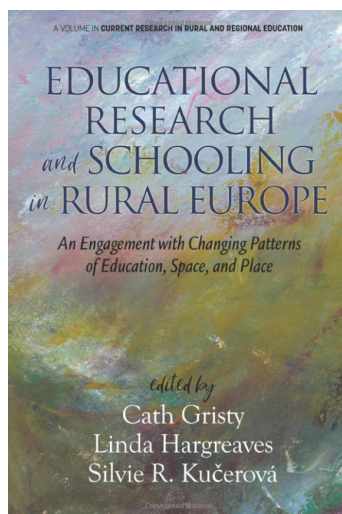


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Cath Gristy, Linda Hargreaves, and Silvie R. Kučerová, *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space and Place*, Information Age Publishing, 2020; 406 pp, ISBN: 978-1-64802-163-3

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The book *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space and Place* is a collection of papers authored by researchers across Europe. Edited by three outstanding researchers on rural schooling – Drs Cath Gristy, Linda Hargreaves and Silvie Kučerová – it brings together contributions of scholars from a range of social science disciplines, including education, geography, pedagogy, psychology and sociology. All of the authors have participated in one of the annual European Conferences on Educational Research (ECER) organised by the European Educational Research Association (EERA), in particular the sessions co-ordinated by the EERA Network 14: Communities, Families and Schooling in Educational Research.²



The book provides a solid account of the contexts and challenges of European rural schools and their communities in eleven European countries (Austria, Czechia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Spain and the United Kingdom) prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The foreword written by Kvalsund and the introduction by Hargreaves leave the reader with no doubt that the book sits firmly within the literature defying the 'deficit' view of rurality, which has been growing steadily over the past fifteen

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2 Dr Linda Hargreaves founded Network 14 with Professor Rune Kvalsund more than 25 years ago. Alongside Rune, Linda's contribution was essential for the development and consolidation of the network.

years (see also, *inter alia*, Roberts & Green, 2013 or Cuervo, 2016).

The deficit approach is rather limited and seems to lead to the same type of actions among policymakers with regard to rural schooling: the closure of rural schools. In this setting, urban educational provision fixes the norm, while rural educational provision is studied as ‘non-urban’ provision and is perceived as a problem. Falling short of the normal standard, it somehow needs to be modified, so it starts to move towards the benchmark. Through this lens, a rural school is too costly to run due to its size, making it inefficient and unsustainable in the long run. The chosen action is closure, thus enlarging a ‘nearby’ school.

An alternative approach that nuances this dichotomy and allows the rural to be considered on its own merits could avoid this trap, and this is exactly what the present book proposes: significant rural education research promoting rural education, thus making them both visible. The book’s message is clear: researching schooling in rural communities should not be marginalised. It promptly points out to the reader (or reminds them) that: (1) most areas in the European Union (EU 28) are rural (92%), and rural regions are home to a significant proportion of EU 28 residents (28% in 2015 according to Eurostat (2018, 2020)); and (2) “*Despite national variations, educational gaps³ between rural and cities populations are consistent and widening*” (p. 4).

As the reader progresses through the book, the guidance of the editors is felt. Each contribution is organised similarly: contributors define the concept of rural, and then describe the context and significance of rural education, the principal drivers of educational change in rural areas, and the nature and status of research on rural education provision. This pattern helps the reader to determine ‘common features’ on educational research and schooling in rural Europe. Firstly, there is no unique definition of ‘rural’ and ‘rural schools’ across Europe: the notion of rural depends on population size and density, while rural schools are often characterised by their size and location. Secondly, the rural schooling experience across Europe over the last five decades has been very diverse. The reader can fully appreciate this diversity from the different research perspectives and research questions due to the discipline heterogeneity of the contributors. Thirdly, a common pattern of change is clearly identified: rural school closure in the name of efficiency (cost saving) and/or improved quality of education provision. Throughout the book, the contributors systematically report a reduction in the number of rural schools since the middle of the twentieth century. This has occurred independent of place and is especially marked

3 The gaps are measured in terms of early school leaving rates among 20–24-year-olds; 18–24-year-olds who are not in employment, education or training; or 30–34-year-olds who have completed tertiary education.

in Central and Eastern Europe. All of the contributions help the reader to gain a better understanding of the impact of rural school closures in their respective communities, while some of them elaborate on the communities' responses and the lessons drawn by policymakers.

The book has four parts and contains sixteen chapters. The first part (Chapters 2 and 3) characterises rural education in Europe. The second part (Chapters 4 to 12) presents a series of case studies, not only from Western Europe (Austria, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain), but also from four countries that emerged from former socialist states (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Serbia). The third part (Chapters 13 and 14) analyses schooling in rural settings from the theoretical lenses in England, while the fourth and final part (Chapters 15 and 16) serves as a conclusion.

Part I provides an overview of rural education issues across Europe. Chapter 2 highlights the factors influencing elementary systems in the eleven countries represented in the book, distinguishing education policy factors from political and economic factors, as well as physical geographic and sociocultural factors. It stresses how diverse rural education is in the countries studied in terms of conditions and spatial distribution (thus providing strong arguments for the importance of examining rural issues from a collection of case studies). This distinction facilitates the understanding of the context of and responses to school closures presented in the following chapters: clustering strategies, communities' resilience (or fatalism?), and the degree of autonomy of the local authority (and conversely the degree of centralisation). Chapter 3 offers a comparison of the effects of globalisation in rural communities in Finland and Norway. It notably investigates the impact of school closures on children's commutes to school and on their physical and mental health. It also examines school-community relationships and how their strength can influence the school closure process.

Part II has 9 chapters. Each chapter proposes an examination of rural schooling in a specific country over several decades, often accompanied with the comprehensive analysis of a case study. Chapters 4 to 7 focus on four Central and Eastern European countries, while Chapters 8 to 12 deal with five Western European countries.

In the four Central and Eastern European countries, the post-socialist era is characterised by decentralisation of policymaking at different speeds, but with similar outcomes: the significant closure of rural schools. Chapter 4 explains how the radical reforms in Hungary have reshaped the rural school network at the expense of many children, especially Roma children. Chapter 5 proposes the insightful use of geography of education, detailing the

changing spatial distribution of primary education provision over several years in Czechia. Chapter 6 stresses the degree to which the transfer of the running of primary schools to the hands of local authorities in Poland has been especially challenging for rural communities. Chapter 7 is devoted to Serbia, perhaps a less familiar country, as it is still negotiating its membership to the European Union, constructively making the case for the improvement of Serbian rural education provision by suggesting seven changes. It concludes with a presentation of the concept of *rural educational tourism* aimed at supporting local communities.

The following chapters lead the reader to the better-known territories of Western Europe, which have also been characterised by significant closures of rural schools over the past fifty years. Chapter 8 presents a remarkable account of the changes in terms of perceptions of rural schools and policymaking in Spain over five decades. It notably examines the lasting effects of the deficit view on Spanish rural schools in the 1960s and highlights how the recognition of educational contexts has led to some innovative strategic initiatives for working in small rural schools. Chapter 9 points out a surprising effect of the use of the Montessori concept to prevent the closure of small rural school in Austria. If the brand attracts new pupils, it may deter the locals. Chapter 10 explains how the isolation of schools in remote Italian mountains or on small islands could be overcome by the use of distance learning activities. Chapter 11 describes the practice of amalgamating small schools in the Netherlands and analyses the subsequent relationship between small school principals and multi-board schools. The final chapter of Part II turns the attention of the reader to Finland and school network planning, giving an enlightened account of how recent changes in the consultation process in school planning can develop new understandings between the local community and policymakers.

Part III highlights how theoretical concepts developed by Bourdieu (Chapter 13) and Lefebvre (Chapter 14) can offer new understandings of case study research. Both of the case studies referred to took place in England over a period of three years. It is instructive to read about the change in the degree of the interaction/engagement of a (primary) headteacher with the local community over this period (Chapter 13), and about the role school played in the lives of young people in an isolated village, highlighting the negative discourse of the inhabitants and the picturesque representation from outsiders (Chapter 14).

Last but not least, Part IV ends the book on a useful note with two chapters and an appendix. The two chapters offer an excellent summary of the changing patterns of education, space and pace detailed throughout the book (the use of Kvalsund and Hargreaves' (2009) space and time typology of

research designs is particularly judicious) and the innovative strategies identified by the contributors. The short appendix provides a much-needed discussion around the ‘migrant crisis in Europe’, a theme largely unaccounted for in the previous parts of the book and too often viewed as a threat by mass media and politicians.

Overall, the book offers an excellent overview of educational research and rural schooling in Europe. It is an essential book for experienced researchers and early career researchers in the field, as well as anyone wishing to work in the field in the near future or simply wanting to learn more about the topic. Part II is perhaps the book’s strongest asset, with a special accolade to the chapters on Central and Eastern European countries, as educational research from these countries remains under-reported in the Western European educational literature. In any case, any reader unfamiliar with the education system of the country studied and/or with the related literature (often inaccessible due to the language barrier⁴) will benefit from the encounter with them, while the variety of research methods used by the different contributors allows the reader to appreciate the methodological breadth of the field. In addition, as the contributors belong to distinct academic disciplines, the range of topics and their contrasting discussions guarantee very enjoyable reading.

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4 One of the objectives of the book is to ensure that the contributors are citizens of the nation states they present.