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Diverse Diversity: Contradictions and Challenges in Norwegian Rural Education

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Abstract

The authors of this paper share a common background from the Northern Norway region, a rural county and the largest and least populated county of Norway. The region is characterised by high out-migration, lower educational levels, and higher drop-out rates from secondary education than in other regions of Norway. Limited educational provision makes it necessary for many young people in rural areas to leave home to take a secondary education. Large geographical distances make it difficult to commute on a daily basis. Historically, this area has been the most culturally diverse in Norway, as the domicile of the Sámi Indigenous people and the national minority, the Kven, and the Norwegian ethnic group. This Arctic region is characterised by the encounter with three ethnicities, and traditional industries such as fishing, farming and herding, combined with modern industry and knowledge-intensive enterprises.

Despite this multi-ethnic and geographically diverse society, the schools are still struggling with the unit-oriented curriculum, ignoring the diversity among the pupils. When the multi-ethnic society is not embedded in the education system, nor given in the adolescents' hometown, the education system will be exogenous and will appear foreign. In this paper, we use available public statistics and a literature review, inspired by autoethnographic methodology—whereby authors use their experiences as a person and a long-time researcher in a field to describe, analyse and understand the phenomenon—to argue for a local- and contextual oriented schools to make meaningful and practical improvements to rural education.

Keywords: Rural education, Northern Norway, education system, diversity, universalistic curriculum, drop-out

Introduction

The authors of this paper share a background from the northernmost, largest and least populated rural region in Norway, Finnmark. This region is the home of the Sámi (an Indigenous people of the Arctic), the Kven (a traditionally Finnish speaking national minority in the north of Norway) and the Norwegian population. These three ethnic groups share the territory, but each has their own language, identity and cultural history. Historically, this area has been the most culturally diverse in Norway. The presence of diversity, Indigenous people, national minorities and the Norwegian majority has always been noticeable here, and most recently the diverse population of this northern region has been increased by immigrants from different countries around the world. Immigrants have moved to Northern Norway from multiple countries, due to work and education opportunities, and as refugees escaping wars, oppression and conflicts. The proximity to other

countries, such as Finland, Sweden and Russia, has also led to border crossing by young people, especially from Russia. In demographic terms, the region is thereby diverse when it comes to ethnicity, language, culture, social and economic development, and citizenship.

Finnmark is situated above the Arctic circle. The territorial scale is equivalent to Denmark, but the population density is very low, and below 76,000 inhabitants, compared to Denmark with almost 6 million inhabitants. While people in many other parts of Europe can commute on an everyday basis for education or work, this is not an option for many people in Finnmark. One of the most striking differences between this region and rural areas in the rest of Europe is the harsh climate and the relatively small population who are spread across vast territories and great distances (Löfgren, 2000). Large geographical distances and limited educational provision make it necessary for many young people in this area to leave home to undertake secondary education. Finnmark is also characterised by high out-migration, lower educational levels, and a higher rate of drop-out from secondary education than in other regions in Norway. The labour market consists of traditional industries such as fishing, farming and herding, combined with modern industry and knowledge-intensive enterprises, and occupations within the welfare sector.

In this paper, we will begin by reflecting on our own experiences as educational researchers with roots in these rural contexts, and then broaden this into a wider consideration – asking what we can learn from each other to make meaningful, practical improvements to rural education and communities.

Methodological Reflection

We use autoethnographic methodology whereby researchers use their experiences as persons and long-time researchers in a field to explore and analyse a phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). The strength of this approach is that it captures the broadness of the phenomenon and assembles different aspects of it in the discussion. This makes it valuable for policymaking and system alteration. The weakness is that the background to the discussion is less concentrated and transparent. It can be too self-centred (Walford, 2009). We are aware of this weakness and we have thus chosen to use publicly available statistical data to enhance the transparency of the knowledge foundation, open it to re-examination, and strengthen its validity. The tables and figures chosen also present high reliability, due to large sample sizes, and the quality of the public statistics is high. The state and the municipalities devote a lot of resources to managing and ensuring the quality of each of the report systems. Another advantage is that these are effective data collection methods, with a minimal environmental footprint or negative effect on informants.

Gry Paulgaard grew up in Honningsvåg at Margeøya, in the county of Finnmark. Geographically, this is at latitude 71 degrees north, on the same island as North Cape, the northernmost point of the European mainland. During her nine years at primary and lower secondary school, her school class had ten different teachers, with the majority coming from the southern part of Norway. Most of the local people working as teachers did not have formal teacher training. When she finished compulsory school, there was no upper secondary school in the area. She had to leave home at the age of 15 and attended upper secondary education (gymnasium) in Kirkenes, near the Russian border. The distance from Honningsvåg to Kirkenes is 502 km. Commuting on a daily basis was not possible. Even though moving away from home at this young age spurred feelings of freedom being away from parents, particularly in the first month, over time it became less and less appealing. After the first year, she left upper secondary education, as did her two cousins of the same age. Gry returned home to Honningsvåg and stayed there for one year, working as a shop assistant. This was quite unappealing in the long run, so at the age of 17, she moved to Tromsø (a central city in Northern Norway) and continued her upper secondary education there. In Honningsvåg, as in many other coastal communities, for generations the local labour market has offered young people an alternative to formal education (Corbett, 2007; Paulgaard, 2017).

Less than half of the pupils from her lower secondary school class continued to upper secondary school. Upper secondary education was not necessary to get a job. Today, this has changed, and education is far more important. The change in local opportunities in these rural areas has inspired much of her research. Her scholarly interests include the geography of education, the importance of the contextualisation of educational research, the globalisation and uneven development between centre and periphery. She is particularly keen to examine how young people growing up in northern areas live their lives and experience their opportunities for education and work, and the choices and the lack of choices they have.

Merete Saus grew up in Indre Billefjord, only 130 kilometres from Gry. While this might be viewed as a long distance in many parts of the world, we consider this to be equivalent to close neighbours in rural Finnmark. This is a village with a Sámi, Kven/Norwegian Finnish and Norwegian population. Most of the people of the village are a mix between all three language and ethnic groups. Her school story is similar to Gry's – changing teachers, with many staying for only one year, leaving the pupils with lots of replacements and upheaval. To attend upper secondary school, she had to move to Alta at the age of 16, two hours' drive from her hometown. Knowing that these years lay ahead made her direct her attention outwards, seeking arguments for leaving, not staying. Later, as a young student in Tromsø, she reflected on how the school's situation, and the lack of opportunity to attend upper secondary school, was indeed an infrastructure to guide her away from her rural home village. She wrote a student paper in her first year at university based on her experience from her home village and used her knowledge of the village to count the total number of adolescents between 16-25 who still lived there. From this she understood that the education system functioned as a driving force, pushing young people, and especially women, away from the village, never to return. Another epoch-making event for her was being young during the "Altacase". This is the name of a political process from 1968 to 1982 against the construction of a dam on the Alta River – the river between Kautokeino and Alta. The first plan for this project was to flood large areas of reindeer grazing land and the Sámi village of Máze. This gave rise to powerful resistance, based on Sámi rights, reindeer herding and environmental protection. The awareness of Sámi rights that this process nurtured came to guide her values and choice of research field, as it still does. These two experiences – how the education system created infrastructure that made her believe she wanted to escape from her hometown, and the negative attitude towards and treatment of the Sámi people and minorities, provided her formative background for the discussions in this paper.

Universalism in Education

Education is a main pillar of the Nordic welfare system, important for ensuring "*social justice by providing schooling of high and equal quality to all citizens regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity or geographical origin and location*" (Lundahl, 2016, p.4). This education model highly values equality, inclusion and all-embracing social community. Despite this, the educational systems in the Nordic countries, as well as other countries, are based on national standards for both curriculum and educational practice for pupils and students. Several scholars have criticised this centrally-governed education system, based on a high degree of unification, as downplaying the existence of differences (Seeberg, 2003; Stenseth, 2023).

In this paper, we focus on two forms of universalism: i) the metrocentric norms and goals of the curriculum and the educational system, and ii), the implicit expected completion timelines within an age-segregated social order (Lødding & Paulgaard, 2019; Vogt, 2018). Metrocentrism is when urban settings are seen as "*ubiquitous, globalised and undifferentiated*", based on urban standards, leaving out cultural, spatial and contextual differences disguised as "*equity*" (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 1; Farrugia, 2014). The implicit expected timelines within an age-segregated social order, and norms for rapid completion of education, mean that career paths are generalised, and the existence of diversity can be overlooked and devalued. The age-segregated social order also

universalises experiences based on structural distinctions, such as between education and work. Such distinctions are not applicable for many young people today, since they both work and go to school (Farrugia & Ravn, 2022). When norms for rapid completion of education are generalised as universal career paths, the existence of alternative learning arenas and qualification trajectories are overlooked.

Within such a frame of reference, people in the periphery are thus not coeval others, not actually different people with their own trajectories, history and future; they are just behind in their development. When differences between regions and places are read in terms of stages of advancement and backwardness, alternative stories about the production of poverty and inequality can be erased from this view. The picture is far more geographically complex:

What is at issue is not just openness and closure or the 'length' of the connections through which we, or financial capital, or whatever ... go about our business. What are at issue are the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power relations. (Massey, 2005, p. 85)

In this paper, we will demonstrate how both forms of universalism play an important role in the overall goals, structures and curriculum within the educational system. The universalisms disguise the importance of place and geography representing changeable and contingent conditions in people's lives, with the result that diversity might be overlooked and devalued. Here, we will point to an alternative story that shows the complexity existing in this rural area today.

Practice in Education

This paper relates the understanding of place to practice (Bourdieu, 1994; Massey, 2005; Simonsen, 2008). Simonsen (2008) describes how places can be seen as a specific articulation of social practices, and of social relations and materiality, as well as experiences, narratives and symbolic meanings. Our focus is to point out that the world of education and work manifests itself somewhat differently in different places. This implies that the opportunities for practice will vary according to where one is situated.

Practice not only reflects local relations congruent with locality in a physical sense. Some of the relations that constitute a place might be characterised by physical proximity at a local level, while others are based on far larger scales and connect the place to other places. Such a conceptualisation of place is highly dynamic, defining place as a specific conjunction of social practices and social relations which have been constructed over time, consolidated, decayed or renewed (Massey, 2005; Simonsen, 2008, p. 16). From such a perspective, it is also possible to understand how external processes and changes are present in local contexts (Massey, 2005; Wenger, 2008). One example might be how national school curricula might not always be in accordance with narratives transmitted through local history. Local narratives, as well as experience, can represent important 'local curricula' gained by growing up in particular areas (Paulgaard & Soleim, 2023).

Practice becomes a key concept in analyses of how place constitutes an important context for learning. According to Wenger's (2008) social theory of learning, practice must be understood as a learning process. In contrast to institutional teaching, social learning is not regarded as a separate activity, something one does when one does nothing else, or stops doing when one does something else. Social learning implies the converse – learning as an integral aspect of everyday life, taking place while one is busy doing other things. By placing learning in the context of social participation, the primary unit for analysis is neither the individual nor social institutions, nor pupils, schools or classrooms, but practice. Wenger (2008) focuses in particular on informal 'communities of practice' that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time.

Participation in different kinds of practices in different fields, among classmates in the schoolyard or in a work team, is seen as both actions and forms of belonging. According to Wenger (2008), participation will not only shape what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret our practice and ourselves. The concept of participation “*refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and construction of identities in relation to these communities*” (Wenger, 2008, p. 4).

By putting emphasis on people’s everyday involvement and how they give meaning to their actions, practice is located in both time and place within specific historical, cultural and geographical conditions. In this respect, the social theory of learning corresponds to Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of practice and the concept of ‘habitus’, referring to how people’s dispositions are embodied and therefore territorially located. Social learning through different kinds of practice becomes a key feature of the constitution of habitus, i.e. a system of acquired dispositions functioning as classificatory and organising principles for action and evaluation (Bourdieu, 1994). As such, place of residence can be regarded as essential for the constitution of habitus through the ability of social learning within different kinds of practice.

By placing Bourdieu’s concept of ‘capital’ in a broader context, where there is an interplay with ‘habitus’ and ‘field’, it is possible to examine how social learning helps to develop habitus that corresponds with, or differs from, the capital inhibited in particular fields. Several educational sociologists have shown how a mismatch between working-class habitus and cultural capital within the field of formal education influences the educational outcome of pupils (Bourdieu, 1994; Corbett, 2007; Heggen et al., 2003). Success at school is thus explained by correspondence between habitus and the school’s cultural capital, for pupils with middle-class or upper-class backgrounds.

Lack of correspondence between habitus and capital within a particular field makes “*people feel ill at ease and seek to move – socially and spatially – so that their discomfort is relieved*” (Savage et al., 2005, p. 9). One example is the term ‘absence that is present’, developed by the Norwegian educational sociologist Edmund Edvardsen (1998) to address how pupils let their thoughts fly, representing a ‘mental escape’, caused by the lack of correspondence between the habitus of pupils and the social practices, knowledge and value systems in the field of formal education.

Due to improved transportation and communication systems, mass media and social media, opportunities for mobility between different fields of practice and places have increased, both mentally and physically. At the same time, research of youth in different rural areas of the world has documented how many young people are facing a more restricted set of opportunities and options, making them less mobile (Corbett, 2007). Uncertain employment conditions, high urban living expenses, and increasing demands for higher education as a key to labour markets and economic success, influence the opportunities for both geographical and upward social mobility for large numbers of rural young people today (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Corbett, 2007). The increasing divide between rural and urban areas, and participation in communities of practice within various fields, may produce very different conditions for both learning and doing for people living in different types of places. While some people will face a world of opportunities, others may face a world of limitations.

In order to portray the diversity within the rural area in this northern and Arctic region, the paper is based on a phenomenology of practice that situates practical, embodied consciousness in the world, as an ‘interworld’ in which meaning and materiality are inseparable (Simonsen, 2012, p.15). This makes it possible to focus on the interdependency between cultural, social and material contexts for practice, in order to highlight the diverse diversity that cannot be captured within a one-dimensional narrative and approach.

The Education System in Norway

The education system in Norway comprises kindergarten to school-grade 13, with a legal right for children to attend all grades. This right is granted up to the age of 23, but the ordinary school programme runs from 6-19 years of age, with children moving up one grade each year.

Kindergarten is an integrated pre-school system from the age of 1-5, which is run as a day-care centre with a pedagogical framework and led by teachers with university-level pedagogical training. This pre-school system is optional, and families are given a cash-for-care subsidy if a parent chooses to home-care children aged 1-2 years. However, most parents choose pre-school from year 1, and 93.4 per cent of children aged 1-5 years attend pre-school. This is linked to the high employment level amongst women in this age group (see Table 1).

Up to grade 10 there is a uniform curriculum, with only slight variation between public and private schools. Although there are some private schools, 95.5 per cent of pupils attend public schools, so that close to all pupils have the same curriculum up to the age of 16 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023a). Grades 10-13 represent upper secondary school, with two parallel educational pathways: i) specialisation in general studies, and ii) vocational education programmes. They differ in terms of how much emphasis they place on theory and practice. The first pathway qualifies pupils for university and college and is theory- and discipline-oriented, while the second is oriented toward skilled work, such as health workers, electricians, childcare workers, hairdressers, and joiners. The vocational education programme is closely linked to the profession for which it qualifies. In Norway, there is a “young person’s right” (statutory right for young people) that grants young people up to the age of 24 the right to attend primary and lower secondary school, or equivalent education, as well as three years of upper secondary education and training (The Education Act, Section 3.1). The aim of this law is to prevent unemployment amongst young people.

At a societal level, education is described as one of the “touchstones by which different areas within nation-states compare their performance and their fitness to face the future” (Butler & Hamnett, 2007, p. 1162). At an individual level, education is understood as a form of protection when it comes to the individual risk of failing in the labour market, as formal education constitutes an asset in any labour market in our post-industrial societies. Education may also serve as a buffer against becoming dependent on welfare benefits.

Education is one of the fields in which geographical differences are evident in Norway. For centuries, there have been significant regional differences in young people’s educational careers. Education levels have been lower among populations in rural and coastal areas in the North than in other areas. Butler and Hamnett (2007) examined the geography of education in England. They pointed out that variations in educational provision and attainment are complex social phenomena which lie in the intersection of space, social structure, and social processes. Educational attainment is closely related to social class, ethnicity, and gender. These factors have a key impact on outcomes and are related to the geographical variations in structures of provision and eligibility rules, and to spatial variations in social composition via the segregation of different social groups (Paulgaard, 2017).

The school curricula are designed to give each pupil a school career that leads to qualification for future work or higher education. The curricula are also created to meet society’s need for properly qualified staff, distributed in harmony with society’s and the labour market’s needs and distribution. This is a double mandate for a school system that is governed by the state. It serves the pupils’ need for variety and choice to fulfil their aspirations and desires for their future working lives, and society’s need for a workforce evenly distributed in the local, regional, and national labour disciplines.

Education Quality and the Documentation System

The curriculum for knowledge promotion in primary and secondary education and training is uniform in Norway when it comes to core principles, value base and overall goals. These are formulated as rights for the pupil to achieve their life prospects and participate in society. However, schools' administration and organisation are driven by school tests, both national and international, on the one hand, and the needs of public and commercial industry and management for qualified workers (Heldal, 2018), on the other hand. Attention is not solely on pupils' needs and aspirations, but also on society's needs and aspirations. This has driven the Norwegian school system to develop a quality assurance system to monitor this dual aim.

The quality system is consistent, thorough and comprehensive. The quality criteria are based on centralised quality indicators, derived from education science, and from learning theory. There is no differentiation between school contexts, such as schools in urban or rural contexts, or schools with variation in Norwegian-speaking skills among the pupils. The quality assurance system is run annually, with different assessment systems, both national and international. International tests make it possible to compare the Norwegian school system with international results, both regarding the level of ability in a specific subject and how process and the quality of results develop over time (Olsen & Björnsson, 2018). The Pupil Survey is carried out every autumn for grades 7, 10 and 11, but the school can also choose to run it for every grade from grade 5 up to grade 13. The survey has questions for the pupils. It is mandatory for the schools to run the survey, so the response rate is high. The national survey is another national quality measurement, and is carried out in grades 5, 8 and 9. The purpose is to give the school information about basic skills in reading, numeracy and English, and the information serves as a foundation for formative assessment and quality betterment at all levels of the school system.

The quality and documentation systems used in the Norwegian education system are not only used for quality assessments, but also for targeted measures to enhance schools' quality. A subsidy arrangement has been implemented for direct action to support education programmes at all 13 grade levels to improve betterment processes. The 30 schools that receive the lowest score on multiple test and quality indicators become part of a counselling system. The schools in the Northern Norwegian region are more often enrolled in this counselling system, revealing that they systematically score lower on the national formative evaluations. As such, it is possible to point to regional variations in the differences when it comes to 'the geography of education' in Norway.

A Portrait of Rural Northern Norway and the Education System

Norway is a rich welfare state, with a strong state and municipalities that have authority over most aspects of people's lives, from childhood to old age. Healthcare and social services are free of charge, and there are a low number of private agencies. Furthermore, trust in the government's services is high, so that most people are trusting and non-critical users of these services. One consequence of both the enveloping welfare state and the trusting public is that the government can—and does—hold an abundance of statistics covering most of people's lives and doings. These are mostly accessible at an in-depth level, anonymised and prepared as online information for the public, local policy- and decision-makers, and even researchers.

Based on official statistics, we provide a portrait of Northern Norway and the education system in this diverse rural region. The overall question is how diversity manifests itself in this northernmost county and whether the education system is well-adapted to this rural region?

Geography

Norway is an outstretched country. The largest city, Oslo, is located in Central-Eastern Norway. Northern Norway mainly comprises rural areas and is the lowest-populated area, with around 76,000 inhabitants.

Figure 1: Map of Norway



Note: Map base: Kartverket (Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0; <https://kartverket.no/en/on-land/kart/illustrasjonskart>).

Employment

Northern Norway, Western and Mid-Norway have many rural areas, while the South and West mostly have urban areas. Table 1 shows unemployment rates in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2023a).

Table 1: Unemployment Across Different Regions of Norway

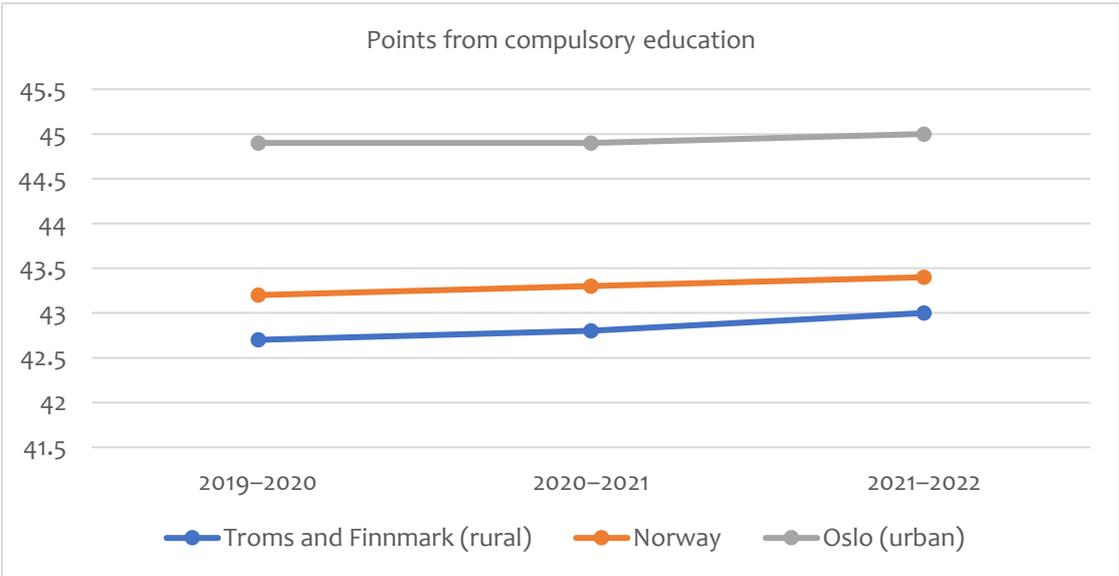
	Unemployment in 2022
Total in Norway	3.3%
East-Central Norway, including the capital, Oslo	4.0%
Inland Norway	3.2%
Southern Norway	3.7%
Western Norway	2.7%
Mid-Norway	2.4%
Northern Norway	2.6%

Overall, the unemployment rate in Norway is one of the lowest in the world (Horge, 2023). According to Table 1, unemployment is at its highest in the central region, with many urban areas, and at its lowest in parts of Norway with many rural areas.

Education

Figure 2 presents the comprehensive qualitative test system in Norwegian education programmes and how Northern Norway systematically scores low in these tests. It shows ‘compulsory education points in primary schools’, a test in Norway administrated by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2023a). This is a wide-ranging survey that aims to measure the quality of learning at schools in Norway).

Figure 2: Compulsory Education Points in Urban and Rural Regions in Norway



This data was collected from a register of final marks and exam results at student level and includes all pupils from public and private schools in Norway. It provides information about the pupils’ performance on completion of primary school. Higher scores suggest better learning quality. This figure suggests that pupils from schools in Northern Norway score lower marks compared with the national population.

Figure 3 reports four indicators of school quality from the Pupil Survey managed by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2023b). All pupils are invited to participate in this survey, and the response rate is 86%. The survey enquires into a wide range of factors. The purpose of the survey is to gauge pupils’ opinion of school in terms of learning, well-being and satisfaction. The results are used by the schools for improvement and quality assessments. The survey can be displayed at national, regional and school level and is open to the public in anonymised form. These indicators are measured and compared against all schools every year. Here, we display four of these factors. These four factors are all considered to be important aspects of the school environment in the Norwegian education system, including: pupils’ democracy and participation, formative assessment, support from teachers and well-being (Ogden, 2020).

Figure 3: Indicators of School Quality for Northern Norway and Norway

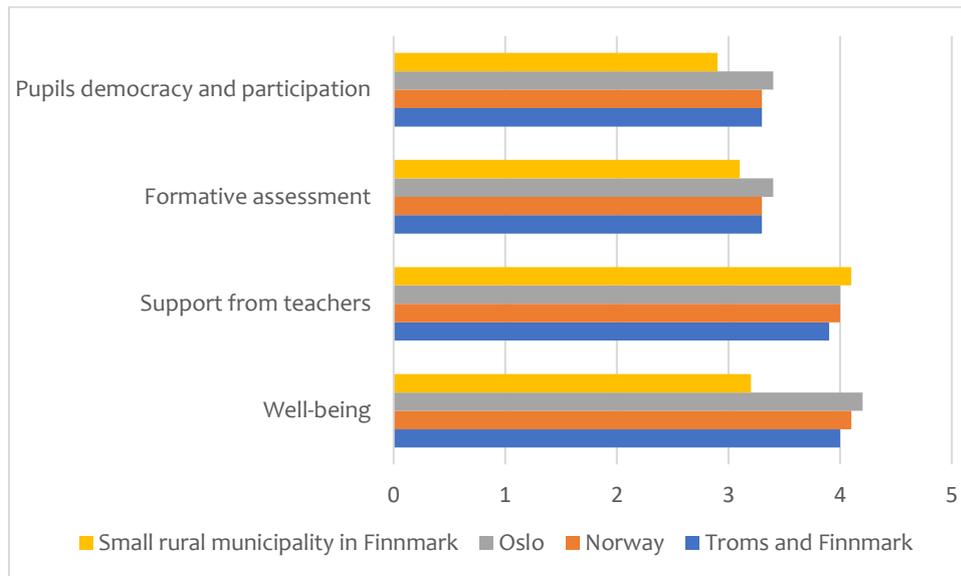
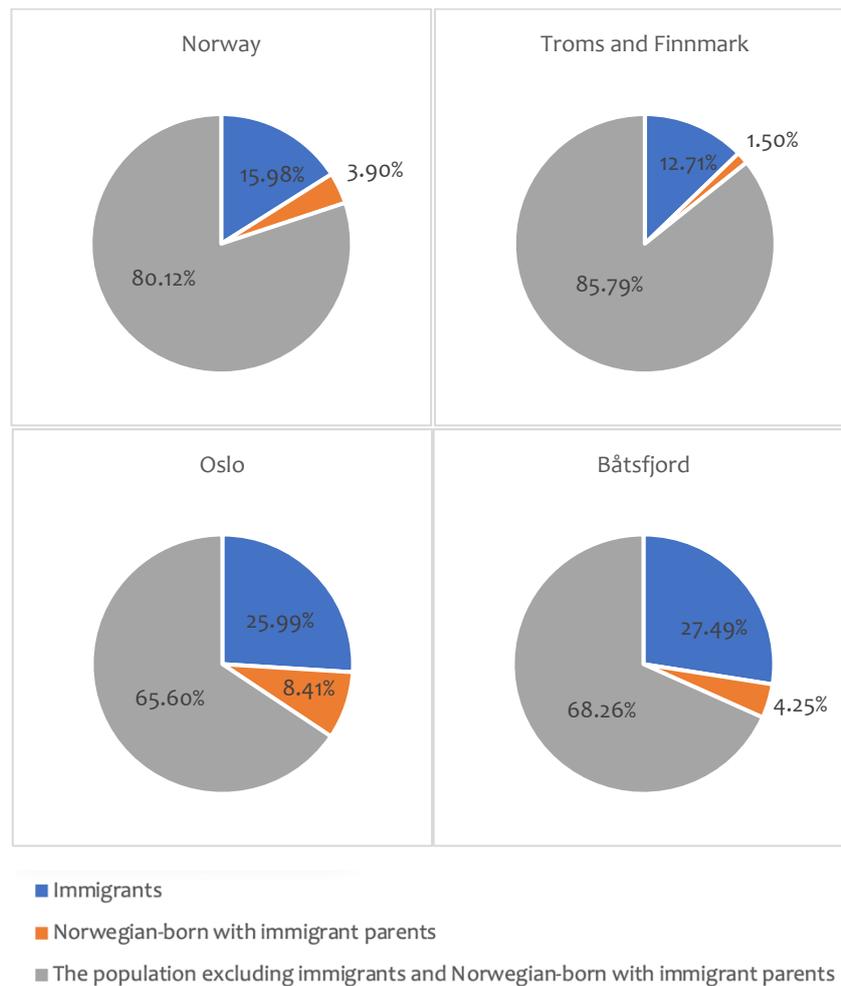


Figure 3 indicates the score by displaying the results from 1-5, where 1 is the most negative and 5 is the most positive. It shows that students in the northernmost county report lower for the same levels of school quality compared to the national level. The difference is not extensive, but does reveal lower scores and systematic differences between the end reports for pupils in Northern rural regions, compared with the national level. This means that the Northern-most schools both score lower than average on academic performance and well-being. Compared to a small municipality in Finnmark, however, the results are less uniform. Pupils in the school in the small rural municipality report low democracy and participation, formative assessment and well-being, but a high level of support from teachers. The low number is considered by the school authorities to be so low that they would probably implement some actions to improve quality. This profile is the case for many small, rural schools.

Immigration

Figure 4 shows that the northernmost counties also have higher numbers of people who have immigrated from other countries (Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2023). It shows that Northern Norway has a lower migrant population than the rest of the country. The number of people with parents who immigrated is particularly low. The capital, Oslo, stands out from the rest, but we can see that even though the number of first-generation immigrants is lower in Northern Norway, it is closer to the rest of Norway. Furthermore, the trends indicate that immigration to Norway is increasing. In 2022, immigration to Norway increased by 2.4% (Statistic Norway 2023a). This trend also applies to Northern Norway, even though the population in this region is generally declining. Figure 4 demonstrates that even though Northern Norway does not have a high number of immigrants overall, some towns, such as Båtsfjord, have one of the highest levels of immigrants. This is because the fishing industry requires a supply of labour. This displays variation in the rural area.

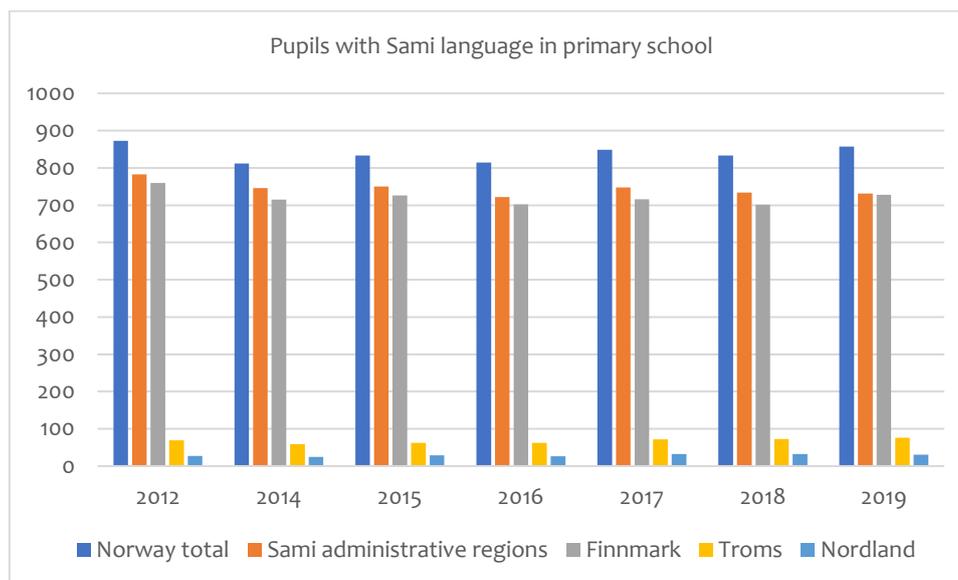
Figure 4: Population by Immigration Category



Ethnicity

Northern Norway is a region of people with diverse backgrounds in terms of culture, ethnicity, language and country of origin. Indigenous Sámi people, Kven/Norwegian Finnish, and the Norwegian population, together with immigrants, constitute a diverse region. It is difficult to define how many Sámi are living in Norway, because it is not permitted to register ethnicity in public registers (Pettersen, 2012), but it is common to estimate 50,000 Sámi living in Norway. Figure 5 offers an overview of the number of children using the Indigenous Sámi language as a learning language in the Norwegian school system (Statistics Norway, 2023b).

Figure 5: Pupils with Sámi Language as a Learning Language in Norwegian Schools



This figure demonstrates how diversity is manifested in the education system and that the Sámi language is an important aspect of education in the rural north, the region where most of the Sámi population live.

Sámi language and culture are included in education in Norway, both in the curricula and as an educational language. In the curriculum reform of the Norwegian school system in 2020, Sámi knowledge became even more integrated into the curricula. However, it is still far from well-integrated, and demographical inequality is still a challenge in the Norwegian education system. The drop-out rate for upper secondary school in the Sámi region of Norway is higher than in the rest of Norway, and is increasing (Sønstebo, 2021). Although most of the children with Sámi as their learning language live in the north, only a few Sámi children have Sámi language in school. Furthermore, the number of pupils with Sámi as a learning language declines rapidly from grade 1 to 10 (Vangberg, 2021).

This portrait is not exhaustive or complete, and supplementary descriptions could be added. However, we have outlined a portrait of a rural region that is not uniform nor one-dimensional, but rather diverse, encompassing complexity and multiplicity.

Discussion

Recognising Diverse Diversity in a Rural and Sparsely Populated Region

Even though Finnmark is a rural and sparsely populated area, like the rest of Norway this Arctic region has a relatively strong economy and the people enjoy a well-developed welfare service. Instead of high unemployment, local communities face a lack of qualified manpower, particularly within the health and education sector, and a lack of qualified doctors, nurses and teachers. Consequently, the region actively recruits employees internationally (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2020). Due to the Norwegian policy for refugees seeking asylum in Norway, many refugees are settled in rural areas in the Arctic north. Hence, the already diverse society has grown to be even more multifaceted and versatile during the last twenty years. Although immigration is lower than in other parts of Norway, 1 out of 10 people still have an immigrant background The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2022). Combined with the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity due to the traditional presence of the Sámi Kven/Norwegian Finnish, and Norwegian populations, the region is highly multifaceted.

Despite this multi-ethnic and geographically diverse society, schools are still struggling with the traditional unit-oriented curriculum, which ignores the diversity among the pupils. The Norwegian education system is directed towards the pupils' individual education and also plays an important role in dispersion for the labour market.

For generations, the drop-out rates in Norway have been higher in Northern Norway, especially in Finnmark, than in the central areas of Southern Norway. The variations in educational careers between rural areas in Northern Norway and urban areas in Southern Norway have for generations reflected the opportunity structure in the labour market (Paulgaard, 2017). This is one example of how practice is related to the manifestation of the world of work and education, which is manifested somewhat differently in different places.

From this perspective, it is possible to claim that in the rural and sparsely populated region, drop-out from upper secondary schools has not always been merely a problem for the person themselves. As we have seen in the portrait of rural Northern Norway, this might not necessarily mean that the person does not gain access to work that gives stability, both economically and in terms of life conditions. This may show how many young people follow other qualification trajectories than one based on normative deadlines and distinctions between education and work. However, when metrocentric norms for rapid completion of education are applied universally, alternative pathways and trajectories can appear as unproductive, unimportant and even deviant and stigmatised.

Huge attention has been given to drop-out rates from Norwegian education, among both politicians and educationalists. Specialised public and private employers have also expressed concern about high drop-out rates because they need skilled and qualified labour to solve challenges in society. However, the sparsely populated Finnmark region does not have resources to run upper secondary schools in every village. In fact, there are only ten upper secondary schools in this region, eight Norwegians and two Sámi. Therefore, many adolescents aged 16-19 have to leave home and live in a dormitory, in order to attend school. One young man, aged 17, from this Northern region had to leave home to attend upper secondary school. He was interviewed in an earlier study (Paulgaard, 2017, p. 5), and described how he blamed himself for not adhering to the normative deadline within upper secondary school:

When you move from home to live on your own, you do not have parents who are there to push you and get you up in the morning and go to school every day, so often you just stay at home (...). I should have done better. It is my fault, no-one else to blame – you have to take responsibility for what you do. I did not put priority on school. I was simply unable to.

This young man blames himself for not observing the 'cultural age deadlines'. He recognises that he deviates from the growing demands of formal education, prescribed by the universal age norms and youth trajectories. In this case, the structure of upper secondary schools in this area results in unequal opportunities for those who have upper secondary education available in their home area, and for those who do not and have to move away from home. Yet in this case individual explanations are given for the unequal structure – he blames himself for not doing better at school. This illustrates how univocal and undiversified the school system is experienced to be by the young people of the rural North. It reflects the narratives they are told. Below, however, we will give a portrait of a diverse and versatile rural region that does not correspond to the one-track option that the young man in these interviews feels that they are left with.

For many of them, like the young man referred to in this citation, moving from home can be challenging. It is not only important to keep up with schoolwork, get good grades and manage time for studying, but also to take care of everyday tasks, such as making dinner, buying groceries, and finding time for leisure activities and housework. This is challenging for young people, and many find the demands difficult to meet.

In addition to living in a new place, for some students the move from a village in one part of the county means a move from one cultural environment to another. Sámi adolescents who move to attend a Norwegian upper secondary school can find themselves living alone in a town where the attitude towards the Sámi minority is less tolerant and more negative. This is a common experience to which one of the popular young Sámi artists has given a face (Batalden & Thomassen, 2019). This puts an extra strain on the pupils' school attendance. Based on a universalised framework that disguises important diversity among young people, this kind of experience and practice can be overlooked, devalued and stigmatised.

The challenges of 'dropping out' by leaving upper secondary education are solely treated as problematic, and the contrastive aspect is not taken into consideration. For example, dropping out of upper secondary school is merely treated as a challenge in the northernmost rural region of Norway, without considering that many of the adolescents who drop out from school might gain well-paid work in service, industry, fishing, or aqua- or agriculture, and some take further education at an older age.

Valuing Diversity in Ideology in the Educational System

The metrocentric approach is fundamental to how modern societies have been understood, both in social theory and in popular imagination (Farrugia, 2014). Place and location have been linked to the past stability of 'pre-modern societies', whereas the present situation, characterised by unfettered flow and mobility, annihilates the value and purpose of place. This notion has commanded an important position in theories of modernity and social change, where modernisation is described as a process of urbanisation in which rural ways of living give way to an urban modernity (Farrugia, 2014). The geographer Doreen Massey (2005) characterised such "*evolutionary assumptions as the 'convening of contemporaneous geographical differences into temporal sequence', transforming the increasing inequality between different geographical areas into a story of 'catching up'*" (p. 82).

The core values of the Nordic education model are equality, inclusion and all-embracing social community (Lundahl, 2016). Despite these values and policies, the educational systems in the Nordic countries, as well as other countries, are based on national standards for both curriculum and educational practice for pupils and students. This corresponds with the two forms of universalism we addressed earlier in this paper: the metrocentric norms and goals of the curriculum, leaving out cultural, contextual differences disguised as 'equity', and the implicit deadlines within an age-segregated social order.

When norms for rapid completion of education apply because universally-oriented career paths are generalised, the existence of diversity can be overlooked and devalued. Critical discussions of values in education models and curricula are important to discover and open "*Invisible Fences*" (Gullestad, 2002), to create social justice for a diverse variety of rural youth, types of knowledge and career paths.

When the education system is not available in the adolescent's hometown and does not have an embedded multi-ethnic society, it will be exogenous and appear to be foreign. Despite society's diversity, the education system has not embedded this thoroughly in either the education system or the organisation of the system. Young people having to move, both in terms of place of residence and culturally, is not fully addressed in the quality assurance system used in the education system. Today's young people are still taking the same paths as the authors described for their own lives. Faced with the knowledge that they will have to move from their hometown to attend upper secondary school, it is logical that youth adapt their attitude to make sense of this. As a consequence, these pupils tend to adopt the idea that either their hometown is the wrong place, or the school is the wrong institution.

Conclusion

We conclude this paper with a call to include a rural perspective in the curriculum that recognises and values complexity and diversity in sparsely populated, yet vigorous societies.

We have reflected on our own experiences as educational researchers with origins in these rural contexts, and then broadened this into an overall consideration – asking what we can learn from each other to make meaningful, practical improvements to rural education. We have provided a portrait of a rural county in Northern Norway that has embedded diverse diversity, a place that cannot be described using a one-dimensional narrative. We argue for an understanding of rural regions that includes the variations. Being rural is not equivalent to being uniform, but can be a vibrant society with contrasts and juxtapositions. Furthermore, we argue in favour for education as a system that reflects the broad diversity of the pupils' lives and places. When the education system is centralised and universalistic, it must also include systems that allow the schools to contextualise the curricula. Instead, the Norwegian education system has developed an advanced arrangement, with national and international tests that do not take any contextual factors into account. The result is a circular argument whereby the schools receive low rankings based on universalistic, but unrealistic quality measures. Indeed, their students get low grades in schools that are universalistic and not contextualised. Since the schools get low rankings, they are supervised according to universalistic approaches. In this circle, the belief in universalistic approaches is unquestioned and upholds the circle, causing the school quality rankings to decline even further.

Based on this study we suggest a rural education perspective that takes location into account and emphasises the contextualisation of the curricula. The national curricula must accommodate and encompass the actual lives and multiple trajectories of pupils, and not be based on universalisms leaning on the linear understanding of one story, one world, everywhere. We will always argue against the principle of the same story everywhere and call for a rural education curriculum that is contextualised and can encompass diverse diversity.

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