

Primary schools in rural communities

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Situation of the primary schools in rural areas is quite similar all over the Europe these days. Small neighbourhood schools have suspended a lot during last years.

In Finland the trend of closing down small schools started already in the 1960's because of the low birth rate and migration from rural areas. Then 1990's the state made many structural changes caused again decrease in number of the schools. Now 2000's there are closed down 241 small schools and will be closed about 100 more until the year 2010 in Finland.

There are about 5,2 million inhabitants in Finland and 62% of them lives in rural areas. In year 2004 there were about 3400 comprehensive schools left. Expenses of organising the comprehensive education differ between different areas from 3700 euros to 15200 euros per pupil per year. Distances are very long in Finland and that's why the small neighbourhood schools are very important for younger pupils.

Closing down the schools is based on economical issues, the quality of teaching and amount of pupils. Teachers are very educated in Finland and they like to work better in smaller schools because the size of the class is smaller than in the bigger schools. Teachers are also very active and they do lot of other things for example developing the village.

Expenses are higher in the neighbourhood schools cause of the smaller amount of pupils but the difference is not so big as it usual thinks. In my opinion the reason of closing down the village school is usually a political or economical issue. It has nothing to do with pedagogical or social issues.

In our school, Kant school, we have 33 pupils in grades 1-6 and two teachers. We had three teachers last term. Our community, Karvia, has been decided last spring that our schools can continue until the year 2008. In our neighbour communities all the small schools have been closed down.

Children need adult also others than only parents. They need more time to spend together to discuss etc. In the small class that's possible. Teacher has got time to listen and grow pupils. That's why there is less behaving problems and disturbance in the small school because in smaller groups grow an atmosphere of safety, familiarity and joint responsibility. Small sizes of the classes make also possible to do different kinds of projects and use various teaching methods.

It's very important that a neighbourhood school is much more than a regular school. It must use all the surrounding forces. It is very important to develop the school and keep it alive. I think that small entrepreneurship is one possibility. If there is work in rural areas there will be also kids. We should make the school heart of the village and connect other services to the school: afternoon daycare, services for the older people, activities of different associations, different kind of courses etc. The school should be open 24/7 , that's also economical. It is very important that all work to same direction: teachers, pupils, parents, people in the village etc.

1998 we woke up in our school to see the situation of the neighbourhood schools. Then we decided to do everything we can to keep our school alive. We wrote up our strengths, our weaknesses and our possibilities. Then we started to develop our teaching methods, co-operations and entrepreneurship skills.

At first teachers went to different kinds of courses. We think that the spirit of the entrepreneurship is very important in rural areas. Entrepreneurship skills support pupils development as independent, initiative-taking, goal-conscious, cooperative and help pupils form a realistic picture of their own possibilities for influence.

We train those skills in practise. We organize a village café twice a year. Pupils do everything by themselves. They make and sell crafts. They plan advertising, make working lists and bake the cakes to the café. Smaller ones work with help of the older ones. Everyone finds her or his strengths and it gives self confidence to them.

We do lots of things together with entrepreneurs and associations in our village. Last Christmas we made 300 christmas cards to the local entrepreneur. We have grown herbs and sold them in local greenhouse and as a return service we made flower cards for them. Co- operation must serve both sides.

We organize also camping schools for classes all over the world. We make the programmes and offers them and entrepreneurs do the work. They get job and we get contacts to the visitors.

We have co-operation also with other schools over the community borders. We have different kinds of activities together during the school year. Pupils can then do things in bigger groups with children of the same age. Teachers can change ideas which is also very important.

Our teaching methods differs from the usual. The learn by doing is the main thing. Also pupils of different ages work together a lot. We have combined classes. Multi age classes give pupils more possibilities to practise their social skills. Though the small number of pupils makes individual attention of the teacher possible and more intensive than in the bigger classes. On the other hand pupils must learn to do things by themselves and de initiative because the teacher has children of different ages in the same classroom. Teaching in our school is very individual. Pupils have their own aims of learning.

Especially for pupils with special needs all these kind of activities are very suitable. They find their strong areas when making crafts, their confidence grows and other pupils take better notice them. All this helps them facing difficulties in schoolwork.

Pupils have learnt to respect their work better. They understand also the value of the money. "We can do it" spirit is rising up. Parents are happy with this kind of school and also the press has been very interested in our projects. The entrepreneurial attitude shows also outside the school work: for example one of the pupils from the sixth grade has his own small company called: "Joonas' chicken farm" as he keeps chicken and sells eggs and grow plants.

Neighbourhood schools should be something to be proud with, not something negative and only wait it's closing. In Finland many young couples with small children like to have their home in rural area if it's possible. They seem safety and peaceful environment very important. They respect also the small school: small classes, familiarity and incentive environment for play and learn.