly influenced by Putnam, is the networks, trust, norms, and values that help individuals and groups achieve mutual goals (Aldridge, Halpern, & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Dhillon, 2009).

Social capital resides in the interrelations of people, as Bourdieu (1986) wrote, and is based on mutual acquaintance and recognition. Bourdieu's concept of social capital, developed in the 1970s and early 1980s, was connected to his theoretical ideas on class. Bourdieu's definition of social capital emphasizes conflicts and power relations—social relations that increase the ability of an actor to advance his or her interests. From the Bourdieuian perspective, social capital becomes a resource in struggles in different social arenas or fields (Siisiäinen, 2000).

Different dimensions of social capital can be distinguished: Woolcock and Narayan (2000) separated two dimensions of social capital at the community level. *Bonds* are strong, intracommunity ties between similar people, and *bridges* are weaker, extracommunity networks in which the focus is on external relations. In addition to bonding and bridging social capital, Aldridge et al. (2009) described a third type: *linking* social capital, found for example, between different social classes. We see linking social capital as very similar to bridging social capital: Both are described as vertical between groups and communities. Vertically oriented, bridging social capital links the relationships between different levels of society, whereas bonding social capital is horizontal, between equal members of the group.

In our analysis of school closures, we rely on Harpman, Grant, and Thomas's (2002) view of the bonding and bridging construct as it sheds light on political contexts: the role of government and the state within social capital. The division of social capital into bonding and bridging types also illustrates the importance of balancing the components. Vertical social capital connects communities to local governments or other groups with resources, networks, and trust and enables improvements in community well-being, whereas horizontal links to similar groups or individuals bring about support, information, and other benefits.

Finnish sociologist Martti Siisiäinen (2000) found in the literature two interpretations of social capital. Social capital can be seen either as a collective resource increasing the "firmness and fluency" of a community (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993) or as the capacity or resources of an individual (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Despite the differences, consensus is growing that social capital stands for actors' ability to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other structures (Portes, 1998). We use social capital from individual and collective perspectives to understand the role of a school in a community. We do not see the two perspectives as excluding one another but as interrelated. According to our definition, social capital supports the achievement of individual goals and the functionality and democracy of society as a whole, which is also profitable for individuals. Social capital motives and actions take place at the individual level. Thus, we do not see social capital as just a feature of a group, but rather as a collection of interactions between group members.

When analyzing the data through the framework of social capital, we maintained a broad perspective of social capital as an individual and collective resource. Moreover, social capital is a process that expands and contracts over time. It is dynamic and is certainly not automatically bestowed on small schools by virtue of their size and location within small communities (Anderson & White, 2011). We studied social capital from two different angles: school as a producer and maintainer of local social capital and the benefits and role of local social capital in preventing school closures.

This approach brought out questions about the substance and function of the concept of social capital. Specifically, we considered Woolcock's (1998) notions about the problems of distinguishing between the sources of social capital and the benefits derived from them. Woolcock (1998) has systematically analyzed the concept of social capital and suggests that there are different types, levels, or dimensions of social capital; different performance outcomes associated with different combinations of these dimensions; and different sets of conditions that support or weaken favorable combinations. Unraveling and resolving these issues requires a more dynamic than static understanding of social capital.

The relevance of social capital in a study that deals with school closures is inevitably linked to power. The school closure process includes formal communication (e.g., public hearings) between municipal officials and members of the community, but too often participatory processes are used only to legitimize a closure decision that has already been made. What role does local social capital play in these processes? We adopt Foucault's (1982) ideas of power relations residing in every social relationship: Power is the way in which certain actions modify others. Power relations are contained throughout social networks. Everyone practices power and is the target of it. Power relations are everywhere but are more intense in some places than others. The primary function of power relations is producing social, cultural, and subjective reality. Power produces the reality before it subordinates. However, the effects of power are

not always negative, and power is not only repressive (Foucault, 1982).

Power exists when it is put into action—as in the decision process for school closures. A power relationship can be articulated only based on two elements: that "the other"—the one over whom power is exercised, such as the resident of a rural community whose school is to be closed—be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts, and that, faced with a power relationship, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. Freedom refers to the subject (an individual or a group) who is faced with a field of opportunities in which many ways of reacting and behaving are possible. The subject determines his actions, but at the same time, his actions are directed by the social norms, guides, and ethical rules of the community (Foucault, 1982).

Data Collection and Analysis

The Context of the Study

Interviews were conducted in 2009 as part of a project to restore the River Ii in northern Finland (Figure 2). The River Ii flows through the municipalities of Ii, Yli-Ii,

Pudasjärvi, and Taivalkoski, which total 25,000 inhabitants, a population that has decreased in recent decades. An exceptionally fast change in the economic and social structures in Finnish society started in the 1950s and ended by the mid-1970s. "The Great Migration" was a period of rapid urbanization; people migrated from the north and east to the south, especially to the Helsinki metropolitan area. Hundreds of thousands of people also immigrated to Sweden (Kortteinen, 1982; Myllyntaus, 1992).

As in many other Finnish regions, the livelihoods of local residents in our research area began changing in the 1960s, when, with modernization, farming and forestry became less important, and the service sector, construction, and transport became increasingly significant. Baby boomers reached working age during the period of occupational and economic structural changes. Agriculture and forestry no longer offered employment. All four municipalities reached their highest population figures in the 1960s, before a rapid population decline, mainly due to migration losses, occurred.

The present population is located primarily in the population centers. The remainder is scattered mainly along the riverfront. Population density is low, ranging from 1.5 inhabitants per square km (Pudasjärvi) to 6.2 inhabitants per square km (Ii) (Halonen, 2013; Local Finland, 2013).
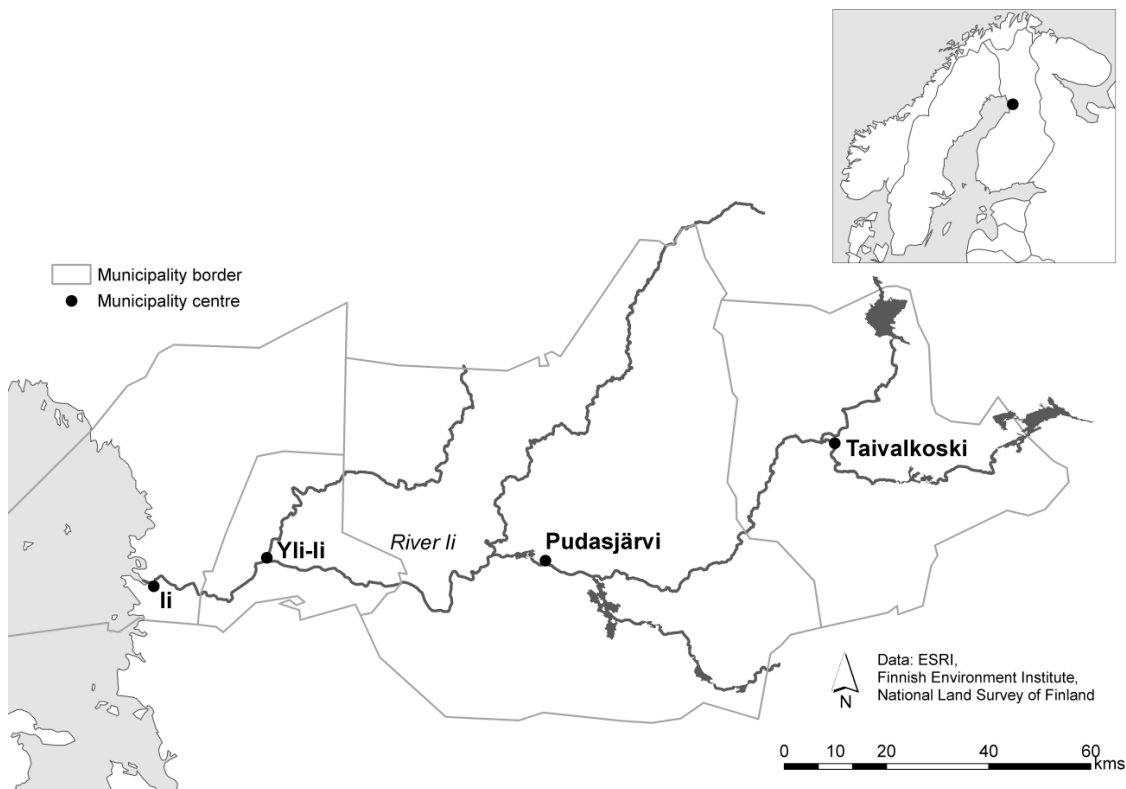

Figure 2. Municipalities of Ii, Yli-Ii, Pudasjärvi, and Taivalkoski.

Unemployment, migration, and gradually weakening services are the biggest challenges currently facing the four municipalities. All four municipalities have experienced school closures, with most of the closed schools being small village schools. According to the Official Statistics of Finland, in 1991, Finland had 2,084 small comprehensive schools; in 2010, only 722 existed. When remote regions are examined separately, these numbers appear even more severe. For example, small schools have been closed with increasing rapidity in the province of Oulu, where the four municipalities in this study are: Only a quarter of the schools open in 1991 remain.

The interview data used in this study are part of a wider Social Impact Assessment (SIA) completed for the river restoration project Migratory Fish Return to the River Ii (Karjalainen, Rytkönen, Marttunen, Mäki-Petäys, & Autti, 2011; see also Erkinaro et al., 2011). Twenty-three chairs of volunteer village associations were selected for the assessment, based on the location of their home villages. Ten of the interviewees were women; 13 were men. Volunteer village association chairs were purposefully selected as key informants (Creswell, 2007) for this project because of their knowledge of and involvement in their local communities. We expected that these chairs would be active villagers with a high level of knowledge of their village and municipality, based on their use, observation, and experience of the local environment. As villagers, the chairs shed light on the local residents' points of view, which differ from the perspective of teachers or municipal officials living elsewhere. Chairs of village associations were also ideal informants according to our theoretical framework. We viewed volunteer village associations as embodiments of social capital—organizations that try to improve the quality of life of local residents.

Interviews varied from 30 to 90 minutes in length. The interview questions were based on the citizen values assessment (CVA) method (Stolp, Groen, van Vliet, & Vanclay, 2002). The CVA, developed in the Netherlands, assesses citizens' judgments of the qualities of a living environment and considers how developments may affect environmental qualities from the perspective of those who live in the area. The CVA can be used in environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedures, integrating a social impact assessment with an EIA. Central to the CVA is the difference that an intended activity will make in the living environment of people potentially affected by the project. The CVA offers an overview of what the environment means to all potentially affected citizens (Stolp et al., 2002).

Methods

Empirical data were collected from people who had experienced school closures in their municipalities. Using the CVA, the first author asked the interviewees to discuss their environment, their usual activities, any changes they had experienced in their village, and the strengths and weaknesses of their environment. What made the person feel rooted in the area? Why did the resident choose to live in the area? How did he or she use the area? What changes had the local resident observed in the living environment recently?

These questions led to much discussion about schools. Since the theme of school closures came up repeatedly during interviews on the informants' own initiative, we realized the importance of the theme and decided to explore the data further. The municipalities along the River Ii have closed many schools in recent years; Pudasjärvi alone closed six schools in 2009. The interviewees quoted in this study were well aware of the school closures because volunteer village associations are in close contact with village schools. Of the 23 villagers interviewed for this study, 11 still had a school in their village at the time of the interviews, and 12 lived in villages that had experienced school closures. We observed the different experiences of the local school's role in the village in these two groups. Of those who had a school in their village, three mentioned school closures either in the context of the threat of school closure or in the context of enrollment in their school by pupils from closed schools. The eight villagers who did not mention closures had thriving schools in their villages. We attempted to find differences in the meanings of a village school between villages and to discover what happened after a school had been closed.

The interviews were recorded on digital recorders and transcribed, and the analysis was based on content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). NVivo (software that supports qualitative and mixed-methods research) was used to categorize the data under different themes and subthemes (Bazeley, 2007). Data concerning the theme (change in) school were analyzed further using content analysis and were ultimately divided into three subcategories: (a) the village school as a place for common meetings and activities, (b) a living school as a sign of a living village, and (c) the powerlessness of local residents (facing school closure). We formulated these subcategories based on the content of the interviews and reflected the subcategories in our research questions. In what context does the interviewee mention a local school? What activities mentioned relate to a local school? How does the interviewee describe the role of a local school in his or her living environment and in the community? How does the interviewee describe the school closure process?

The data placed in the subcategories were also analyzed through the framework of social capital. We examined the data, tracing social capital motives, interests, investments, outcomes, and social activity as components of the concept. We then compared the villages and identified them as either weak or strong in terms of social capital (Granovetter, 1973). We defined the characteristics of weak social capital as a

low level of social activity in the village and a reluctance to contribute to issues concerning the whole village. In villages with strong social capital, social life was vital. Furthermore, people were involved with volunteer work and associations. Based on the narratives of village association chairs, the studied villages were readily placed into these two categories. We attempted to find differences in methods of coping with school closure between villages and to discover what happened after a school had been closed.

The data concerning the theme of "school" were analyzed also by using narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008). We found that these separate parts of interviews concerning the theme of school were like episodes or small stories, "stories of closing schools" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; see also Hyry-Beihammer & Autti, 2013). They were personal stories that people told about their lives. The stories were also temporal; events in the stories were temporally ordered with a beginning, a middle, and an end, starting usually when the school was closed and then integrating the closure of the school in the speaker's own life situation and experiences. In the middle part of the story, the decision process was discussed, and in the end, the decision was estimated and justified, and/or the future of the village and villagers was explored. Narratives[5] are not just personal stories; they are also collective. That is, they are always narrated in a particular cultural, social, and historical context—they can be understood as so-called larger narratives (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). The stories of closing schools were told in the interviews between the chairs and the interviewer but more generally represent the social structure and power as they operate within the transaction, within the process of school closure (see Ewick & Silbey, 2003). The narrative analysis was especially suitable for answering the research question concerning local residents' experiences of the school closure process.

Findings

Village Schools Bring Local People Together

Rural schools are the heart of villages—a straightforward answer to our first research question. According to our data, Finnish village schools are places for community meetings and activities. In addition to teaching, a village school often hosts various festivities, particularly at harvest time and Christmas, and religious congregations often arrange services there. The activities involve the entire community. A school is central in the reproduction of the surrounding community; the school brings local people together to build and maintain social capital. As an interviewee (Riitta)[6] observed:

> Well, there was always a spring party at the school. You went to that if you had children at school or not. All the grandpas and grandmas were dragged there. It belonged ... in a way it was sort of the entire village's.

Riitta's words are a sign of the strong social capital that prevailed earlier within the community. The village school was perceived as common ground, irrespective of whether one had children attending the school. The school also brought together different generations. As argued by Kearns et al. (2009), rural schools are well placed to become a focus for community interaction and identity because of the common needs and life-stage experiences of parents with young children, the existing social ties between neighbors, intergenerational connections, and the schools' location in rural areas in which schools are literally and symbolically central places. Basu (2004) similarly described the significance of city schools: They are focal points of community life and provide a common space for neighborhood interaction. Basu saw schools as centers for democratic activity; they are essentially political and can often be the battleground for social change.

Later in the interview, Riitta described the present situation within her community. The school closure had weakened its bonding social capital: "The activities [village community activities] are quite small in scope now, particularly since the school has been sold away from the village. There's no longer a place for activities." This closure negatively affected the community's social capital.

The School Building as a Place for Common Activities

Maintaining strong social capital requires social contacts, and closing a school decreases opportunities to interact with other members of the community, thus weakening social capital. We understand a community with strong, bonding social capital as having an active social life and many shared activities. Weak social capital refers to a community that has little social interaction and few common activities and in which the public good is not seen as worth striving for. Coleman (1988) demonstrated the effect of social capital in the family and the community in forming human capital and stressed the public good. An individual actor who generates social capital typically captures only a small part of its benefits. One informant (Eeva) described social capital investments and motives in one sentence. The

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[5] The important concepts in narrative inquiry are story and narrative. In the study of literature, story is defined as a subconcept of narrative (see, e.g., Riessman, 2008). In this research, the terms are used synonymously.

[6] We use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the interviewees.

motive was to keep the school as the residents' place, and they invested in social capital by doing volunteer work.

> We want to buy it so we can keep it, because we've done so much for the school environment. Villagers have given their own land; there are sports grounds and everything, so we'd like to keep it. We won't have any other place here otherwise.

Kearns et al. (2009) described a reciprocal arrangement in which the community supports the school, and the activities organized through the school support the community. Local residents contributed time, money, and effort to build their community through the school.

The strength of social capital can change. The threat of closure and the shared aim of keeping a school open activate its community's social capital. When a village school is threatened, people rally together; a common threat brings about common effort. A community with strong social capital more strongly defends the services in the environment. Therefore, social capital influences power relations. Bourdieu's (1986) view of social capital—emphasizing conflicts and the function of power—concentrates on the individual's activity in the community. Social capital increases the ability of an actor to advance his or her interests, but the interests may be shared, such as when the increasing activity of local people under the threat of a school closure is examined.

The school closure in Eeva's home village constituted a threat to a previously high level of social capital. If the local people were to lose their battle to keep their school, communities with strong social capital would be in a better position to find new alternatives and manners of social interaction in their village. Communities that previously had weak social capital may temporarily strengthen that social capital through an effort to keep their school, but if they lose the battle and the school is closed, their social capital will weaken again.

When a school is closed, its social meaning does not disappear. Active villagers with strong bonding social capital in their community may continue to use the school as a location for common activities, such as those described in this quotation from Olavi about a closed school: "Meetings for different associations are held there; parties are held there; and in winter, adults' and children's sports clubs meet at the school. The adult education center uses the facilities as well."

Villagers may develop new ways to use the school to cover its operation costs, as Olavi described:

The activities of the village club are based very much on theatre activities and on coffee and catering for those involved. The municipality owns the school, or the village hall, and the village club is there as a host or, in other words, to take care of the building. The building now has tenants, and rental income is being used to cover activities and costs so that the villagers can keep the school in use. There are many sorts of activities on many evenings during the week.

Volunteer work is as an investment in social capital. In addition, festivities build social capital, facilitate the formation of networks, and increase social cohesion. Vijayendra (2001) studied celebrations as forms of social investment in India and found that by participating in a festival, a family signals its commitment to being an active part of the community, good citizens, and potential partners in mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships. This experience does not seem to be much different in northern Finland. One motive for volunteer work was to keep the school or other services in the village. A volunteer's position in the community might also increase in terms of respect and recognition. The strongest motive emphasized among interviewees was the ability to continue living in their home village.

Our data show four potential uses for a closed school. First, the municipality can keep the school building and pay the operating costs, in which case local residents can use the school building, usually for a small fee. Second, the municipality can sell the building to the village association, which will pay for the operating costs; the purchase price is usually nominal. Third, the new owner may be a private person who buys the school building, settles in, and possibly rents the facilities to local residents. Fourth, a business may buy the school building for storage, in which case the community no longer has access to the premises.

A village school is an important place for shared activities. If the school is closed and sold to outsiders, then villagers cannot use it any longer, and those community connections may be diminished. By purchasing the closed village school and taking care of its maintenance expenditure, the village association is investing in its village's social capital. Villagers may find other ways to meet if they do not have access to a school building, which, for us, is a sign of strong social capital. An interviewee (Liisa) observed:

> The club had been meeting at the school, but the school's closed now. In the autumn, we'll find out if we can still use the school or if we should meet

somewhere else. If there is nowhere else, we'll start going from house to house in the old way.

A Living School is a Sign of a Living Village

The significance of a living school often parallels that of a living village shop. Both are seen as hallmarks of a living village that may tempt new people to move in. As Jaakko described:

It's always a great loss to the village ... the service ... if there's a shop, as there still is, and then when there's a school, a village has certain signs of life. It's said a lot that it doesn't mean death to a village, but if you think of new people who might possibly move there, it has its own significance, what services are available there and how close by. You can't get past that.

When a village shop closes, a living school still creates hope for the future. Mika, describing development plans such as building a new pedestrian river bridge or restoring traditional summer festivals, saw keeping the school as a prerequisite for realizing those plans. A living school or a closed school still used by the villagers is a form of social capital, which encourages new ideas related to investments and innovations. These are forms of economic and human capital, respectively:

You always hope for a positive change, that the school could be kept [describes plans to build a new bridge and arrange summer festivals], but that's hardly going to happen [referring to the plans], particularly if the school is closed. There's no shop; we should at least keep the school.

Several interviewees had returned to their childhood villages after leaving for part of their adulthood. Riitta reported moving to a village because of the advantages of a rural neighborhood. She stated that the best local advantage was the "safe" village school, which she compared to the urban school in her family's former residential area:

Well, when we moved here, my son went to school ... they [all three of her children] went to primary school here [at the village school]. It's been, I think, completely essential. When we lived in the city, in the harbor area there, it really was terrible. Well, you didn't dare put your children in school. Yes, yes, that was the biggest reason we came here. And my husband got work.

The local residents made a connection between a living village school and a positive future. With a school, new families with children move to the village, and if the school is closed, the prerequisites for a vital village, residents, diminishes. The village is no longer seen as a tempting home for families. Jaakko described the spiraling negative effects of closing the school as preventing "the treadmill" from turning:

The starting point is definitely that you need pupils and that a school shouldn't be kept if it has no pupils, but where do the pupils come from? They come from villages that are thriving and attract residents in that way; families with children move in. It's like a treadmill, in a way. If you remove parts of the treadmill, if services are taken away, for instance, the wheel doesn't turn.

Nonetheless, strong social capital can also have negative effects. Despite recent population declines, new residents are moving into rural villages. These individuals are typically returnees, either young families or recently retired couples. For new arrivals with no family or former connections to the village, settling in is difficult. Portes (1998) described the negative consequences of social capital: the exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward leveling norms. In addition, Dhillon (2009) described the dark side to social capital, arguing that the downsides are acknowledged in social capital theory but are less prevalent in policy arenas. In our data, the exclusion of outsiders was evident in many interviews. Paradoxically, the villages need new families to maintain services, but villagers do not want to sell land or houses to outsiders. This attitude keeps the number of school pupils small and weakens the lifeline of the village. By welcoming newcomers, residents would have a better chance of keeping their school. As Helena remarked:

There could be more newcomers, but no plots or houses are for sale. If you have no family in the village, it's not really possible to move in. The villagers like their own properties and their own peace; they don't want to give things up.

According to interviewees, local people have started to see the consequences of such negative attitudes toward outsiders, understanding that new arrivals are needed to retain high standards of services.

Experiences of Powerlessness: The School Closure Process

In our search for answers to our second research question, we noticed that stories about the school closure process differed depending on the situation of the village school—whether it was under the threat of closure but still used, or if it had been closed during the last 2 years, or if it had been closed for several years. Jari's story is an example of the first situation. He described the closing of the village school as a "threat." The villagers' resistance resulted in action, fighting against policymakers and questioning policymakers' justification for closing it, the diminishing number of pupils:

> The closing of the school has been also a threat. There was a severe quarrel with policymakers. The closure was explained based on the lack of pupils but the residents of the village questioned this—and the number of the pupils has increased. On the contrary, soon the school will be too small. The closure of the school would have been really foolish.

Jari's story ended with a win: The school survived and might become too small because of the increased number of students. In this situation, policymakers' desired action was misguided. In Jari's story, the strong agreement of the villagers engaged their strong bonding social capital, which enabled the mobilization of local power to resist extra-local decision making.

In the stories in which the village school had closed in the recent past, the main topic was the inconceivable decision process they had experienced. Villagers had trusted that if the school had enough pupils, power would be on their side during the decision-making process. If the birth rate rose or families with children moved in, the village school was on firmer ground. However, this reasoning no longer fit. The problem was that the grounds for closing schools had changed to emphasize economic reasons and the municipality's ability to save money; the number of pupils was no longer central. This policy was difficult to understand and justify, as two interviewees, Jaakko and Ellen, stated:

> Particularly when our pupil situation developed so that it increased the number of pupils. We were used to the idea that if a school closed, it closed because the number of pupils decreased. Now, it isn't a question of that. (Jaakko)

> Yah, that doesn't mesh if five schools are closed alike in our village in which there has been an increasing period [more children] so it is a little bit difficult to understand. They [families with children] don't move here anymore. This is a harsh fact I can't say it any better. (Ellen)

The threat of closure often resulted in local action. However, by the time the threat became evident, it was often too late for that action to be effective. Typically, municipal decisions to close village schools were reached over only one or two meetings, and villagers' voices were not heard in any meaningful way. Villagers were not given information in time to state their arguments, and the public closure hearings were not interactive. As Jaakko described:

> Over a few meetings, the sort of decisions are reached that have extremely far-reaching impacts on the future; for instance, in our village ... that is to say, with a few blows of the gavel, decisions are made in such a way that no listening really takes place and no opportunities are given to justify other, alternative bases for decision making.

Local residents often did not see opportunities to influence the municipal decisions that close schools. The power to decide, the residents concluded, is elsewhere, and local people have no genuine opportunity to air their opinions and lobby authorities. Local people have experienced that, for example, writing letters to editors of local newspapers, demonstrating, or contacting municipal officials has no true influence. Interviewees took a bystander's position when discussing the school closures. Municipal officials made the decisions, and local residents could only witness the results, as Pekka explained: "Sure, they were making decisions back then ... they calculated that ... now you see it. Haha [laughing], you see it."

In addition to being a chairman of a village association, Pekka was also a school head. Despite this position, he seemed to be an outsider in decision making, and he did not receive adequate information about the closure plans. This lack of communication partly explains why the villagers were surprised by their municipality's school closure plans. Hasty preparation and decision making regarding the closure were to blame. Another complication was the poor flow of information, but local residents still trusted the municipality and state policy.

The roots of this trust began in the period of the decentralized welfare state. Trust is central also because it builds the bonding social capital of the community as a shared value. In extracommunity networks, in this case with municipality officials, trust has no such role. Local residents suddenly realized that their expectations did not fit new municipal policy, and the conflict began. In the conflict, social capital was put into action, but the villagers seemed

powerless in the face of bureaucracy, the lack of democracy, and the hasty decision making. In such decision processes, people felt powerless, which affected their views of future. Jaakko exemplified this perspective when the interviewer asked him about changes in the future:

> The interviewer: What about the changes in the future?
>
> Jaakko: So what could one suppose? Well, it's a good question, just these decisions seem to be such, although basically I am an optimist and I wouldn't like to look negatively into the future and paint threatening future visions, I must say I have been worried about this type of decision making, for example. It is so near the whole shebang of school closures. The decisions that have extreme effects on the future are rammed through and even in such a way that one doesn't really hear and give any possibilities to justify other alternatives as the basis on the decision making.

A village school seems taken for granted as long as it is not threatened. The eight villagers who had living schools in their villages did not mention the school at all. Kearns et al. (2009) wrote about the paradox that schools continue to be seen as self-evident elements of social structure until they are under the threat of closure or amalgamation. At such times, schools can become overt objects of and contexts for political contestation. Kalaoja (1988a) contended that the social meaning of the interaction between a small rural school and the surrounding community is particularly valued after the school is closed. In our data, some village associations were founded to save a school under the threat of closure. In most stories in which the school closure was experienced within the last few years, the villagers were still defending their school and trying to keep the school building for their use.

Conclusions and Discussion

We examined school closures in Finland, focusing on the social role of small village schools. The number of school closures has remained high since 1992, and the number of small schools has decreased significantly. Our aim was to examine how local residents experienced their village schools and school closures. The interviews illustrated that local residents were unanimous about the significance of village schools. A safe, small school is fundamental to a pleasant community. The school is more than just a place to educate children; it influences the community's well-being. In addition to building human and cultural capital, schools build and maintain social capital. Schools in rural areas are centers of village social life and have a crucial role in constructing a local identity. For some people, the school is the only site for contact with other local people. Nonetheless, the significance of a village school is often taken as a given, and the school's importance does not become evident until the school is threatened. When we compared informants who still had a school in their village to those who had faced school closures, we found that operating schools were taken for granted. That our relation to a certain place is intricate and inevitable is not something to which we often pay a great deal of attention. The places in which we live are always with us, and usually, they call upon our attention only in unusual circumstances (Malpas, 1999).

Strong local social capital was not beneficial when the community faced the threat of school closure. Top-down (see Woolcock, 1998) decisions for school closures were made quickly; local residents were powerless and felt that they had little influence. Formal municipal procedures and administrative practices discouraged some local residents from participating, and public hearings were considered an illegitimate form of public participation in civic debate and decision making. When a village school was under threat of closure, people rallied together showing bonding social capital, but this approach had no effect on the closure decisions made by municipal officials. In the end, the school closure negatively affected the community's social capital. Closing a school decreased opportunities for interacting with other community members. The change for the community was challenging because a shared site closed its doors (see also Kearns et al., 2009). Without the incentive provided by school events to draw the wider community together, sustaining community life would be more difficult despite people's best efforts. Communities with strong social capital are more able to adapt to change. After the closure, they may find new ideas and new ways to meet and arrange common activities.

In a conflict concerning school closure, social capital enabled the use of the power of networks as a resource for the villagers. If a village had strong bridging social capital, people obtained more information and were able to respond more adroitly. However, our data showed that local residents had almost no say in the school closure process. Thus, it made no difference in this sense if the village possessed strong or weak (bonding) social capital. The resistance of local people seldom influenced their municipalities' school closure plans. Shared norms and values were an important factor in creating bonding social capital but had no role in a village's relationship with municipal officials. Bonding social capital showed its strength after the closure; active villagers found new ways to get together, and especially if they had the chance to use the school premises, social activity continued in the village.

Social capital is contextual. A limitation of this study was the restricted data, which gives us a need to gain more diverse information about the villages—and a possibility for future research. In addition to historical, demographic, and geographic information about the villages, field work should include interviews with other groups in the village: parents, teachers, and villagers without school-aged children. These groups were represented in this study, but they were engaged as informants in the role of the chair of a village association. Are people linked in more than one context? A closer or wider look at the villages and their differences would shed light on what makes them strong or weak in terms of social capital. The villages studied were very homogeneous.

Closing a village school accelerates the withering of life in the surrounding countryside, reduces the "immigration attraction" of the village, potentially increases emigration, and leads to a downward spiral in which the remaining services in the village are terminated. Thus, we need a better understanding of the significance of village schools for their communities, especially if we want to support living conditions in Finnish rural areas and preserve the school network in a functional state, with reasonable travel distance to schools. This understanding presupposes hearing the voice of local residents and appreciating their local knowledge, which may be different from the decision-makers' knowledge. We need to obtain more knowledge of how a school closure may cause the beginning of a downward spiral for the whole area and its infrastructure, including shops, churches, and public transportation (Meusburger, 2009). This study also suggests that local communities should recognize the value of their school in producing and maintaining social capital. Connections between schools and their surrounding communities should be continually upheld and strengthened in both directions.

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