Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Teachers and Teaching
theory and practice

ISSN: 1354-0602 (Print) 1470-1278 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctat20

Teaching in place: rural pedagogical work, spatial inequality, and symbolic orders in a Swedish valley

Peter Erlandson

To cite this article: Peter Erlandson (25 Aug 2026): Teaching in place: rural pedagogical work, spatial inequality, and symbolic orders in a Swedish valley, Teachers and Teaching, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2026.2724044

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2026.2724044

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 25 Aug 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 234

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ctat20

TEACHERS AND TEACHING
https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2026.2724044

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Teaching in place: rural pedagogical work, spatial inequality, and symbolic orders in a Swedish valley

Peter Erlandson

Department of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Linnaeus University, Vaxjo, Sweden

ABSTRACT

his article explores how teaching is enacted in a rural Swedish school situated in the Vega Valley, focusing on how educators handle the intersection of national curricular mandates, spatial marginality, and locally rooted student aspirations. Drawing on ethnographic data—including interviews, fieldnotes, and classroom observations—we examine how teachers mediate between institutional expectations and the social and symbolic landscape of rural life. Inspired by Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Massey's notion of relational space, the analysis reveals how dominant definitions of educational value often render rural knowledge forms invisible. Teachers engage in translational pedagogical work: adapting curricula to agrarian and forest-based practices, mobilising digital tools such as Minecraft for sustainability projects, and addressing temporal rhythms shaped by agricultural labour. Yet these efforts are largely individualised and structurally unsupported. The study contributes to international scholarship on rural education and teaching by reasserting the epistemological legitimacy of rural contexts and calling for policies and teacher education that recognise rurality not as an exception, but as a generative site of pedagogical theorising and professional innovation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2025
Accepted 21 August 2026

KEYWORDS
Rural teacher agency; rural schooling; symbolic recognition in education; place-based pedagogy; rural teaching; Sweden

1. Introduction

This study contributes to research on teaching in rural schools (in this journal see for example (Cui et al., 2022; Hickman et al., 2025; Wang & Lo, 2022; Zhao et al., 2025)). Rural schools have increasingly become focal points in academic and political discussions concerning equity, inclusion, and the spatial distribution of educational opportunities. These schools are often located in contexts marked by economic decline, depopulation, and centralisation of public services, raising questions about the capacity of education to sustain local communities (Bæck, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Kvalsund, 2019). While education is increasingly recognised as a vital component of rural development, teaching in rural schools remains a multifaceted endeavour shaped by both spatial and symbolic factors.

CONTACT Peter Erlandson peter.erlandson@lnu.se Department of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Linnaeus University, Vaxjo SE 351 95, Sweden

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Teaching in rural schools involves more than professional adaptation; it is a complex practice embedded in overlapping structural, cultural, and institutional conditions. Research has shown that the norms and expectations embedded in national curricula, teacher education programmes, and accountability systems are often informed by urban-centric perspectives that fail to recognise or value rural knowledge, practices, and forms of capital (Delahunty & Hellwig, 2022; White & Kline, 2012). Furthermore, Swedish rural schools operate under conditions of both material and symbolic constraint. They are often small, multi-graded, and subject to staff shortages, while being expected to fulfil the same curricular mandates as their urban counterparts. Teachers in these contexts must act as both educational professionals and community members, working within the tensions between national demands and local expectations.

This article is based on ethnographic research and investigates how teaching unfolds in one Swedish rural school, with a focus on the intersections of place, policy, and pedagogy (see also, Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields and Doreen Massey's relational conception of space, the study explores how teachers interpret and respond to the symbolic hierarchies and material conditions that shape their work. Teaching is understood here not simply as instructional delivery but as a socially embedded practice situated in broader social relations. Moreover, this study is part of a larger project that spanned from 2022 to 2025, aiming to expand the field of rural studies by addressing a research gap related to education and particularly teaching in rural communities.[1]

1.1. Research questions

The study addresses three interrelated questions that explore the socio-spatial and pedagogical aspects of teaching in rural schools:

(1) How are different forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital articulated and distributed in teaching practices at rural schools?
(2) How is place constructed in the daily school environment, and in what ways do local experiences interact or conflict with national and global educational ideals?
(3) In what ways does symbolic capital manifest in everyday teaching, and how is this connected to the school's spatial and social position within the national educational field?

2. Previous research

Research on rural education has examined the conditions under which teaching takes place in geographically dispersed contexts. Earlier studies have shown that these conditions are not only spatial but also institutional and social, including limited access to resources, fewer opportunities for professional development, and forms of professional isolation (Corbett, 2007; Mitescu Reagan et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2010). These studies also point to how rural schools are often positioned at the margins of national education systems, both materially and symbolically. Subsequent research has reinforced these findings while providing more detailed accounts of how such conditions shape teachers' everyday work, including the organisation of teaching,

relationships with students and communities, and access to professional support (Schafft, 2016). More recent studies extend this line of work by showing how teachers' work is shaped by policy expectations and by how rural schools are positioned within broader education systems, including processes of evaluation, accountability, and reform (Lampert et al., 2026; McKeon et al., 2024). Additional work on rural schooling also notes variation across contexts, indicating that local histories, demographics, and institutional arrangements influence how these conditions are experienced in practice (Østergaard et al., 2024; White & Corbett, 2014).

Recruitment and retention of teachers remain central issues in rural education. A large body of research shows that rural schools face ongoing difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers due to restricted career pathways, distance from professional networks, and social disconnection (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Juusola et al., 2026; Kvalsund, 2019). Teaching roles in rural schools often include a wider range of responsibilities, such as administrative work, pastoral care, and extracurricular activities, which may contribute to increased workload and professional strain. Earlier studies describe these features as structural characteristics of rural schooling, while more recent research suggests that retention should be understood as a process rather than a fixed outcome. Teachers continuously reassess their professional situation in relation to changing working conditions, personal circumstances, and future opportunities (Lampert et al., 2026). Studies of early-career teachers further indicate that initial placement experiences and access to mentoring can influence longer-term retention patterns, particularly in rural contexts where support structures are uneven (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Kvalsund, 2019).

Alongside this body of work, a number of studies have challenged deficit-oriented perspectives on rural schooling. Rather than focusing primarily on constraints, these studies document strengths such as close relationships between teachers and students, stronger links to local communities, and the potential for place-based pedagogies (Schafft, 2016; White & Corbett, 2014). Such perspectives suggest that rural schools may offer conditions that support alternative forms of pedagogy and professional practice, particularly where teaching is closely connected to local contexts and knowledge. Empirical studies also indicate that teachers' sense of recognition and belonging within local communities can contribute to their professional commitment and decisions to remain in rural schools. Related research on youth and place further shows how local attachments and community relations shape educational aspirations and experiences, which in turn affect teaching and learning practices in rural settings (Cuervo & Miranda, 2019; Østergaard et al., 2024).

Teacher education is a recurring theme in the literature. Earlier research emphasises the need to include rural perspectives in teacher education and to prepare teachers for multi-grade teaching and resource variability (White & Kline, 2012; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). This includes developing pedagogical approaches that are responsive to small school contexts and diverse student groups. In addition, research has shown that teacher education is shaped by policy frameworks that influence professional expectations, accountability, and teacher identity (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021; Lundqvist & Westerlund, 2024). These studies highlight how teacher education is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills, but also about becoming a particular kind of professional subject within specific policy contexts. Further work indicates that links between universities and rural schools, including practicum placements and partnership models, can

support context-sensitive preparation, although such arrangements are unevenly developed across systems (White & Kline, 2012; Reid et al., 2010).

Rural teaching is also characterised by pedagogical complexity. Teachers are often required to plan and teach across multiple subjects and levels simultaneously, which places demands on both content knowledge and organisational skills. Earlier studies point to the limited availability of targeted professional development for these conditions, while more recent research emphasises the importance of collegial relations and professional networks for supporting teachers' learning and wellbeing (Smala et al., 2026). In rural schools, where staff numbers are small, these relations can be decisive for sustaining professional practice over time and for developing locally relevant pedagogical approaches. Additional studies note that digital tools and remote collaboration may mitigate some forms of isolation, but access and implementation vary across contexts (McKeon et al., 2024).

2.1. Policy context and structural conditions

Research on educational policy shows that reforms are not implemented uniformly, but are interpreted and adapted in local contexts (Ball, 2003; A. Braun & Maguire, 2020). This is particularly evident in rural schools, where national policies are enacted under conditions that differ from those assumed in policy design. As a result, policy must be understood as something that is translated into practice rather than simply implemented as written. Studies of policy enactment show that teachers interpret, adjust, and sometimes resist policy demands in relation to local conditions. This process relies on professional judgement and is shaped by available resources, organisational structures, and local priorities. In rural schools, enactment often involves reconciling policy requirements with small-scale organisation, limited staffing, and close relations to the community. Swedish studies show that policy enactment depends on teachers' and principals' sensemaking, as well as access to time, professional development, and organisational support (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021; Lundqvist & Westerlund, 2024). Complementary work indicates that enactment is also influenced by local leadership practices and existing professional cultures, which mediate how reforms are interpreted and prioritised (A. Braun & Maguire, 2020; Gunter, 2011).

Policy also affects teachers' working conditions and professional roles. Earlier work links policy to changing forms of accountability, performativity, and control (Ball, 2003; Gunter, 2011). More recent studies connect these conditions to retention, showing how workload, accountability demands, and organisational pressures influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave (Lampert et al., 2026). These dynamics are particularly visible in rural settings, where fewer staff must meet similar policy demands as larger schools. Research also points to cumulative effects of multiple reforms, where overlapping initiatives can increase administrative demands and reduce time for teaching (A. Braun & Maguire, 2020).

Structural differences between urban and rural schools are also reflected in policy frameworks. Policies often assume levels of scale, resources, and specialisation that are more typical of urban contexts (Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Miranda, 2019). This can result in tensions between policy requirements and local practices. Empirical studies show how broader institutional and political environments shape teachers' work and professional

agency in rural settings (Hickman et al., 2025). Additional research suggests that funding models and accountability metrics may disadvantage smaller schools by not accounting for context-specific constraints (Reid et al., 2010; Schafft, 2016).

Policy also intersects with curriculum and teaching content. Research demonstrates that curriculum assumptions can marginalise students whose experiences do not align with dominant norms (Kim, 2024; Roberts, 2014). In rural contexts, this raises questions about how curriculum is interpreted and adapted to local conditions, and how teaching can be made relevant to students' lived experiences. Studies of place-based education indicate that integrating local knowledge can support engagement and learning, while also aligning curriculum with community contexts (White & Corbett, 2014). Moreover, studies of rural education reforms show that teachers respond to policy through processes of adjustment, negotiation, and partial implementation (Cui et al., 2022; Hickman et al., 2025). These responses are shaped by local conditions, available resources, and professional judgement. Across studies, policy outcomes vary depending on context, rather than following a uniform pattern. Further evidence suggests that teachers' responses may include strategic compliance, selective implementation, and locally adapted practices, reflecting attempts to align policy with feasible teaching arrangements (A. Braun & Maguire, 2020).

Yet, rural education policy remains vague or absent. Instead, rural schools are often mentioned only within broader national strategies for digitalisation or equity, which seldom address the specific structural and pedagogical issues they face (Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Lundahl, 2016). This situation invites closer attention to how rural schools operate within these conditions. Rather than framing rural schooling through the lens of lack or failure, it becomes important to examine how policies, spatial factors, and institutional norms shape daily teaching work. Understanding these processes requires analytical tools that can trace how power, place, and institutional expectations influence the organisation and experience of education.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a relational perspective on education and combines Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice with Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of space and place. The two approaches address different aspects of the same problem. Bourdieu provides a framework for analysing how social relations, forms of capital, and processes of recognition structure educational practice, while Massey offers a way of understanding space and place as relational and processual (Massey, 1994, 2005). Taken together, they allow an analysis of rural schooling as produced through both social and spatial relations.

Bourdieu's framework centres on the concepts of capital, field, habitus, and symbolic violence, including language (Bourdieu, 1991, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Capital refers to resources that acquire value within specific social contexts, including cultural, social, economic, and symbolic forms. Their value is not fixed but depends on recognition within a field. Education constitutes such a field, where particular forms of knowledge and ways of acting are legitimised. Research shows that schools tend to privilege forms of cultural capital associated with dominant social groups, while other forms are given less value (Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2006). In rural contexts, this includes locally grounded

knowledge, practical competences, and forms of experience tied to place, which may not align with curricular and assessment frameworks (Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2016).

The concept of field directs attention to how schools are positioned within broader systems of power. Educational fields are structured by policy, accountability frameworks, and dominant understandings of knowledge and achievement (Ball, 2003). Rural schools often occupy marginal positions within these fields, where expectations are shaped by assumptions that do not correspond to local conditions. This has implications for both teaching and learning, as it defines what is recognised as legitimate practice. However, habitus links these structural conditions to practice. It refers to dispositions formed through social and material conditions, which orient how individuals perceive and act (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In rural contexts, habitus is shaped by local histories, labour markets, and everyday practices. This affects how students relate to schooling and how teachers interpret their work. It also influences aspirations, including orientations towards staying, leaving, or combining local attachment with mobility (Cuervo & Miranda, 2019; Østergaard et al., 2024). Symbolic violence, in turn, describes how inequalities are reproduced through processes of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1991, 1998). Dominant standards appear neutral but favour particular social and cultural backgrounds. In education, this can involve the devaluation of knowledge and experiences that do not align with dominant norms. Research on rural schooling shows how such processes can shape expectations and participation, not through explicit exclusion but through taken-for-granted hierarchies of value (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015).

While Bourdieu provides a relational account of social structure, Massey extends the analysis by focusing on space and place. Place is understood not as a fixed location but as the outcome of intersecting social relations that extend across time and space (Massey, 1994, 2005). From this perspective, rural schools are not isolated units but part of wider networks, including migration, policy processes, economic change, and digital connections. These relations are present in everyday educational practice. Massey's approach also emphasises that places are constituted through multiple temporalities. Past experiences, institutional histories, and anticipated futures all contribute to how places are understood and lived. In rural school contexts, this includes local narratives, previous reforms, and expectations about future opportunities. Students' aspirations are shaped within these contexts and are linked to how places are positioned within broader socio-spatial relations.

Combining these perspectives makes it possible to analyse teaching as a socio-spatial practice. Bourdieu's concepts make visible how value is assigned to different forms of knowledge and how this relates to social structure. Massey's framework situates these processes within spatial relations and shows how they vary across contexts. This combination allows an examination of how teaching is shaped by both institutional expectations and the spatial positioning of the school. The framework is used in this study to analyse how teaching practices in a rural school are formed through the interaction between policy, local conditions, and broader structures of inequality. It directs attention to how teachers work within these conditions, how knowledge is valued in practice, and how spatial and social relations intersect in everyday teaching.

4. Method

4.1. Ethnographic design and theoretical orientation

This study is situated within the Swedish branch of the Scandinavian ethnographic tradition, which has evolved since the late 1960s and is characterised by long-term, situated engagement in the field (Erlandson & Karlsson, 2018; Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Erlandson et al., 2023). Central to this tradition is an emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals in institutional and local contexts, with close attention to how these are shaped by broader social, political, and cultural structures. Rather than seeking generalisability, this ethnographic approach aims to capture the intricacies of human life by attending to contradictions, contested meanings, and the richness of everyday practices as they unfold over time.

Researchers working in this tradition embrace a theoretically informed yet empirically grounded mode of inquiry. The approach supports continuous reflection on how individual actions relate to collective practices and institutional frameworks. Research processes are structured to accommodate both inductive and deductive reasoning, enabling researchers to engage in a sustained theoretical dialogue throughout the course of the project. Conceptual frameworks are not static but serve as evolving tools that guide interpretation, provoke new questions, and foster theoretical innovation.

In this study, key decisions regarding field site selection, the duration of engagement, and the inclusion of participants were guided by the typologies developed by Jeffrey and Troman (2004). While specific research questions were not fully articulated at the outset, a broad orientation towards understanding everyday educational practices informed the initial stages of fieldwork. Early on, the researchers refrained from drawing rigid distinctions between roles such as teacher and principal. This open approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the school as a professional and social environment.

4.2. The project's research site

This three-year ethnographic project began in the spring of 2022 and ended in 2025. It involves three schools located in separate municipalities in the southern half of Sweden, each approximately 300 kilometres apart. Although these rural communities share some structural and demographic characteristics they also differ in important ways. As is often revealed through sustained ethnographic fieldwork, close engagement with a particular context tends to bring its distinctiveness to the fore. Consequently, the analysis presented in this article concentrates on one school and its surrounding locality: the Vega Valley. Insights from the other two sites have nevertheless informed the interpretation of this case by providing comparative reference points and a broader contextual understanding.

Sweden, with a population slightly exceeding 10 million, includes ten cities with more than 100,000 residents, and 115 smaller cities with populations between 10,000 and 100,000, collectively accounting for 63% of the national population (Statistics Sweden, 2023). The three locations included in this study fall within the category of 'rural municipality' as defined by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise—characterised by having fewer than 15,000 inhabitants in the largest locality and low rates of commuting (under 30%) (The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, 2023). Moreover, Biddle and

Azano (2016) convincingly demonstrate that 'rural' is not a fixed or stable concept but rather one that has changed in relation to broader social transformations. Similarly, the meanings attached to 'rural' and 'rurality' vary across different geographical and cultural contexts. What is understood as rural in Sweden—situated in Western Europe, one of the world's most urbanised and digitalised regions with long-established cities—differs significantly from understandings of rurality in, for example, parts of Australia or Africa. At the same time, northern Sweden, located in the far north of Europe, includes extensive sparsely populated areas that in some respects resemble rural and remote communities found in the interior regions of countries such as Spain.

4.3. Vega valley

The school and surrounding community analysed here, called Vega Valley, are located in a rural area with approximately 4,500 inhabitants. The community is the most remote of the three project sites, with considerable distance to the nearest city, Bixbo. The area is primarily agricultural, with a local economy based on farming, forestry, and livestock production. The settlement pattern consists of dispersed farms and small clusters of buildings, including a grocery store, private homes, and a school facility with an adjacent library. The community reflects a longstanding rural working-class ethos, where ties to the land and multigenerational family continuity remain significant. Many children live on family farms where agricultural work continues to play a visible, if varied, role in everyday life. Parents frequently combine farming with other forms of employment, typically in daytime shifts. The social fabric is deeply rooted in the locality, with many residents having grown up, settled, and raised families in the same area (Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025).

The school in Vega Valley serves approximately 260 pupils from grades one through six and is staffed by 25 teachers. The school building consists of an older section and a newer wing constructed in 2018. As part of the expansion, a well-equipped gymnasium was added, which is used both during school hours for physical education and in the evenings by local sports clubs for matches and tournaments. The former gym was converted into a school library, which also functions as a municipal branch library accessible to the public. Given the school's wide catchment area, many pupils commute considerable distances—some spending up to an hour each way on school buses. A similar pattern applies to teachers, although a notable number reside locally or in nearby towns and have returned to the area after time away. The school's pupils reflect a range of educational needs, with several requiring specialised support, although the school population is linguistically uniform, with no students enrolled in Swedish as a second language programs. Recently arrived students from Ukraine have integrated into the school community and display strong Swedish language skills.

The school grounds are expansive and well-equipped, featuring a football field, basketball hoops, a ping-pong table, and a playground. Nearby facilities include a grocery store, a hair salon, and a church, further underscoring the school's central role in the local area. For many pupils, daily life is shaped by the school bus schedule, which limits flexibility for social activities outside of school hours. Few children are able to visit friends in the afternoons, and therefore, the after-school programme functions as an important space for continued interaction and care. Approximately 55 children

regularly attend the programme, where they eat meals—including breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snacks—and participate in recreational activities. The school has also taken proactive steps in implementing digital tools for learning. As early as 2011, the school began integrating computers into classroom instruction, made possible by project-based municipal funding. Some of these devices were procured through leasing agreements, while others—such as tablets—were acquired using dedicated project resources.

Furthermore, Vega Valley does not have an upper secondary school offering national academic programmes that qualify students for higher education. Students who wish to pursue post-secondary studies must therefore commute to the nearest city, Bixbo. Within Vega Valley, upper secondary education is primarily limited to locally oriented vocational programmes, where aspirations for further academic study are generally low. These programmes include one-year courses preparing students for work as nannies or care assistants, while the majority are focused on farming and other agricultural occupations.

4.4. Fieldwork and data generation

Fieldwork was conducted over an extended period to allow for immersion in the research setting and to foster trust and rapport with participants. Both formal and informal interviews were central to data collection, supplemented by extensive participatory observations across multiple school settings. This combination of methods was chosen to enable close attention to what people say as well as what they do in context. Interviews and observations were documented through detailed field notes and audio recordings, all of which were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Particular care was taken in translation to retain the nuance and situated meanings of participants' statements. Rather than treating data as discrete units, transcripts and field notes were read holistically to preserve the social and cultural logics embedded in them. Selected transcripts and observational accounts were incorporated into the data corpus to provide insight into the institutional, professional, and personal landscapes inhabited by school staff.

In keeping with ethnographic best practices, reflexivity was an ongoing part of the research process. Researchers regularly examined their own assumptions, positions, and potential influences on the field and the data. This reflexive stance not only strengthened the ethical foundations of the study but also contributed to the credibility and transparency of the interpretations presented (Wolcott, 2008). Researchers understood themselves as both observers and participants in the field, recognising that knowledge production was co-constructed with those involved in the research (Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025).

4.5. Analytical procedures and thematic organisation

The analysis followed an iterative and layered process, combining ethnographic sensibilities with a systematic approach to thematic analysis. The initial stage of analysis began shortly after fieldwork concluded. At this point, handwritten and digital notes were transcribed and thematically sorted to provide an overview of recurring patterns. These early categorisations provided a foundation for more detailed analytic engagement.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by V. Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to systematically identify, examine, and interpret recurring patterns in the dataset. Themes were defined as features of the data that captured essential aspects of participants' experiences and provided insight into their perspectives. The process began with close readings of the full data corpus, supported by detailed note-taking to capture initial ideas. These impressions informed the generation of preliminary codes—short, descriptive tags highlighting salient features of the material.

Following initial coding, data segments were grouped into provisional thematic clusters. These clusters were revisited and refined in relation to the broader dataset. This ongoing refinement ensured that themes were internally coherent, distinct from one another, and meaningfully connected to the study's guiding questions. The iterative nature of this process enabled responsiveness to emergent insights and allowed for theoretical re-engagement throughout the course of analysis. The final themes were illustrated with carefully selected, vivid excerpts from the data, chosen for their ability to convey key meanings and represent broader patterns in participants' accounts. Throughout this process, the analysis was informed by a theoretical framework that shaped the interpretation of empirical findings and facilitated deeper understanding. In turn, the empirical material challenged and extended the theoretical concepts brought to bear. This reciprocal movement between theory and data is typical of ethnographic inquiry, where writing itself becomes an act of analysis and knowledge production.

4.6. Validity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations

The study was guided by established criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, particularly those articulated by Guba and Lincoln (1994); see also Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2025). Credibility was pursued through methodological transparency, systematic documentation, and the inclusion of numerous illustrative excerpts. The aim was not to provide exhaustive coverage, but to offer thick, contextualised descriptions that make the interpretive process traceable and open to scrutiny.

Depth was prioritised over scope in the selection and presentation of data. The value of ethnographic research lies in its capacity to illuminate social life from within—capturing tensions, complexities, and the textures of experience in situ (Marcus, 1995). The teachers who participated in the study contributed detailed, thoughtful reflections on their work and lives. These contributions formed the empirical foundation for the themes identified and provided insight into the broader institutional and societal contexts in which they operate.

Given the reliance on audio-recorded interviews, the study also reflects on the translation of verbal interaction into textual form. This transformation—from speech to transcript, and from Swedish to English—was approached with care to preserve the integrity and intent of participants' statements. The transcripts included in the findings are intended to convey not just content but tone, emphasis, and context, offering readers an interpretive window into the research encounter.

Respectful relationships with participants were central to the success of the project. Ethical engagement extended beyond formal consent to include ongoing dialogue, attentiveness to participants' concerns, and recognition of their knowledge contributions. Access was not merely granted but cultivated through sustained interaction, and the

resulting material reflects the depth made possible by these relationships (Walford, 2008). The project has been reviewed and approved by the *Swedish Ethical Review Authority*.

5. Result

Our ethnographic analysis attends to the social and cultural specificities of the research site, tracing the evolution of the study over time. The findings are organised around three key themes developed in the results section: *Symbolic Hierarchies and the Framing of Educational Worth*, *Teaching within a Spatially Situated Field of Expectations*, and *Knowledge, Recognition, and Curricular Authority*.

5.1. Symbolic hierarchies and the framing of educational worth

Teachers in Vega Valley work an educational context in which institutional definitions of value often contrast with the forms of capital students bring with them. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1998) framework, this section examines how the national curriculum and school culture reproduce hierarchies that privilege abstract and mobile aspirations while assigning less value to embodied, place-bound, and manual forms of knowledge. Massey's (2005) insights into place as contested and relational further highlight how these symbolic orders are anchored in spatial inequalities. Across interviews and field-notes, a recurring pattern emerges: the cultural capital favoured by schools—academic abstraction, detachment from locality, and textual fluency—rarely aligns with the dis-positions and aspirations of students embedded in a rural lifeworld. These mismatches are neither accidental nor benign; they are constitutive of how educational worth is defined and legitimated within the educational field. In Bourdieu's terms, the school privileges forms of cultural capital more closely aligned with institutionally dominant norms, while locally grounded competencies are more weakly recognised within the formal structures of schooling. 'I want to work on the farm. I must work there, otherwise I can't live there.' (Field Interview)

This pupil's statement exemplifies how the conditions of life in Vega Valley structure what is imaginable, desirable, and necessary. Educational engagement is not framed as a route to broader possibilities but as a potential interruption of familial and local continuity. As a teacher explains: 'Some of them just say, "I'm going to stay on the farm," or the goal is to get a truck licence or forestry machine qualification. Then that's it.' (Interview, Dennis—Teacher). When contextualised within local expectations and infrastructures, it becomes evident that these aspirations are rational and culturally affirmed. As another teacher described, many pupils 'know quite a bit' but see 'no point in proving it' (Interview, Dennis—Teacher), as academic validation does not visibly correspond to the forms of future recognition available within the local context. The issue is therefore not an absence of competence, but the unequal symbolic value assigned to different forms of knowledge and future orientation.

Furthermore, this is not to say pupils lack imagination or ambition. Rather, their sense of what is realistic or meaningful emerges from a habitus deeply shaped by place-based histories, kinship networks, and material constraints. A particularly illus-trative moment comes from a classroom writing exercise in which students were

asked to reflect on their future careers. Only one boy expressed a desire to become a farmer—despite the majority living on farms—while others cited ambitions such as becoming an excavator operator, a football commentator, or a hairdresser (Fieldnote 7). These choices are mediated by digital imaginaries, family expectations, and embodied experience. Tina, a ten-year-old girl, wrote that her dream was 'to become rich.' When asked what inspired this, she cited a character from a superhero film she had seen on a TV channel. Her subsequent explanation was deeply intertwined with personal experience—her parents had once travelled to Hawaii without taking her, and she now imagined earning enough to bring her family back there. Her imagined future oscillated between local rootedness (living on her friend's farm) and global luxury (travelling abroad). These layered aspirations illustrate how local attachment, digital imaginaries, and global mobility intersect in children's understandings of the future. Despite such imaginative multiplicity, the symbolic structure of schooling continues to privilege narrow forms of aspiration. Teaching practices attempt to bridge this gap. One teacher explicitly described her efforts to connect mathematics with agricultural knowledge: 'Why are we learning this in maths? Well, think about when you're sowing crops. You'll need to calculate the ratio of fertiliser to seed.' (Interview, Emelie—Teacher).

This strategy attempts to make curricular knowledge intelligible and justifiable within the cultural logic of farming life. However, such translations remain compensatory. The curriculum does not begin from students' lifeworlds but is instead adapted to accommodate them. In this sense, teachers work within a field structured by institutional definitions of legitimate knowledge that only partially correspond to pupils' everyday experiences. The burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on rural pupils and their teachers. This is further compounded by symbolic exclusions that go unmarked. In one interview, a teacher noted how religious minority students regularly took leave during certain periods, but this was always arranged privately by parents. Institutional practices were not adjusted; instead, students quietly adapted themselves: 'Those students usually take leave on those days—or more precisely, their parents request it.' (Teacher interview, Fieldnote 8)

This quiet acquiescence signals how school norms are stabilised—not through coercion, but through routinised inattention to difference. This can be understood as a form of symbolic marginalisation in which rural and minority students are required to adapt to institutional norms not designed with them in mind. Such processes resemble what Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence, where dominant norms become normalised and alternatives are rendered less visible or legitimate. Moreover, teachers, too, experience the tensions of symbolic ordering. In Vega Valley's recent history, a protracted conflict occurred between the school and influential farming families who viewed formal education as irrelevant. Teachers were described as outsiders; some eventually left, and unqualified staff were brought in. The school's ranking dropped significantly. Over time, a new leadership team reversed this trend, restoring curricular focus and hiring experienced staff. But this history continues to shape the relationship between teachers and families. The same ambiguity appears in present-day encounters. While the school now enjoys greater parental cooperation—evidenced by projects such as tree planting in the schoolyard—many pupils remain guided by inherited scripts. Teachers repeatedly observe that pupils 'are satisfied with lower grades' and 'don't aim higher' because

their parents see no point in pursuing education beyond vocational training: 'The parents signal that it is enough to complete vocational training.'(Fieldnote F12)

As Rose, a teacher who grew up in a similar rural context, explained, even when children do not intend to stay on the farm, they are seldom encouraged to explore alternatives. The absence of visible role models or viable routes to higher education within the community reinforces this bounded horizon. Certain educational trajectories therefore acquire greater symbolic legitimacy than others, particularly those already recognised within the local social world. Teachers are thus positioned within a field of competing legitimacies. They are professionally responsible for delivering a curriculum that indexes success to upward mobility, abstract knowledge, and urban futures. Yet, they teach in a locality where these very signifiers are either inaccessible or culturally alien. Their work entails constant labour to validate students' experiences while simultaneously preparing them for futures that may neither be imagined nor desired. The cost of this symbolic misalignment is not only borne by students. Teachers, too, must navigate their own position within a system that demands fidelity to curricular standards while ignoring the lived textures of the communities they serve. Their pedagogical agency is shaped by symbolic hierarchies that assign uneven value to different forms of success, learning, and aspiration.

5.2. Teaching in a spatially situated field of expectations

Teaching in Vega Valley unfolds within a landscape shaped by interwoven spatial, economic, and institutional forces. Massey's conceptualisation of place as relational and materially saturated enables a deeper understanding of how local attachments, geographic remoteness, and symbolic positioning frame the conditions under which teachers work and pupils learn. Schools are not just institutions delivering education; they are situated nodes within wider networks of social relations, resource allocation, and cultural expectations. At the same time, these spatial relations are connected to broader educational fields in which some locations, trajectories, and forms of mobility acquire greater institutional legitimacy than others.

The teachers in Vega Valley are not isolated actors. Most are returnees who grew up in the region, studied in nearby urban centres, and chose to come back to serve their home communities. However, their residential and professional trajectories reflect a spatial duality. Although they are familiar with rural life, many live closer to the town centre or in more middle-class neighbourhoods with easier access to the larger city Bixbo. Their everyday experience therefore straddles both the semi-urban and the deeply rural, positioning them simultaneously as insiders and as carriers of institutional expectations linked to national educational frameworks. In Bourdieusian terms, they occupy intermediary positions between locally grounded forms of belonging and institutionally recognised educational norms.

This duality is reflected in the pedagogical tensions they face. Teachers report that students are strongly rooted in their home environments. Even relatively minor geographic displacements, such as travelling to the nearby town of Vega Valley, provoke apprehension. One teacher noted: 'Even going to tiny Vega Valley (to the central part of the tiny community that is) can feel scary sometimes.' (Interview, Dylan—Teacher). Moreover, the pupils' orientations are grounded in strong local affiliations—families,

farms, and familiar routines. Yet, these same pupils also inhabit digitally mediated worlds that offer alternative geographies. During lunch interviews and informal conversations, children mentioned cities they had never visited but felt connected to through YouTube and other platforms. One pupil, Lisa, imagined living in England, inspired by a girl she follows online. Another wanted to move to Portugal because she had seen a Swedish family doing so on YouTube (Fieldnotes F9, F10). Teachers also recognise this dual exposure and attempt to navigate it in their pedagogical choices. The Minecraft sustainability project is emblematic of this effort. Pupils designed future-oriented environments and digitally modelled them using the software, integrating themes of ecological responsibility and collaboration. According to a teacher involved in the project: They chose areas, sketched how they should look, built prototypes in cardboard [. . .] and then constructed them in Minecraft. They have been really helpful [. . .] extra supportive, guiding each other." (Interview, Mary—Tecaher)

This kind of integrative project exemplifies a teaching practice that attempts to connect curricular goals with both global discourses and locally meaningful forms of engagement. It also illustrates how teachers work to mediate between institutional demands and pupils' lived experiences. Such projects may also be understood as attempts to create forms of pedagogical recognition that allow locally situated experiences and competencies to acquire value within the school context. Yet teachers also acknowledge the rarity of such efforts. Projects like these are made possible through individual initiative and are not part of a broader systemic approach. Furthermore, tensions around place also emerge in institutional memory. A significant historical conflict between school staff and farming families revolved around the perceived irrelevance of formal education. At its peak, parents took effective control over the school, pushing out trained staff and promoting a vision of education tied narrowly to local labour. While this episode has passed, the residue of distrust lingers, even as collaboration improves. Teachers remain aware that their authority depends not solely on institutional mandate but also on the capacity to establish legitimacy within the social relations of the community. One teacher reflected on this relational fragility: 'We were surprised when the parents came on a weekend to plant trees. They brought equipment, they cared for them afterwards—it was moving. But it also reminded us that we need to maintain this trust, always.' (Fieldnote F4)

These relational dynamics are also shaped by infrastructural and institutional absences. The school's location on the edge of the municipality limits access to upper-secondary academic pathways. Pupils who wish to pursue further education must commute or relocate to Bixbo or beyond. For many, this is not just a logistical obstacle but also a symbolic dislocation from the familiar social world. The spatial positioning of the school thus becomes a structural condition shaping educational possibilities and aspirations. Access to educational mobility is therefore unevenly distributed, both materially and symbolically. But, global cultural flows also reshape the local from within. Pupils integrate digital narratives into their understanding of possible futures, but few know how to translate these imaginaries into educational trajectories recognised within the school system. Teachers describe students who are enthralled by influencers and global lifestyles, yet remain uncertain how to pursue careers outside of farming, childcare, or manual trades. This spatial disjunction between imagined futures and perceived possibilities places teachers in a pedagogical tension. They are expected to cultivate global

competencies in pupils whose social fields remain shaped by spatial immobility and limited access to institutional resources. In this respect, teachers work within a field structured by unequal access to both material and symbolic forms of mobility.

Thus, teaching in Vega Valley involves more than classroom instruction. It entails an ongoing effort to mediate between overlapping spatial imaginaries: the lived locality of the pupils, the curricular frameworks of national policy, and the aspirational geographies transmitted through media. Teachers do not merely teach in a place—they teach through and with it, and their professional work is closely connected to the socio-spatial conditions in which it is embedded.

5.3. Knowledge, recognition, and the authority of the curriculum

Teaching in Vega Valley is deeply affected by the interplay between curricular mandates and the realities of local knowledge cultures. The curriculum, as shaped by national policy, places strong emphasis on decontextualised knowledge forms, including linear textual literacy, logical abstraction, and disembedded reasoning. These values are not neutral; they reflect forms of legitimacy associated with institutionally recognised educational trajectories. For students whose everyday knowledge is rooted in tactile, embodied, and place-based experiences, this curricular orientation can become distancing. Teachers repeatedly described how these curricular forms are difficult to align with pupils' lived experiences. Many children are highly competent in areas such as tool use, animal care, land navigation, and digital creativity, but these capacities rarely translate into school-based recognition. A teacher explained: 'Some students know everything about engine maintenance, but it doesn't help them in Swedish or maths.'(Interview, Rose—Teacher). Despite efforts to bridge this gap, institutional structures often fail to support such integration. Teachers who try to incorporate broader epistemologies—through entrepreneurial projects, image-based assignments, or embodied learning—do so largely unsupported. One teacher reflected: 'We're supposed to work with entrepreneurship, but we've never been offered training in how to do it. You just make something up and hope it works.' (Interview, Paula—Teacher)

Art, music, and hands-on subjects that might offer a bridge between community knowledge and curricular content are de-emphasised. In one school year, visual arts was removed from the schedule due to staffing shortages. This marginalisation is both material and symbolic. As another teacher noted: 'Image and music are always the first to go. It's like they're decoration, not real subjects.' (Interview, Mary—Teacher). This marginalisation extends to what is physically visible in the school space. The principal's insistence that only original artworks be displayed, never posters, reflects a view of culture that privileges certain aesthetic forms over others. This was explained as an effort to 'elevate the cultural environment,' but for some teachers, it felt disconnected from children's visual worlds: 'They live in a world of memes, Instagram, video clips. We shouldn't pretend that doesn't exist.' (Interview, Emelie—Teacher). Such aesthetic and epistemological preferences reflect broader symbolic hierarchies. They establish distinctions not only between subjects, but also between different modes of knowing and expression. Students absorb these cues. When asked about their strongest subjects, many named Swedish and mathematics, regardless of their actual competence, while treating other areas—art, physical education,

technology—as secondary. This internalisation reinforces the authority of the curriculum while simultaneously obscuring students' broader capacities and forms of competence.

Language policy is another vector through which recognition is unevenly distributed, the curriculum's linear temporality clashes with the cyclical and seasonal rhythms of rural life. Several teachers commented that children's lives were organised around farming calendars, hunting seasons, and local events—not exam periods or national test dates. When these rhythms collide, it is usually the local that must yield. Teachers recalled moments when pupils were absent for weeks during calving season or harvest, only to return and face disciplinary consequences for missed assignments. One teacher explained: 'They learn responsibility on the farm, but that doesn't count here. If they miss a maths test to help deliver calves, it's seen as a failure.' (Interview, Dylan—Teacher). These disjunctions highlight how the curriculum functions as a form of symbolic ordering. Certain forms of knowledge and participation are recognised as legitimate, while others remain marginal within institutional assessment frameworks. Teachers, in turn, are positioned within this logic. They must deliver learning outcomes, assess according to standardised rubrics, and prepare students for futures that often bear little resemblance to their present conditions.

Even so, teachers also develop locally situated projects, adapt assignments to pupil interests, and quietly downplay guidelines when necessary. One teacher spoke of a reading project where children wrote their own fairy tales, incorporating family history and farm life. Another used the forest adjacent to the school as a classroom for natural sciences and storytelling. These acts, while modest, signal efforts to create space for forms of knowledge and experience not easily accommodated within the dominant curriculum logic. Teaching in Vega Valley is a situated practice, embedded in spatial, social, and institutional fields that assign uneven value to different forms of knowledge and being. The teachers' work reveals tensions between national educational policies and local life-worlds, between curricular ideals and the material realities of rural youth. The everyday decisions made by teachers—what to teach, how to contextualise, when to adapt, and when to insist—are shaped by overlapping and sometimes contradictory institutional expectations. These structures reinforce symbolic hierarchies in which institutionally dominant forms of knowledge are universalised while alternative epistemologies are given less recognition. Pupils quickly learn which forms of knowledge are rewarded and which are not. 'If you're good at practical stuff, you're seen as "okay but not academic",' one teacher explained. 'That label sticks' (Fieldnote F14).

Despite these pressures, many teachers attempt to reframe classroom learning. A science teacher uses the nearby forest for hands-on learning: 'We go outside. They collect leaves, insects, draw them, talk about ecosystems. Suddenly, they're engaged. It makes sense to them.' (Interview, Rose). Such practices illustrate attempts to teach through place rather than around it. Yet they often occur beneath the radar of formal accountability systems, which remain tied to standardised curriculum frameworks. The authority of the curriculum is not total, but it remains powerful. It shapes what counts as learning, who is recognised as capable, and which futures are rendered imaginable within the school context. The teachers' situated practices reveal how educational legitimacy is both reproduced and questioned in everyday school life.

6. Discussion

The findings presented in this study provide a situated account of teaching in Vega Valley, illustrating how pedagogical practices are shaped through the interaction between local geographies, institutional expectations, and broader symbolic structures. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and symbolic violence together with Massey's understanding of relational space, the analysis demonstrates how educational legitimacy is unevenly distributed across different forms of knowledge, aspiration, and future orientation. Rather than positioning rural schooling primarily through deficit, the findings point to processes through which particular forms of competence become recognised, while others remain weakly valued within the educational field. Teaching consequently emerges as work carried out within unequal symbolic and spatial conditions, where teachers continuously mediate between institutional expectations and locally grounded forms of life.

The findings suggest that students' aspirations cannot be understood independently of the social and spatial conditions in which they are formed. Pupils' expressed intentions to remain within farming, forestry, transport work, or other locally available occupations were frequently interpreted through educational frameworks that privilege mobility, academic progression, and urban-oriented futures. Yet the empirical material indicates that these aspirations are not expressions of limited ambition. Rather, they appear as socially grounded orientations shaped through local labour traditions, family histories, community expectations, and material realities. In Bourdieusian terms, such aspirations may be understood as products of habitus; dispositions developed through repeated experiences that orient what appears possible, desirable, and meaningful. The pupil who stated a need to continue working on the family farm illustrates how future imaginaries are embedded in responsibility, continuity, and belonging rather than individual educational advancement alone. Educational aspirations therefore emerge not only from available opportunities but from embodied understandings of legitimate futures. Furthermore, this interpretation contributes to existing rural education research showing that place attachment and educational orientation are closely connected (Cuervo & Miranda, 2019; Østergaard et al., 2024). But, the present findings also indicate that habitus is not solely produced locally. Students simultaneously navigate globally circulating imaginaries through digital media, influencers, and online environments. Aspirations therefore develop at the intersection of local rootedness and mediated mobility. Massey's (2005) understanding of place as relational becomes relevant here, as students' futures appear shaped through overlapping spatial relations extending beyond Vega Valley while remaining anchored in local social worlds. The coexistence of these orientations complicates deficit assumptions frequently associated with rural youth aspirations.

The findings further demonstrate that forms of capital valued within local contexts are unevenly convertible into institutionally recognised educational capital. Teachers repeatedly described pupils as highly competent in practical problem solving, machinery, animal care, responsibility, environmental knowledge, and digital creativity. Yet these competencies rarely acquired equivalent symbolic value within assessment frameworks or curricular priorities. The issue therefore appears less connected to absence of competence and more to differential recognition. Local forms of cultural capital remain valuable

within community contexts while occupying marginal positions within the educational field. Similar processes have been identified in studies of rural schooling where dominant conceptions of educational success privilege forms of knowledge more closely associated with urban middle-class norms (Corbett, 2007; Reay, 2006; Renganathan, 2023).

This uneven conversion of capital, however, helps explain why students may disengage from forms of educational validation despite demonstrating extensive knowledge in other domains. Teachers' descriptions of pupils who 'know quite a bit' yet see little reason to demonstrate it academically indicate possible mismatches between institutional recognition and everyday competence. Educational participation may consequently be shaped by whether individuals perceive school success as meaningful within their broader social world. This interpretation resonates with Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argument that educational systems reproduce inequalities partly through presenting historically specific forms of knowledge as universal standards. From this perspective, symbolic violence becomes visible not through overt exclusion but through gradual processes of normalisation and misrecognition. Dominant educational expectations become accepted as neutral, while alternative competencies require explanation or remain invisible. Statements indicating satisfaction with lower grades, perceptions that practical competence is incompatible with being 'academic,' or acceptance that educational mobility necessitates leaving the community may all be interpreted as manifestations of such processes. Symbolic violence operates precisely through this internalisation of hierarchy, where unequal recognition becomes experienced as natural rather than socially produced (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Reay, 2006). The findings therefore suggest that rural students may continuously adapt to institutional norms only partially aligned with their lived realities.

Moreover, symbolic violence should not be understood as total or uncontested. The empirical material illustrates how teachers repeatedly attempt to interrupt these processes through pedagogical adaptation. Connecting mathematics to agricultural practices, using forests as learning environments, integrating family histories into literacy work, or engaging pupils through digitally mediated sustainability projects represent more than contextual teaching strategies. Such practices may be interpreted as attempts to revalue forms of capital otherwise weakly recognised within dominant curricular frameworks. Teachers create temporary spaces where locally grounded knowledge acquires educational legitimacy. The findings also indicate limits to these efforts. Pedagogical adaptations largely depend upon individual initiative rather than institutional arrangements. Teachers perform substantial translational work, adapting curricula, mediating expectations, and creating relevance between policy and place. Similar observations have been made in studies describing rural teachers' reliance on adaptive strategies under conditions of limited structural support (Hickman et al., 2025; Wang & Lo, 2022). Yet the present study extends this argument by suggesting that such adaptation also constitutes symbolic labour. Teachers are not only translating curriculum content; they are continuously attempting to reconcile competing systems of value.

The findings further highlight how educational authority in rural contexts is relational rather than solely institutional. Teachers' legitimacy cannot be assumed through professional credentials alone but is shaped through trust, recognition, and long-term engagement with communities. Historical tensions between school staff and farming families demonstrate how educational legitimacy develops within

broader social relations rather than operating independently of them. This supports previous research showing that teaching in rural settings is closely connected to community relations and local forms of recognition (Cui et al., 2022). The findings therefore suggest that teachers occupy intermediary positions between institutional expectations and locally situated social worlds, requiring continual negotiation of professional authority. Furthermore, the findings indicate that rural teaching is shaped through intersecting symbolic, spatial, and institutional inequalities. Teaching emerges less as implementation of policy and more as situated mediation between competing forms of legitimacy. Teachers work within educational systems where dominant forms of knowledge continue to be universalised, while locally grounded competencies require translation to acquire value. The contribution of this study therefore lies not primarily in documenting rural disadvantage, but in demonstrating how educational legitimacy is produced, contested, and occasionally reconfigured through everyday pedagogical practice.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that teaching in rural schools such as Vega Valley is shaped through the interaction between national policies, curricular expectations, and locally situated conditions. Teachers work within these overlapping institutional and spatial contexts while attempting to affirm students' lived experiences and prepare them for forms of educational recognition that do not always align with rural life. Drawing on Bourdieu and Massey, the study has illustrated how symbolic hierarchies, habitus, and spatial relations influence which forms of knowledge, aspiration, and competence are recognised as educationally legitimate. Educational orientations and future aspirations emerge not simply as individual choices, but as socially and spatially situated dispositions shaped through local histories, family relations, and material conditions. Rather than framing rural schools through deficit-oriented perspectives, the findings highlight the situated and relational character of rural teaching practice. Teachers continuously adapt curricular content, connect learning to local contexts, and create forms of pedagogical recognition that make schooling meaningful within students' everyday worlds. In this respect, rural teaching emerges not simply as curriculum delivery, but as ongoing translational work situated between institutional expectations and locally grounded forms of knowledge, experience, and future orientation. Moreover, the study demonstrates how locally valued forms of competence and practical knowledge may acquire limited legitimacy within dominant educational structures. Unequal recognition of different forms of capital contributes to subtle processes through which some aspirations, competencies, and educational trajectories become more visible and valued than others. These processes resemble forms of symbolic ordering in which dominant understandings of educational success are normalised, while alternative forms of knowledge remain more weakly recognised. Furthermore, the study contributes to research on rural education by demonstrating how educational legitimacy is produced through intersecting spatial, symbolic, and institutional relations. It also points to the importance of recognising rural knowledge, locally embedded forms of competence, and place-based experiences as educationally significant rather than peripheral to dominant curricular frameworks. Rural

schools should therefore not be understood as exceptions to educational systems, but as contexts that make broader processes of inequality, recognition, and educational value particularly visible.

Notes

1. Prior research in the project underscores how rural education is shaped by the intersection of traditional, place-bound values and national policy frameworks oriented towards urban norms and global competitiveness (for example, Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Kjellsdotter & Erlandson, 2024).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The project was funded by The Kamprad Family Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Research & Charity [REF 20220025].

ORCID

Peter Erlandson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0428-0233

References

Bæck, U.-D. K. (2016). Rural location and academic success—Remarks on research, contextualisation and methodology. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *60*(4), 435–448. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2015.1024163

Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, *18*(2), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065

Bergmark, U., & Hansson, K. (2021). How teachers and principals enact the policy of building education in Sweden on a Scientific foundation and proven experience: Challenges and opportunities. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *65*(3), 448–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1713883

Biddle, C., & Azano, A. P. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the "rural school problem": A century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education*, *40*(1), 298–325. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16667700

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. (R. Johnson, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice Trans., 2nd ed.). SAGE.

Braun, A., & Maguire, M. (2020). Doing without believing – Enacting policy in the English primary school. *Critical Studies in Education*, *61*(4), 433–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1500384

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. (2023). *Kommungruppsindelning*. https://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/sakomraden/kommungruppsindelning

Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community*. Fernwood Publishing.
Cuervo, H., & Miranda, A. (2019). Youth in the global South: An introduction. In H. Cuervo & A. Miranda (Eds.), *Youth, inequality and social change in the global South* (pp. 1–10). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3750-5_1
Cui, M., Xia, Y., & Wang, C. (2022). Does community matter?: A study on rural Chinese teachers' turnover. *Teachers and Teaching*, *28*(3), 263–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062715
Delahunty, J., & Hellwig, A. F. J. (2022). The legacies of community in building a future: Rural young people envisioning "possible selves". *Educational Review*, *76*(6), 1439–1457. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2112149
Erlandson, P., & Karlsson, M. R. (2018). From trust to control – the Swedish first teacher reform. *Teachers and Teaching*, *24*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2017.1379390
Erlandson, P., & Kjellsdotter, A. (2025). Educational endeavors in a rural society –an example from a small community in Sweden. *Education Inquiry*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2025.2452009
Erlandson, P., Kjellsdotter, A., & Karlsson, M. R. (2023). Neoliberalisation and educational reforms: Impacts on teachers in a single school context. *Educational Review*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2210781
Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). SAGE.
Gunter, H. M. (2011). *Leadership and the reform of education*. Policy Press.
Hargreaves, L., Kvalsund, R., & Galton, M. (2009). Reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in British and Nordic countries: Analytical perspectives and cultural meaning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *48*(2), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.02.001
Hickman, B. J., DeDiego, A. C., Hunt, T. L., Rush, L. S., Tracy, A. D., & Perkins, M. A. (2025). Walk in my shoes: Teacher experiences in a U.S. Rural state through the framework of an ecological systems model. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2025.2609940
Hudson, P., & Hudson, S. (2008). Changing preservice teachers' attitudes for teaching in rural schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *33*(4), 67–77. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2008v33n4.6
Ingram, N. (2011). Within school and beyond the gate: The complexities of being educationally successful and working class. *Sociology*, *45*(2), 287–302. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510394017
Jeffrey, B., & Troman, G. (2004). Time for ethnography. *British Educational Research Journal*, *30*(4), 535–548. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000237220
Juusola, K., Venkitachalam, K., Kleber, D., & Popat, A. (2026). Knowledge sharing in open social innovation for sustainable development: Evidence from rural social enterprises. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, *19*(1), 34–48. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-12-2023-0322
Kim, J. (2024). Teaching "home" in the curriculum. *Teachers and Teaching*, *30*(5), 701–715. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2365176
Kjellsdotter, A., & Erlandson, P. (2024). Generation alpha in a rural Swedish community: Experiences across local and global spaces. *Education Inquiry*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2024.2433295
Kjellsdotter, A., & Erlandson, P. (2025). Being there – Ethnographers' roles in transforming rural education. *Ethnography and Education*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2025.2498645
Kvalsund, R. (2019). Bigger or better? research-based reflections on the cultural deconstruction of rural schools in Norway: Metaperspectives. In H. Jahnke, C. Kramer, & P. Meusburger (Eds.), *Geographies of schooling. Knowledge and space* (Vol. 14). Springer. 179–217. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18799-6_10
Lampert, J., McPherson, A., Hawkins, A., Casanueva Baptista, A., & Burnett, B. (2026). For the foreseeable future: The tenuous and precarious nature of teacher retention1. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2026.2643436

Lundahl, L. (2016). Equality, inclusion and marketization of Nordic education: Introductory notes. *Research in Comparative & International Education*, *11*(1), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499916631059

Lundqvist, C., & Westerlund, S. (2024). Principals' enactment of policy on research-based education: Interpreting and facilitating policy in local school settings in Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *68*(2), 320–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2022.2148270

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *24*(1), 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.

McKeon, K. A., Merchant, B., Flanagan-Gonzales, C., & Sultan, S. (2024). Thin places of resistance: A caring response to refugees in rural American schools. *Educational Review*, *76*(3), 441–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2039593

Mitescu Reagan, E., Hambacher, E., Schram, T., McCurdy, K., Lord, D., Higginbotham, T., & Fornauf, B. (2019). Place matters: Review of the literature on rural teacher education. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *80*(2), 83–93. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.12.005

Østergaard, J., Pless, M., Blackman, S., & MacDonald, R. (2024). Introduction to special issue: Youth, rural places and marginalisation. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *27*(9), 1227–1239. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2404919

Reay, D. (2006). The zombie stalking English schools: Social class and educational inequality. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *54*(3), 288–307. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00351.x

Reid, J.-A., Green, B., Cooper, M., Hastings, W., Lock, G., & White, S. (2010). Regenerating rural social space? Teacher education for rural—regional sustainability. *Australian Journal of Education*, *54*(3), 262–276. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411005400304

Renganathan, S. (2023). English language education in rural schools in Malaysia: A systematic review of research. *Educational Review*, *75*(4), 787–804. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1931041

Roberts, P. (2014). A curriculum for the country: The absence of the rural in a national curriculum. *Curriculum Perspectives*, *34*(1), 51–60.

Schafft, K. A. (2016). Rural education as rural development: Understanding the rural school–community well-being linkage in a 21st-century policy context. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *91*(2), 137–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151734

Smala, S., McLay, K., & Gillies, R. M. (2026). Teacher relationships and social connectedness. *Teachers and Teaching*, *32*(4), 730–753. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2025.2494036

Statistics Sweden. (2023). *Population in the country, counties and municipalities on 31/12/2023*. https://www.scb.se

Walford, G. (2008). *How to do educational ethnography*. Tufnell Press.

Walker-Gibbs, B., Ludecke, M., & Kline, J. (2015). Pedagogy of the rural: Implications of size on conceptualisations of rural. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, *10*(1), 81–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/22040552.2015.1086292

Wang, X., & Lo, L. N. K. (2022). Development of resilience among Chinese rural teachers: A social ecological perspective. *Teachers and Teaching*, *28*(5), 533–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062743

White, S., & Corbett, M. (2014). *Doing educational research in rural settings*. Routledge.

White, S., & Kline, J. (2012). Developing a rural teacher education curriculum package. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *22*(1), 17–32. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v33i2.417

Wolcott, H. F. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). AltaMira Press.

Zhao, T., Guo, J., Sang, G., & Edirisingha, P. (2025). 'Where you put your attention, where is your heart': Understanding rural teachers' perceptions and choices of retention in China. *Teachers and Teaching*, *31*(6), 993–1008. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2381035