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Education in place: Rural schools between local realities and Global horizons

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to synthesise and advance current knowledge on the conditions and challenges of rural education in contemporary Sweden, with particular attention to how processes of digitalisation and globalisation shape educational practices and possibilities in rural communities. Drawing on qualitative data material, the study shows how place functions as an active force shaping educational opportunities: organisational closeness creates cohesion but also dependence, social embeddedness provides continuity yet limits aspirations, and geographical distance both constrains and stimulates innovation. Digitalisation appears as a pragmatic tool, a generational condition, and a structural response to isolation, offering new opportunities but also reinforcing inequalities when infrastructures fail. Culture is revealed as contested, oscillating between municipal strategies of high culture and families' everyday practices that shape children's belonging and place-based forms of belonging and recognition (Massey, 1994, 2017). Structural inequalities – of resources, geography, and technology – emerge as decisive conditions rather than temporary barriers. Using Massey's relational notion of place, including her concepts of power-geometry and spatial divisions of labour (Massey, 1994), the study concludes that rural schools must be understood as situated arenas where local and global processes intersect.

1. Introduction

This article contributes to the ongoing body of research on rural education during a period of significant economic and social transformation (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021; Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Kos et al., 2023; Pristed Nielsen, 2022). More specifically, the aim of this article is to synthesise and advance current knowledge on the conditions and challenges of rural education in contemporary Sweden, with particular attention to how processes of digitalisation and globalisation shape educational practices and possibilities in rural communities. The study constitutes an *analytical synthesis* of a larger research project conducted between the spring of 2022 and June 2025, which involved three research sites and aimed to advance the field of rural studies by addressing a research gap concerning educational endeavours in rural communities.

In our previous research we have analysed the three different communities and the particular schools there in separate studies (Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025a; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025b; Erlandson et al, 2025). This article, however, is a synthetisation of the most urgent topics from these studies on small rural communities and the educational endeavours within them. Bringing these studies into a shared analytical frame requires acknowledging that the themes addressed here – place, digitalisation, culture, and structural equity – rarely operate independently in rural schooling.

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Rather, they intersect in ways that shape both everyday practices and the broader conditions under which rural schools work. By considering these themes together, the article seeks to illuminate how spatial conditions, technological developments, local histories, and structural inequalities overlap and inform one another, and how these overlapping forces shape the educational possibilities available in small rural communities.

It is well established that rural communities are far from homogeneous. Furthermore, just as there are significant differences between cities and urban regions, rural areas also vary widely in their social, cultural, economic, and geographical characteristics, as well as in their historical trajectories and material resources. These variations are evident in our research sites as well. Although they are located in the same country and relatively close to one another, they differ, for example, in the forms of local capital generated through tourism, in traditions of entrepreneurship, and in other context-specific features.

At the same time, certain commonalities can be observed across rural schools. For instance, young people in rural areas are less likely to complete a college degree compared to their urban peers (Nelson et al., 2021; Showalter et al., 2017). Furthermore, rural communities – particularly the rural working class – are often portrayed and circulated globally through a dominant metrocentric, middle-class media culture (Massey, 2017; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015, 2018), illustrating how place is constituted within unequal representational and material power-geometries (Massey, 1994).

Research has also noted that rural education policy tends to emphasise deficits – such as low academic performance or restricted future opportunities – rather than recognising and building upon existing strengths, including local knowledge, strong place attachment, and contextually grounded educational practices (Reay et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014). Cuervo and Miranda (2019) warn that such a deficit-oriented discourse risks producing what Massey (1994) refers to as a "discursive fixation" on place as a problem, shaping how rural students and educators perceive themselves and their communities within unequal power-geometries of representation and mobility (Massey, 1994). Nevertheless, rural schools continue to face structural challenges such as small student populations, vast catchment areas, and recruitment difficulties. Despite these realities, rural education policy remains vague or even absent. When rural schools are mentioned in policy documents, it is often within the context of broader national strategies on digitalisation or equity – frameworks that rarely address the specific pedagogical and structural conditions shaping education in these settings, despite the fact that such conditions are inherently spatial and relational (Massey, 1994). This calls for a synthesising analytical effort that highlights contemporary characteristics of rural schools in Sweden as spatially situated institutions shaped through relational place-processes (Massey, 1994, 2017).

Questions of research on education in rural societies have long remained in the shadow of urban educational research in academic contexts. This is notable given that a significant proportion of the world's population continues to live in rural areas (43 percent in 2021, according to Statista 2022). In these communities, the school is often more than a site of knowledge transmission; it functions as a central societal institution and as an arena where local traditions, global influences, and future aspirations intersect (Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025) in ways that illustrate the relational production of place (Massey, 1994). Analysing rural schools therefore becomes a way of understanding broader societal transformations, in which questions of migration, digitalisation, demography, and local development are central.

The last decade has been marked by accelerating globalisation and digitalisation, both of which have altered the conditions for education and social life. Children and young people in rural societies now grow up with constant access to digital tools, and in many cases, digitalisation has become a prerequisite for providing equitable education in small municipalities (Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024; Rosvall et al., 2018). At the same time, research has demonstrated that digitalisation is unevenly distributed: while some schools can use it to bridge geographical distances, others risk falling behind due to limited infrastructure (Rolandi et al., 2021). This duality makes digitalisation one of the most central issues in current research on rural schooling and highlights how technological infrastructures form part of the spatial geometries shaping educational opportunities (Massey, 1994).

Parallel to digitalisation, migration and demographic changes have reshaped many rural communities. The outmigration of young people to cities continues to challenge the long-term survival of rural schools, yet at the same time there is growing immigration of new groups – international migrants as well as urban middle-class families seeking more affordable housing and higher quality of life (Alexander, 2023; Bagley & Hillyard, 2014; Funnell, 2008). These processes transform the social composition of schools and create new tensions and opportunities in the classroom as different trajectories, mobilities, and relational place-positionings intersect (Massey, 1994, 2017).

The education system also plays a central role in shaping children's and young people's future aspirations. As Cuervo and Wyn (2012) note, young people in rural communities often find themselves in a double position: they are formed within local traditions and communities while simultaneously encountering global discourses of success, mobility, and urbanisation (see also Autti & Bæck, 2021). This creates what Corbett (2007) terms the "stay or leave" dilemma, where the school not only transmits knowledge but also contributes to shaping young people's understanding of which life trajectories are possible through the spatial imaginaries and power-geometries that link local life with global horizons (Massey, 1994). In a Swedish context, Kjellsdotter & Erlandson (2024) show that Generation Alpha students in a rural community imagine their futures both through local horizons – staying and contributing to the community – and through global horizons – moving, travelling, and working internationally, illustrating Massey's argument that the local is always constituted through wider relational spatial connections (Massey, 1994, 2017).

This duality – between local rootedness and global orientation – makes rural schools particularly compelling to study. They are simultaneously subject to structural processes that risk marginalising them and hold the potential to act as engines of local development and social cohesion (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Isaksson, 2023). It is here that sociological perspectives on education become central. By analysing how relations of value, recognition, and mobility are shaped within the relational character of place and its organisation through power-geometry (Massey, 1994, 2017), it becomes possible to illuminate the complex conditions that shape education in rural societies.

We argue that rural schools cannot be reduced to marginal deviations from an urban norm, but must be analysed as places where local traditions, global processes, and digital practices intersect. The school in the rural community is simultaneously an educational institution, a social node, and an arena for future aspirations – and it is in this duality that the most central questions for research are articulated:

i. How do the social, cultural, and geographical dimensions of place constitute the opportunities and constraints of education in rural schools?
ii. In what ways are digital tools used to bridge rural distances, and how do they simultaneously reproduce or challenge educational inequalities?
iii. How is culture constructed as a pedagogical, social, and political concept in rural schools, and what consequences does this have for students' identity and social capital?
iv. How do structural conditions – such as resources, infrastructure, and organisational frameworks – interact with the school's compensatory mission and the ambition of educational equity?

The aim of this study is to analyse how education in rural schools is shaped through the interplay between place, digitalisation, culture, and structural conditions. By examining these dimensions in relation to each other, the study highlights how national goals and global policy flows intersect with local life forms and resources, and how this affects the content of teaching, students' future orientations, and the school's role in the local community in ways that reflect the relational production of place (Massey, 1994). In doing so, the study seeks to deepen the understanding of the rural school's complex function as both an educational institution and a social node, and to contribute knowledge that can inform the development of more equitable and place-conscious educational practices.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Doreen Massey's relational understanding of place, developed in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), systematised in *For Space* (2005), and elaborated in *A Place Called Home?* (2017). Massey offers a spatial ontology in which place is not a bounded entity but an open, dynamic constellation of relations. Places emerge from intersecting social, material, economic, and symbolic trajectories, making her framework particularly suitable for analysing rural schooling where local histories and global flows continually meet.

Central to Massey's theory is that place is relational – "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings" (1994). What takes place in rural schools must therefore be understood through the broader networks within which teachers, students, policies, technologies, and resources circulate. Rural schools become nodes where diverse trajectories—migration, labour markets, digital infrastructures, and policy directives – are encountered and negotiated, showing how global processes are lived locally.

A key concept is power-geometry, Massey's term for the unequal positioning of groups and places in relation to mobility, access, and influence. In education, this helps explain how urban centres often dominate definitions of legitimate knowledge and ambition, while rural contexts are assigned subordinate positions. Locally grounded experiences – farming, resource-based work, community life – thus receive limited recognition within educational narratives that privilege mobility and metropolitan norms.

Massey also highlights uneven spatial positioning, referring to the geographically differentiated distribution of opportunities and resources. In rural municipalities, limited labour markets and narrow educational provision shape what futures students can realistically imagine. These inequalities are embedded in broader spatial divisions of labour, through which regions are integrated differently into national and global systems. Access to programmes, cultural experiences, and digital infrastructures is therefore conditioned by geographical location, making some futures feel attainable and others remote.

A central element in Massey's thinking is her emphasis on trajectories – the multiple paths, each with its own temporality, materiality, and history, carried by people, practices, and objects, that meet in particular places. The condition of being brought together in this heterogeneous convergence is what Massey refers to as 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005). Rural schools exemplify this convergence: students bring digital practices, family histories, occupational traditions, and aspirations reaching beyond the local; teachers navigate national mandates; municipalities tie schooling to development strategies; digitalisation inserts global resources into classrooms. These trajectories intersect unevenly, generating both tensions and opportunities.

Digitalisation itself can be understood through Massey's spatial lens. Uneven connectivity, differentiated digital skills, and variable pedagogical uses reflect power-geometry: some students gain extended horizons through digital tools, while others experience exclusion when infrastructures fail. Digital participation thus becomes a spatialised phenomenon shaped by rural schools' relational positioning within technological and policy networks.

Massey also underscores that place is political. Because place is relational and open, it is continuously contested – over which practices gain recognition and which futures appear legitimate. Rural schools become arenas where local traditions, globalised mobility discourses, and national policy frameworks interact, sometimes in tension. Situating rural schooling within Massey's conceptualisation shows that educational practices cannot be separated from the spatial relations in which they unfold.

Massey's relational theory of place offers a framework well aligned with this study's empirical focus. It illuminates how rural schooling is shaped by the interplay of local practices and broader spatial processes, the uneven distribution of resources and recognition across geographies, and the ways students and teachers navigate these layered spatial conditions. Rather than viewing rural schools as marginal, the framework conceptualises them as spatially situated institutions shaped by the relational and political production of place.

1.2. Research Context

The international research field on rural education has expanded substantially in recent decades, though it still remains underrepresented when compared to urban-focused educational research (Beach et al., 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016). A central strand of critique has been directed against what White & Corbett (2014)[1] conceptualises as metrocentrism, where urban experiences are taken as the normative frame for educational research and policy, while rural schools are portrayed as exceptional, problematic, or deficient (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021). Nelson et al. (2021) and Thier et al. (2021) argue that such metrocentric framings reproduce deficit discourses in which issues of teacher supply, resources, and performance dominate, thereby overlooking the strengths, assets, and place-based forms of value and recognition (Massey, 1994, 2017) embedded in rural schools and communities.

Australia has been one of the most important arenas for rural education research, not least because of its geographical vastness and inequalities between rural and urban contexts. Walker-Gibbs and colleagues (2015, 2018) demonstrate how national reforms premised on standardisation and mobility systematically disadvantage rural schools by building on urban assumptions. Cuervo and Wyn (2012) provide a youth perspective, showing how rural aspirations are shaped by both local attachments and globalised discourses, while Funnell (2008) illustrates how place-shaped orientations influence young men's decisions to either stay or leave isolated communities. Cuervo (2025) also points out that there are differences between larger rural school and smaller rural school.[2] Collectively, however, these studies highlight the structural injustices rural students face, as well as the ways in which education systems contribute to a narrowing of perceived futures.

Canadian research has contributed significantly to the field, particularly through the work of Corbett (2007) and Corbett and Forsey (2017)[3]. Their studies demonstrate how rural students are caught in a dual orientation, rooted in local social life yet pressed to adapt to urban-oriented educational norms. Corbett's (2007) influential conceptualisation of the "staying" versus "leaving" dilemma underscores how schools often reproduce out-migration by positioning mobility as the measure of success. This resonates with findings from U.S. research, where educational aspirations are also tied to mobility. Agger et al. (2018) and Means (2019) show that rural adolescents' aspirations are strongly influenced by family and community, but that systemic pressures often channel them towards urban futures. Semke and Sheridan (2012) further demonstrate that weak family–school connections in rural contexts can reinforce such patterns, while Showalter et al. (2017) emphasise the structural challenges highlighted in the "Why Rural Matters" reports, documenting persistent inequalities in funding, teacher recruitment, and access to opportunities.

Research from the United Kingdom has illustrated how demographic change reshapes rural schooling. Bagley and Hillyard (2014) describe how counter-urbanisation brings new populations into rural schools, introducing resources but also creating tensions between long-term residents and middle-class newcomers. In Southern Europe, Vigo Arrazola and Soriano Bozalongo (2015) identify rural schools as simultaneously heritage sites and potential engines of development, while Amaral and Mateus (2022) show that Portuguese small schools can function as innovative educational arenas through strong community–school ties. These studies highlight how rural schools are shaped by social transformations that extend far beyond education policy itself.

Beyond Europe, new strands of research have expanded the geographical scope of rural education studies. Wu (2025) explores how rural Chinese students experience transitions into higher education as embodied struggles, revealing the persistence of inequalities despite educational expansion. Xu and Montgomery (2021) analyse Chinese rural parents' role in their children's access to elite universities, showing how globalised aspirations intersect with local constraints. Yúnez-Naude and Taylor (2001) provide insights from Mexico, demonstrating how education intersects with rural households' economic strategies and diversification beyond farming. Goris et al. (2021) examine how popular education and agroecology in Brazil connect rural schooling with social movements, further underscoring how local and global struggles are entwined in education. Together, these studies emphasise that rural education is a global issue, manifesting differently but with recurrent tensions between place, mobility, and structural inequality.

Digitalisation is a theme where Nordic and international scholarship converge. Studies of Swedish rural schools show that digital tools often serve a compensatory function by providing access to teaching otherwise unavailable (Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025; Rosvall et al., 2018), yet research also warns that weak infrastructure can deepen inequalities (Rolandi et al., 2021). Similar concerns appear in Brazil and Southern Europe, where digitalisation is linked to both inequality and innovation (Amaral & Mateus, 2022; Goris et al., 2021), while Australian and Canadian work highlights the need to align digital practices with pedagogy and local conditions (Corbett & Forsey, 2017). European contributions further show how digital platforms can refine teaching, expand classroom possibilities, and connect teachers to wider professional networks (Coker, 2021; Vigo Arrazola & Bozalongo, 2014). Although digital spaces can extend interaction beyond the rural community, teachers' engagement with online resources still depends heavily on local social and institutional support (Pallin, 2022).

Methodologically, ethnography has been pivotal in advancing the field. Jeffrey and Troman (2004) stress ethnography's potential to capture everyday practices where meaning and power are formed. Canadian and Australian ethnographies (Corbett, 2007; Corbett & Forsey, 2017) highlight the contradictions of rural youth's aspirations and mobility. In Sweden, Kjellsdotter and Erlandson (2025)

[1] *Metrocentrism* refers to the tendency for urban norms, institutional logics, and understandings of schooling to be taken for granted as the default standard, against which rural contexts are implicitly measured. As a result, rurality is frequently defined in relation to – and often in deficit to – urban ideals. It becomes not an analytical category with its own epistemological, cultural, and social significance, but an exception case (White & Corbett, 2014).

[2] Raggl (2015) shows that *small* rural schools often offer strong relationships and pedagogical opportunities through multigrade teaching, but are simultaneously characterised by high teacher workload and limited resources.

[3] This paper also concerns the Australian context as well as a broader global one.

illustrate how collaborative ethnography becomes part of change processes, while Beach and Vigo-Arrazola (2020) extend this approach in comparative analyses of Spain and Sweden.

Research has gained momentum across contexts. Cuervo and Wyn (2012) in Australia, Corbett (2007) in Canada, Kjellsdotter and Erlandson (2024) in Sweden, and Means (2019) in the U.S. demonstrate that rural youth articulate futures that combine strong local belonging with globalised imaginaries. Wu (2025) adds to this by showing how embodied transitions in China reveal the weight of structural inequalities even as opportunities expand. These findings converge with Nordic studies documenting how rural schooling is central to both community survival and youth futures (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Isaksson, 2023).

This growing international body of research demonstrates that rural schooling must be understood relationally, as positioned at the intersection of local conditions and global processes (Massey, 1994, 2017). Rural schools are neither marginal anomalies nor idyllic refuges; rather, they are central sites where globalisation, migration, policy, and digitalisation converge, and where young people's identities and aspirations are forged between continuity and transformation (Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Wu, 2025).

2. Method

2.1. Overarching framework

Even though this article, with its synthetizing ambition, is not presented as an ethnography as such, methodologically, ethnography provided the overarching framework for the project, but we also conducted more conventional interview studies and smaller developmental projects. These can nevertheless be understood as components of the larger ethnographic ambition (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Walford, 2008). Within this tradition, research efforts generally span at least two years, making it possible to establish a comprehensive empirical basis for observations and analyses, as well as to document the emergence of contradictory behaviours and perspectives. This timeframe is also essential for promoting ongoing reflections on the complexity of human contexts, such as the interplay between cultural, political, and social levels in the research field and the room for manoeuvre of individuals and groups. Furthermore, the research incorporates explicit theoretical perspectives and analyses, creating an opportunity to use empirical data both to test macro- and meso-level theories and to generate new ideas.

Fieldwork was conducted over an extended period to enable deep engagement with the context and to establish trusting relationships with participants. This combination of methods made it possible to attend to both what people said and how they acted in context. Interviews and observations were documented through detailed field notes and audio recordings, which were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis. The translation was carried out with great care to preserve nuances and situated meanings. Rather than treating interviews and notes as isolated fragments, the material was analysed holistically to retain the cultural and institutional logics embedded within it.

2.2. The research sites

Sweden, with a population of just over 10 million, has ten cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and 115 smaller towns with between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, which together constitute 63 % of the national population (SCB, 2023). The three sites included in this study fall within the category of "rural municipality" according to the definition by the *Confederation of Swedish Enterprise* - characterised by the largest settlement having fewer than 15,000 inhabitants and a low commuting rate (below 30 %). This three-year project began in the spring of 2022 and concluded in 2025. It encompassed three schools located in different municipalities in the southern part of Sweden, each approximately 300 kilometers apart.

Valedale Municipality runs three primary and one lower secondary school, all public, with clear socioeconomic contrasts. Vega School, in the oldest parish, has no students with Swedish as a second language. Lake Valley Municipality operates seven compulsory schools. Pinewood School is a small rural school with about 150 students, known for its close-knit relationships and strong local ties. Heathmark Municipality is a sparsely populated commuting area with long distances, few foreign-born residents. Sunward School, expanded due to closures nearby, illustrates how geography and infrastructure shape education: limited local services, extensive school transport, and collaborations with external actors influence organization and daily routines Table 1.

However, as has been pointed out earlier, just as there are differences between cities and urban regions, rural areas also vary, although they are located in the same country and relatively close to one another. The different schools and communities have been analyzed in our previous research (see eg. Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024; Erlandson & Kjelsdotter, 2025; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025a; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025b). At the same time, however, certain commonalities can be observed across these tree rural schools, which we concentrate on in this article.

Table 1
Overview of the project sites.

Municipalities	Valedale	Lake Valley	Heathmark
Residents	11 000	14 000	16 000
Project schools	Vega	Pinewood	Sunward
	160 students	150 students	140 students

2.3. Analytical process

Reflexivity was a central component of the research process. The researchers continuously examined their own assumptions, positions, and possible influence on the field and the material, while simultaneously recognising themselves as both participants and observers in the field. This reflexive stance strengthened the ethical foundation of the study and contributed to the credibility and transparency of the interpretations (Wolcott, 2008). Even so, in this article we have made an effort to synthesize the particularly notable results from the three-year project and the three different research sites specifically concentrating on data generated through field interviews.

The analysis presented condenses findings from the three research sites in relation to the research questions. The first categorisations of data began shortly after fieldwork concluded, through transcription and initial sorting of notes, which provided an overview of recurring patterns. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify and interpret central features of participants' experiences. Initial close readings formed the basis for the development of descriptive codes, which were subsequently grouped into preliminary thematic clusters. These clusters were revised and refined through repeated engagement with the full material, ensuring internal consistency, clear distinctions, and relevance in relation to the study's research questions.

Themes were illustrated with carefully selected excerpts that captured central meanings and represented broader patterns in participants' accounts. The process was characterised by a reciprocal movement between theory and empirical material: the theoretical framework shaped interpretation, while the empirical material simultaneously challenged and further developed the theoretical concepts. As is often the case in ethnography, the act of writing itself functioned as a central part of the analysis and knowledge production. *Nomadic writing* offers a methodological stance that treats writing as an exploratory, circling practice rather than a linear reduction of field experiences (St. Pierre, 1997). This approach made it possible to trace how voices and events emerged in relation to our presence, local conditions, and pedagogical work. The analytical layers that developed over time were shaped by these writing processes, leading us to view rural communities not as disadvantaged per se but as sustained by their own standards while positioned within a metrocentric power-geometry.

The study was guided by established criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), ensuring validity through transparency, systematic documentation, and illustrative excerpts that provide in-depth and contextualised descriptions. Depth was prioritised over breadth, in line with the potential of ethnography to capture tensions, complexity, and lived experiences in context (Marcus, 1995). Particular care was taken in the translation of interviews from speech to transcription and from Swedish to English, preserving tone, intention, and integrity. Respectful relationships were essential to the project, with ethical work extending beyond formal consent to include ongoing dialogue, attentiveness, and acknowledgement of participants' contributions (Walford, 2008). The project was reviewed and approved by the *Swedish Ethical Review Authority*.

3. Results

The results are presented below in four themes: the significance of place for education and school conditions; the possibilities and limitations of digitalisation; culture, identity, and social capital; and structural conditions and equity. Lastly, the section concludes with a synthesizing analysis.

3.1. The significance of place for education and school conditions

Place emerges in the material as a decisive and active force in schoolwork – organisationally, socially, and geographically. It is not a passive backdrop but a structuring dimension shaping the school's mandate, students' aspirations, and everyday conditions. At the organisational level, proximity between political, administrative, and pedagogical actors was repeatedly emphasised. A leader at Pinewood School explained: *"This closeness in the chain of governance and the responsiveness that I am often impressed by when meeting the committee, that one can have conversations on various issues."* Such closeness provides rapid access to decision-makers and short circuits of responsibility. Yet it also creates pressure, as the same leader noted: *"We are involved in almost everything all the time."* The material shows how organisational place both enables and constrains: it fosters initiative and shared ownership but makes schools dependent on a few individuals who move between roles. Teachers described how the school's functioning often rested on one or two key persons handling tasks from teaching to administration – an arrangement that offers resilience in crises but long-term fragility.

At the social level, place structures children's futures. At Vega School, a boy stated: "Work on the farm, I have to work there otherwise I cannot live there" [Field Interview 1]. Another added: "I want to become an excavator operator like my uncle and work in Bjarso. Maybe Pajala … or Abisko, where we have the hunting cabin." These expressions show how aspirations are tied to both occupations and landscapes, shaped by kinship geographies and inherited pathways such as farming, construction, and resource-based work. A teacher observed that "many of the boys still think first of the mine or forestry, while the girls often imagine staying close to home and working with children." The continuity offered by place provides belonging but narrows alternatives. Thus, place functions simultaneously as protection and limitation in young people's meaning-making.

Geographical conditions further sharpen these patterns. Teachers at Pinewood School emphasised that "physical study visits are often difficult to carry out, partly due to long distances to urban centres, partly due to limited public transport."What is routine in urban schools becomes logistically complex in sparsely populated areas. Yet teachers underscored the importance of such encounters: "Meetings with different societal actors are an important pedagogical element – something that has previously been difficult to realise in practice." In Heathmark, the municipality compensated by bussing students to larger schools for domestic science and foreign languages. Though costly, the practice was seen as pedagogically valuable because it gave younger students early exposure to

secondary settings: "They get used to the bigger school before it becomes their everyday." Here, place acts as both obstacle and catalyst, prompting adaptations that would not otherwise have emerged.

Everyday relations between school and community also reveal how place operates. At Vega School, tensions between teachers and farming families once escalated to the point where staff felt compelled to leave. Over time, however, relations improved. A principal recalled with pride how parents engaged directly with the school environment: *"They planted trees on the schoolyard to give shade. They were fully aware of the school's needs, and they were really willing to help."* This illustrates how embeddedness involves reciprocity, with parents' practical contributions signalling long-term commitment to the school as part of village life.

Attractiveness and belonging emerged as additional dimensions of place. Parents who had moved from other regions frequently described safety and community as decisive motives. A mother in Sunward explained: *"We wanted our children to grow up where everyone looks out for each other."* Such motives stabilise enrolment but also introduce new expectations. At Pinewood School, the arrival of German families shifted the balance of language provision: *"We had planned for one thing, but the new families changed everything – we suddenly needed a different set of competences,"* a teacher commented. The school thus became a site where mobility, migration, and local traditions intersected, generating concrete curricular challenges.

Taken together, these accounts show that place is not a static backdrop but a dynamic force entering schooling across multiple layers. Organisational proximity created both efficiency and dependence; social embeddedness fostered continuity but restricted futures; and geographical distance limited opportunities while prompting creative adjustments. Across cases, place consistently acted as a conditioning factor, shaping which relations could form, which futures appeared attainable, and how schools connected to wider society.

3.2. The possibilities and limitations of digitalisation

Digitalisation appears in the material as a layered phenomenon – practical, cultural, and strategic. It is never a neutral tool but filtered through the realities of rural schools, where it alternates between opportunity and limitation. In classroom practice, teachers use digital resources pragmatically. At Pinewood School, one teacher reflected: *"I use digital teaching materials, but I also go beyond them. You find films, like Grammar Company … they find it great fun."* Such examples show digitalisation as one tool among many, activated when it enriches lessons with clarity or variation. Another teacher noted how online exercises support differentiation: *"It is easier to give them something at their own level without making it obvious to the others."* Here, digitalisation complements rather than transforms teaching, shaped by teachers' situational judgement.

For children, digital technology is not an addition but part of daily life. Staff at Vega School observed that "the children belong to a generation that has never experienced a life without digital technology … their environment and everyday life are formed by constant access to digital media." A boy confirmed: "I watch YouTube every day, that's where I learn most things." School becomes one learning site among many, with digital media providing knowledge and community. Another student added: "If the Wi-Fi doesn't work, then we feel cut off from the world." These voices reveal a paradox: digitalisation expands horizons while intensifying vulnerability in rural settings where infrastructure is uneven. Connectivity failures are experienced not only as technical problems but as exclusions from the wider world.

In peripheral schools, digitalisation also counters geographical distance. At Sunward School, videoconferencing was described as *"a technology that mirrors the realities of working life and thereby strengthens students' digital competence."* It allowed contact with distant employers and institutions, broadening students' imagined futures. Yet teachers expressed ambivalence. One argued that *"seeing, feeling, and smelling a place was considered crucial for students' learning."* Digital encounters could not replace embodied experience or the subtle cues of physical presence. Sunward students who followed upper-secondary lessons virtually appreciated the access but found it incomplete: *"It wasn't real. You couldn't feel how it was to be there."*

The generational dimension is equally significant. Children at Pinewood School described how online games and social media maintained friendships across long distances: *"We play together every evening, even if we live far apart."*Digitalisation thus softened the effects of physical isolation, enabling shared experiences otherwise impossible. At the same time, teachers and parents voiced concern that screen-based life might narrow rather than widen horizons. A teacher at Vega School remarked: *"They live so much through their phones that sometimes they don't see what is around them here."* The fear is that, while digitalisation connects students globally, it may detach them from local practices and knowledge.

These accounts show digitalisation as a relational practice rather than a technical fix. At Pinewood School, it created engagement; at Vega School, it was embedded in children's lifeworlds; at Sunward, it functioned as a strategy to counter isolation. Across sites, digitalisation emerges as a double-edged force: bridging distance yet generating dependency, opening global access while sometimes narrowing attention to screens, enabling individualised learning while raising questions about authenticity and embodiment.

The possibilities and limitations of digitalisation lie not in devices or platforms but in how teachers, students, and communities interpret and attribute value to them. Technology may signal innovation in one moment and inadequacy in another. It is simultaneously a generational condition and a pedagogical challenge, a municipal strategy for equity and a lived dependency for children. In rural schools, digitalisation is always situated in the tension between local constraints and global technological change, shaping both what can be taught and how young people imagine their futures.

3.3. Culture, identity, and place-based forms of value and recognition

Culture in rural schools emerges not as a narrow domain of art or aesthetic activity, but as a dense weave of values, practices, and everyday strategies stretching from municipal visions to micro-interactions in classrooms. It appears both as a resource and a site of

tension, shaping how children acquire recognition and belonging and how they understand who they are and where they fit.

At Pinewood School, teachers and leaders framed culture through democratic formation. They emphasised empathy, dialogue, and the capacity to see connections. One principal stated that *"keywords such as context, dialogue, relations, reflection, and empathy"* guided their approach. Culture thus expressed the school's central mission: preparing children for social life through reflective and communicative competences. Yet staff also noted the strain of realising these ideals. A teacher admitted: *"We talk about reflection, but the schedule is packed. Sometimes it feels like a luxury to sit down and actually listen to what they think."* The cultural mission thus resonates with ideals of *Bildung* that risk becoming diluted under limited time and organisational pressure.

At Vega School, tensions between cultural logics were particularly visible. The municipality implemented high-profile initiatives – contemporary dance, visiting artists – intended to enrich children's lives and place the school "on the map." Teachers often welcomed these efforts, but families were more ambivalent. One mother remarked: *"For us, culture is to be at the hunting lodge, or when everyone comes together for the village festival."* A father added: *"They can bring in professional theatre if they want, but that is not what makes my kids proud. It is when they play football for the village team."* Such voices show how everyday rural practices – sports, hunting, seasonal gatherings – carry symbolic weight as forms of belonging and pride. They also reveal how externally defined "culture" risks alienating families who see little connection between professional cultural forms and their lived experiences. Teachers recognised this tension. One noted: *"Sometimes we see a clash, where what we try to give them as culture is not what the families value. Then we risk missing each other."*

Culture also appeared in classroom micro-dynamics. At Pinewood School, teachers described the importance of cultivating *"a classroom where effort, attempts, and failures are permitted and valued."* Yet students offered a more cautious perspective. A Sunward School student admitted: *"You do not always dare to say anything if you think it will be wrong, then the others laugh."* Another added: *"Sometimes you just sit quiet even if you know, because you don't want to be the one who stands out."* These comments show how classroom culture is lived in peer interactions where laughter, silence, and hesitation become mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Teachers' efforts to create openness therefore operate as interventions into micro-social hierarchies – attempts to redistribute recognition and status.

Across the cases, culture emerges as both opportunity and barrier. Municipalities use cultural projects to signal development and modernity, yet such initiatives can reproduce distance from families who identify with local and practical traditions rather than external forms of cultural capital. Teachers articulate culture as empathy and dialogue but struggle to realise these ideals amid tight schedules and organisational constraints. Students encounter culture in the everyday atmosphere of the classroom, where participation and risk-taking depend on relational climates shaped as much by peers as by pedagogy. Culture thus unites and divides simultaneously, creating belonging while also drawing boundaries of legitimacy and power.

The material further shows that culture is negotiated rather than fixed. At Vega School, some initially sceptical families revised their views after their children returned home enthusiastic about new cultural experiences. As one teacher recalled: *"At first the parents said it wasn't for them, but when their children started talking about it, some changed their minds."* Similarly, at Pinewood School, students described moments when classroom culture shifted: *"When the teacher said it's okay to fail, then more of us dared to try. But if someone laughed, it went back to silence again."* These examples demonstrate how cultural norms are continually reshaped through interactions, with teachers, students, and families co-producing what counts as valuable, permissible, or meaningful.

Culture in rural schools is always situated. It is not only about arts provision or curriculum but about how communities define value, how schools mediate between external initiatives and local lifeworlds, and how children gain or are denied recognition in their everyday interactions. The tensions between high culture and everyday culture, between democratic ideals and limited resources, between teachers' ambitions and students' lived experiences, make culture a central dimension of identity formation and place-based belonging. In these tensions, rural schools reveal their cultural significance – not as passive transmitters of established values but as arenas where identity, recognition, and power are actively shaped.

3.4. Structural conditions and equity

The issue of equity in education emerges in the material not as an abstract principle but as a lived contradiction between national ambitions and local realities. Conditions of small scale, geographical periphery, and limited resources are not mere background factors but decisive forces shaping what education can be in rural schools.

At Pinewood School, leaders and teachers repeatedly underlined how unequal conditions affect their ability to meet national requirements. One principal stated: *"The same knowledge goals are to be achieved under very unequal conditions."* National curricula apply universally, yet local variation in staffing, resources, and student populations is stark. Teachers described taking on multiple roles. One explained: *"We teach, we lead projects, we organise activities, and at the same time we handle administration. It is simply too much for the small staff we are."* Another added: *"If one person is sick, the whole school feels it."* These voices show how equity is undermined organisationally: what appears uniform in policy becomes uneven in practice.

At Vega School, inequities were most visible in transitions to upper-secondary education. Local provision consisted only of short vocational programmes, forcing academically oriented students to commute long distances or move. A teacher noted: *"If they want to study a national programme, it means three hours of bus travel every day or moving to Bjarso."*Students described the strain. One boy said: *"I wanted to choose the science programme, but I couldn't imagine sitting on the bus six hours a day."* A girl added: *"It feels like you have to give up something – either your friends and family if you move, or your dream if you stay."* Geography and transport logistics thus translate directly into educational opportunity, making equity less a question of motivation and more one of feasibility.

Across Pinewood, Sunward, and Vega, digitalisation also revealed inequity. Teachers and officials viewed digital solutions as partial compensation for distance. One municipal officer remarked: *"Videoconferencing can give them access to the same experiences as*

urban schools, but not all schools have the same technology, and not all teachers feel comfortable leading such sessions." Students felt this unevenness. One girl noted: *"When it works, it feels like we are part of something bigger."* Here, technological resources and teacher competence determine whether digitalisation functions as a bridge or reinforces exclusion.

Equity further appeared in subtler but equally significant ways. Teachers in all three sites stressed that small scale increased dependency on family support. One explained: *"For some of our students, the only way they can get to activities or extra lessons is if parents can drive them. If not, they miss out."* A parent in Vega School observed: *"We want our daughter to have the same chances as in the city, but we cannot afford an apartment there, and she cannot manage the travel every day."* These statements show how equity extends beyond school organisation to household resources, local infrastructure, and community capacity.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal three interconnected dimensions of inequality. At Pinewood School, resource inequality means identical goals must be achieved under different organisational conditions. At Vega School, geographical inequality limits programme access and forces difficult choices about staying or leaving. At Pinewood (and similarly at Sunward and Vega), technological inequality undermines digitalisation's promise, producing differentiated access even within the same municipality. These dimensions intersect in everyday life, shaping students' options and teachers' ability to fulfil the school's mission.

The analytical conclusion is that structural conditions in rural schools are not temporary obstacles that can be addressed through isolated interventions but enduring features of the educational landscape. They determine what can be taught, how it can be delivered, and which futures appear realistic for young people. For many students, equity means adapting to structures they cannot influence – bus routes, school budgets, digital networks – that quietly govern their possibilities. As one student said: *"It feels unfair, because we don't choose where we live."* This voice captures the core contradiction: equity is promised nationally but undermined locally, as structural conditions continuously set the limits of what rural education can be.

3.5. Synthesizing the result

The empirical material makes clear that the four themes – place, digitalisation, culture, and structural conditions – should not be understood in isolation. They intersect and shape one another, producing the specific realities of rural schooling. Place is both backdrop and active force: organisational closeness fosters participation yet creates dependency; social embeddedness ties children's futures to local labour markets; geographical distance limits opportunities while generating creative adaptations. These characteristics of place permeate all other themes rather than standing apart from them.

Digitalisation, viewed through this lens, is not only a pedagogical tool but a response to spatial constraints. Teachers use digital resources pragmatically to engage students, yet in peripheral contexts digitalisation becomes a structural necessity. It expands horizons and connects children to worlds beyond their immediate surroundings, but also exposes fragilities when infrastructure fails or when digital encounters feel incomplete. The relationship between place and digitalisation is thus mutually constitutive: geographical peripherality makes digital strategies essential, while digital practices reshape how rurality is experienced and imagined.

Culture adds another layer to this weave. Municipal cultural initiatives aim to profile and develop the community; pedagogically, teachers emphasise empathy, reflection, and social interaction as valued practices within local relational contexts; in classrooms, children encounter culture in micro-relations that grant or withhold recognition. Place again intervenes: what counts as culture is contested between external projects and local practices – between ideals of *Bildung* and everyday forms of belonging in hunting clubs, sports teams, and village festivals. Culture is therefore inseparable from place and social equity, since the ability to participate and feel represented varies with background, resources, and recognition.

Structural conditions cut across all these dimensions. Resource inequalities, geographical distances, and technological unevenness shape what schools can realistically achieve. They determine children's access to further studies, the feasibility of digital participation, and the sustainability of cultural ambitions. Equity thus emerges not as a universal standard but as the capacity of local schools to transform structural limitations into workable practices. The voices of teachers, students, and parents show that such transformations remain partial and fragile—providing stability in some moments while exposing vulnerability in others.

Taken together, the findings show that rural schooling is constituted through the interplay of place, digitalisation, culture, and structural conditions. None should be treated as separate variables; each actively shapes the others. Place conditions the need for digitalisation; digitalisation reshapes access to culture; culture provides or denies forms of recognition tied to spatial and social configurations; and structural inequities underpin them all. Rural schools thus appear not only as educational sites but as arenas where broader societal processes converge, where children's futures are formed at the intersection of local belonging and global transformation.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that valuable insights emerge when rural schooling is understood at the intersection of place, culture, digitalisation, and structural conditions. This resonates with a theoretical framework that brings together Massey's notion of spatially situated value and place-shaped dispositions with her relational conceptualisation of place as a meeting point of heterogeneous trajectories – social, material, historical, and affective – that unfold across different temporalities. In this view, place is not a static backdrop but an ongoing configuration of interwoven relations, a condition Massey terms 'throwntogetherness', which foregrounds both the contingency of such encounters and the political and ethical responsibilities they entail. Through this lens, the results illustrate how educational practices reflect not only pedagogical choices but the distribution of valued practices within wider spatial configurations.

The theme of place shows how locally valued knowledge – farming skills, hunting networks, family ties – remains central to

children's imagined futures yet is seldom legitimised within dominant educational norms, echoing research on how urban and academic standards define legitimate knowledge (Beach et al., 2019; Corbett, 2007). Massey's relational approach clarifies that these valuations are not fixed but produced within intersecting spatial trajectories that privilege some practices while marginalising others. Thus, aspirations such as building a future "on the farm" or "in Bjarso with my uncle's excavator" reflect place-shaped dispositions formed at the intersection of local recognitions and global discourses linking mobility with success (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012).

Digitalisation highlights how valued competencies intersect with spatial relations. In urban contexts, digital competence is naturalised and culturally sanctioned, while in rural areas it becomes a strategy to compensate for distance and scarcity (Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024; Rosvall et al., 2018). Teachers in this study saw digitalisation not as transformative but as a tool to bridge structural gaps. Yet digitalisation can also reproduce inequalities when infrastructure or pedagogical support is weak (Rolandi et al., 2021). In Massey's terms, digital access and competence emerge within power-laden spatial configurations that both enable and constrain, shaping how students imagine their own position within wider networks.

The theme of culture illustrates how spatially situated cultural values are negotiated. Municipal investments in high culture introduce externally defined status, while everyday practices – sports, hunting, village events – carry more immediate meaning, echoing Corbett's (2007) observations in Canada. Pinewood School's emphasis on empathy and dialogue reflects Bildung traditions and attempts to build place-based recognition, yet classroom interactions reveal uneven realisation, where peer dynamics determine legitimacy. Massey's emphasis on the simultaneity of multiple spatial stories helps clarify why such cultural negotiations unfold differently across social groups.

Structural conditions further demonstrate that equity is inseparable from geography, resources, and infrastructure. Long commutes and weak internet shape educational opportunity, consistent with international findings on rural inequities (Means, 2019; Showalter et al., 2017; Wu, 2025). Spatially, such conditions determine access to valued opportunities and recognitions. For Massey, these inequalities emerge from the positioning of rural schools within wider political and economic networks that structure flows of resources and privilege.

Taken together, the analysis shows that the conditions shaping rural schooling are difficult to grasp if approached through separate thematic lenses. Rather than acting as isolated influences, place, digitalisation, cultural values, and structural inequalities intersect and reinforce one another in the everyday work of rural schools. Recognising these connections makes it possible to see how schools both reproduce and sometimes subtly reshape broader patterns of inequality as they navigate local histories, limited resources, and emerging technological possibilities. It also highlights how students' aspirations form within – and sometimes in tension with – the material, spatial, and technological configurations that shape their communities.

Overall, the findings show that rural schools are neither passive victims nor isolated idylls but spaces where global and local processes converge. They demonstrate how place-shaped dispositions develop through continuity and aspiration, how place-embedded forms of value are negotiated within spatial hierarchies, and how place structures educational possibilities. This supports research from Australia, Canada, China, and Sweden (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Corbett, 2007; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Wu, 2025; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024, 2025), emphasising that rural education must be understood relationally and within the wider spatial processes Massey describes.

5. Conclusion

This article has shown that analysing rural schooling through the intertwined dimensions of place, culture, digitalisation, and structural conditions offers a richer understanding of how educational possibilities are shaped in small rural communities. By drawing together findings from three research sites, the study illuminates how students' aspirations and teachers' practices emerge within spatial configurations that both enable and constrain. The analysis contributes to ongoing international scholarship by demonstrating that rural schools are best understood not at the margins but at the intersections of global and local horizons, ideals and resources, continuity and change. Rural schools are active sites where global discourses, local histories, and material conditions meet, producing distinct forms of value, recognition, and opportunity. Recognising these relational processes is essential for developing educational policies and practices that acknowledge the diversity of rural contexts and support equitable conditions for learning across geographically dispersed communities. Acknowledging this complexity is also crucial for understanding rural educational conditions and for recognising the vital role these schools play in the lives and futures of the children and communities they serve.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Peter Erlandson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ninni Wahlström:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Anne Kjellsdotter:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Ulrika Bossér:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

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