

Agents of centralization? Local school administrations and contested school closures in Norwegian rural districts

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the number of schools in Norwegian rural municipalities has been reduced substantially, often accompanied by much contestation in the local community. In Norway's decentralized governance system, the municipal-level authorities have autonomy over decisions on school structure. However, municipal school administrations may have considerable indirect influence, *inter alia* in preparing the cases prior to meetings of the local council. This article examines experiences with, perceptions of and main concerns with school-closure processes among those handling school issues in the municipalities. It builds on an online survey of the local school administrations in Norwegian municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, as well as case studies in three municipalities where school closure was or had recently been high on the agenda. Although the municipal school administrations recognize the importance of local schools for the communities, their primary concern is to secure a good learning and social environment for pupils, within the defined budgetary constraints. In contested cases, this usually leads them to side with politicians favoring closure. However, acknowledging the importance of the school for the community and the risks of local tensions, municipal school administrations also stress the importance of transparent and open discussions among those involved, before a decision is made.

1. Introduction

The rural municipality 'Innsjøbygda' in south eastern Norway had experienced a gradual reduction in the number of pupils in the local schools. Teacher capacity was problematic: if a teacher fell ill, local mothers had to step into the breach. In one community, several parents were dissatisfied with the 'social aspects' of the local school and decided to send their children to a school in the neighbouring municipality, which was closer than the central school. This exacerbated the situation, further reducing the basis of the local school. Fierce debates erupted, in the local community and in the municipality. The central school was about 45 min away by bus, and people were sceptical to requiring children to travel such long distances every day. Local people, the elderly in particular, considered the local school institution to be very important for the social life of the community. Although political parties were split on the issue, a majority favoured keeping the school, due to the local opposition to closure, despite the recommendations of the municipal school administration. They did, however, decide to close the school temporarily.

Likewise, in coastal 'Havøy', the municipal administration proposed closing a small school located on one of the islands. For the pupils this would mean a daily trip by ferry and then onward journey by bus, which the older pupils (lower secondary level) do on a daily basis already. The more centrally located school has ample space and resources to receive more pupils. The municipal school administration argued that the learning environment on the island was too narrow, and that the expenses involved in retaining the school would affect other schools which could use the resources made available if the island school were closed. Members of the local community, however – parents, pupils and local interest groups – were strongly opposed to closure.

'Innsjøbygda' and 'Havøy' municipalities are two out of many rural Norwegian municipalities where school closure has been on the agenda. In fact, school closure has been a recurrent phenomenon in Norway since a new revenue system for municipalities was introduced in the mid-1980s (Solstad and Solstad, 2015). Previously, transfers to the municipalities had been earmarked for education. After the reform, the municipalities now receive block grants to cover welfare services according to criteria based on objective characteristics like demography,

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tax revenues, settlement structure, communications, etc. While one of the aims of the reform was to enhance local democracy by giving local authorities more influence over the distribution of their welfare services in accordance with local needs and priorities, one consequence was that expenses for running the schools now had to compete with other welfare needs. Importantly, in contrast to many other welfare services, local school *structure* is governed not by national rules but by local autonomy. The municipalities are obliged to provide children with satisfactory education. It is up to each municipality to decide whether this obligation is best served through small community schools or by developing larger schools. Closing a school in a remote community where maintaining a school with few pupils can be quite costly may yield savings that the municipality can use to strengthen schools in more central parts of the municipality – but also to cover other prioritized welfare services (Solstad, 2009b: 219). The school structure is virtually the only factor that the municipalities can employ to influence costs in the educational sector (Solstad, 2005).

The new revenue system has hardly been the sole reason for subsequent school closures in rural districts. Regardless of budgetary systems, rural school structures in Norway and other Western societies are affected by depopulation, smaller families, general centralization and new expectations to education – including the belief that larger schools can provide better learning and social environments than small ones (Süpule and Sørholt, 2018). However, research from European countries, including Norway, does not document any correspondence between the size of a municipality and educational results, nor between urban and rural schools (Bonesrønning et al., 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2009). Despite minor annual fluctuations, there has been a relatively steady decrease in the number of schools in Norway ever since the late 1980s. Between 2008 and 2018, the number of schools fell from 3140 to 2858, a reduction of 9% (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2018) – most of this in rural districts. During the same period, the average number of pupils per school increased from 196 to 222. Most of the schools that have been closed were small: in 2008, 35% of all schools had fewer than 100 pupils, but by 2018 this had fallen to 30%. School closure in this period affected almost 25,000 Norwegian pupils.

As was the case in 'Innsjøbygda' and 'Havøy', school closure is often a controversial and sensitive issue: politicians engage, both for and against closure; parents and local organizations mobilize; and both sides use the local media to win support.

School closure has been studied in terms of the effects on local communities (see e.g. Egelund and Laustsen, 2006; Hargreaves, 2009; Kvalsund, 2009) and the quality of education (Beuchert-Pedersen et al., 2016; Leuven and Rønning, 2016; Thorsen, 2017), the opportunities and challenges of schools with mixed-age classes (Engan, 2017), as well as the impact of lengthy bus transport (Solstad and Solstad, 2015). Often overlooked in research and debates about change of municipal school structure is the less-visible municipal school administration (MSA): local politicians and interest groups dominate the scene. However, the MSAs have an important role in administering school issues and preparing cases regarding school closure *before* decisions are made in the municipal councils. Many of the premises for political decision-making are based on the preparatory work undertaken by the MSA.

As the governance of local schools is subject to target-oriented management, the MSA has possibilities to influence local education. This is in line with the efficiency argument for decentralization of welfare services to the municipal level: that municipalities are the most capable when it comes to implementing national goals in local settings (Fiva et al., 2014; Hansen, 2014; Kjellberg et al., 1979). Target-oriented management gives influential power to the MSAs in their preparations for political decisions and in implementation, though limited by available administrative capacity in small municipalities (Süpule and Sørholt, 2018). Unlike teaching staff, the MSA is not part of the front-line services who encounter pupils and parents regularly. They are part of the often invisible bureaucracy, although they influence and regulate the everyday educational frames for pupils, parents and local communities.

Recognizing their potential influence on the school structure in Norwegian municipalities, we focus on how the MSAs experience and perceive school-closure processes. As there is considerable variation in how the municipal administration of school matters is set up, we also ask whether MSA responses are associated with the specific type of municipal organization in each case.

The article is organized as follows: In the next section, we present the Norwegian multi-level governance model of the education sector to show why the Norwegian case, where the local municipalities have an autonomous decision-making role as regards school-closure issues, is particularly relevant for this study. The next section gives the background for our actor-oriented multi-level governance (MLG) approach and outlines three specific research questions. After presenting the empirical data sources and methods, we offer our findings on MSA experiences with and perceptions of school closure in rural municipalities. The final discussion revisits the MLG approach and discusses how MSAs balance considerations relating to school quality, economic constraints and local community development.

2. Norwegian multi-level governance of the education sector

Even though closure of schools in rural areas is widespread and contested, few studies have investigated school-closure processes from a governance angle (Süpule and Sørholt, 2018), using the local territorial level and not the school as the unit of analysis (Clarke and Wildy, 2011). As the governance structure of the educational sector differs widely among European countries, there is great diversity in how decisions about school closure are made.

With only slightly more than five million inhabitants, and before the amalgamation process of municipalities and regions had got underway, Norway in 2016 (the time of our data collection) had 428 municipalities (*kommuner*) and 19 counties (*fylker*). More than half of the municipalities had fewer than 5000 inhabitants. Many of Norway's sparsely populated municipalities are large in geographical size, often with 'challenges' such as mountains, islands and fiords, which influence local settlement patterns and school structure. In contrast to the neighbouring countries, Norway has maintained a decentralized settlement structure to a considerable extent.

Norway is a unitary state, but the government structure is quite decentralized, including the education sector (Trapenciere and Myrvold, 2016).¹ Municipalities are responsible for kindergartens, primary and lower secondary schools (grades 1–10) and after-school activities; the counties are responsible for upper secondary education (grades 11–13), and the state for university colleges and universities. Here we deal solely with the primary and lower secondary levels, which are the responsibility of the municipality.

Norway is obliged by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure that the best interests of the child are to be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors and reports on the implementation of the Convention. Through Norway's Education Act of 1998, the national level sets the detailed framework for how the municipalities and counties are to design and provide education for their residents. Thus, even if responsibility for providing primary and lower secondary education is delegated to the municipalities, the content of the curriculum is largely decided by the state. Whereas the Ministry of Education and Research has the overall responsibility for education at all levels, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training is its executive agency.

The county governor (regional state authority) conducts the supervision of municipalities and municipal schools. The purpose of this supervision is to ensure fulfilment of the rights of children and young

¹ Much of the following discussion in this section is based on Trapenciere and Myrvold (2016).

people to high-quality education. Most of the funding of school transport is also placed at the county level, though with the county council responsibility. In most cases the extra school transport costs incurred upon the county council when a primary school is closed, is fully refunded by the municipalities (Amundsvæn and Øines, 2002).

Since the educational sector is regulated by the Norwegian state, the room of manoeuvre for the school owners is quite limited. The individual municipalities employ the teachers they need, but teachers' wages are negotiated by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) – the individual municipality has limited possibilities here. However, municipalities have full autonomy over the school structure and may open or close schools without state interference: moreover, it is not possible to appeal to the higher authorities. As long as the municipalities fulfil their educational commitments in accordance with national regulations, they can use their block grants as they prefer. Other studies have concluded that municipalities see school closure as a potential way to reduce costs (see Solstad, 2005). On the other hand, the municipalities do not control the establishment of private schools. Although private schools are not common in Norway, their establishment (often a Montessori or a religious type) has been an option for many rural communities where the local school has been closed. These schools receive funding directly from the state, which reduces municipalities' financial compensation for pupils. In 2018–2019 the share of private schools had increased to 9% (251 schools), while their share of pupils was 4%. About 5% of schools that close are replaced by a Montessori school.²

There is great variation between Norwegian municipalities in how the governance of schools is organized. This depends largely on the form of municipal organization, where there are two major models: traditional organization (TO), and the newer, two-level model (TLM). In TO, there is at least one level between the school and the municipal chief executive (*rådmann*), often a separate school administration headed by the head of schools (*skolesjef*). In smaller municipalities, like those studied in this article, this administration is often merged with other municipal sectors (e.g. health, culture or social services) and headed by a chief executive for the area. The TLM has no administrative level between this chief executive and the headmaster at each school. Thus, those working with school-related matters in the municipality report directly to the chief executive. This has implications for the role of mid-level management in the municipalities (Kvifte Andresen, 2014) – for instance, that those working with school matters in the municipal administration have less professional independence vis-a-vis the municipal chief executive, while headmasters have greater autonomy. Finstad and Kvåle (2004) have noted the importance of various procedures of communication between the municipal school administrations (MSAs), the schools and other stakeholders in municipalities organized according to the two models. Our study therefore examines whether municipal organization of school matters affects the MSAs as regards school closure issues.

In decisions about school structure in the municipalities, local politicians make the final decision, but the administration prepares the case before the vote in the local council. The 1992 Local Government Act (*Kommuneloven*) delineates the responsibilities of the political and the administrative levels. However, in practice this is sometimes blurred, especially in controversial issues (Fjulsrud, 2013). Further, in small communities it is easy for elected politicians and administrators to keep in touch; they are often connected through social ties. Local politicians also network with various interest groups, other municipalities and authorities at the county and state levels.

² Statistics downloaded from <https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/statistikk/statistikk-grunnskole/skolenedleggelsefarre-skoler-og-storre-skoler-i-dag-enn-for-ti-ar-siden/>.

3. Multi-level governance: the analytical framework

The complexities of the governance structure in the Norwegian educational system make a MLG framework relevant for studying school closure in rural municipalities. MLG emphasizes decision-making authority being dispersed between different territorial levels of government. The approach was originally used to bridge the traditionally separate domains of domestic and international politics, highlighting the fading distinction between these domains in the context of European integration and globalization. It gradually became applied to describe the more general dispersion of authority away from the state level, and for dealing with linkages between the higher and lower levels of government (Peters and Pierre, 2001). Another important aspect of the MLG approach is its emphasis on interlinkages between public institutions, market and civil society actors. Various actors interact with or cut across one another, vertically and horizontally, in complex ways that are not necessarily strictly hierarchical (Bevir, 2012). According to the MLG approach, decision-making competencies are shared between actors of different levels and sectors, often in network-like formations – not monopolized by national governments (Hooghe et al., 2001).

Local autonomy in connection with school structure in Norway is part of a general trend of decentralization that took off in Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s (Peters and Pierre, 2001). Baldersheim and Ståhlberg (2002) hold that the 'Nordic model' is incomprehensible unless understood in terms of MLG, because the provision of public services in this region is normally channelled through local authorities. It may seem paradoxical for 'egalitarian' Nordic welfare states to promote independent local discretion in connection with important welfare services, as that is likely to lead to great variation in service provision. Indeed, as shown below, that has been the case with the school structure in Norway. When focusing on central-local relations, Baldersheim and Ståhlberg (2002) cite the normative and cultural co-ordination that results from long-term interaction between public functionaries across levels of government as an important explanation of the basically harmonious relations between the state and local levels.

Applying an MLG approach to the study of school closure in Norwegian rural districts draws attention to the state and non-state actor constellations at various territorial levels that are involved, to differing degrees, in influencing the local school structure. The goals and interests of these actors may be similar or different, the latter being especially pronounced as regards school closures. As actor constellations vary according to whether a municipality is organized according to the TO or the TLM, we need to examine whether the chosen model affects school structure processes. The MLG approach also allows us to study how informal means of co-ordination and decision-making may drive central-local relations in addition to formal, hierarchical methods of government.

Norway's multi-level governance of the educational sector and the decentralization of decisions concerning school structure to the municipal level leaves considerable influence, at least indirect, for the MSAs, due to their important role in preparing decisions prior to local council meetings. Thus, it makes sense to study how school-closure processes are perceived and acted upon as seen from the perspective of the MSA concerned.

Our study has one overarching research question that will be approached from different angles:

What are the experiences, perceptions and main concerns of municipal school administrations (MSAs) in local processes of school closure?

Drawing on MLG theory, we approach this question by examining three more specific sub-questions:

- i) What are the experiences of MSAs with school closure?

Here we highlight the salience of the school-closure issue in rural municipalities, identifying the issues that have been high on the agenda

as seen from the perspective of MSAs.

ii) How do MSAs perceive their **position** in school-closure processes, in relation to the other actors involved?

Here we examine how MSAs perceive their own position in processes of school closure, and how they assess the position of and their collaboration with other actors involved.

iii) What are the **main concerns** of MSAs as regards school closure?

As noted, the decentralized structure may give MSAs considerable influence over processes of school closure. Here we explore to what extent they express strong opinions on school closure and the emphasis they put on arguments in favour and against such closure.

4. Data and methods

Our main data source is a web-based survey (Questback) sent to MSAs in all Norwegian rural municipalities in May 2016.³ We applied an operational definition of ‘rural municipality’ as a municipality with up to 15,000 inhabitants, even if some of these municipalities may have some urban-type settlements. After discarding three incomplete responses, we had a data file with responses from 159 municipalities, which gives a response rate of 45%. Further analysis showed that these municipalities were representative in terms of geographic distribution and size. The data were transferred to and analysed in SPSS for Windows 21.

MSAs may be organized in several ways. We asked for responses from those in the local administration who had greatest insight into school-closure processes, and obtained answers from a range of respondent types.⁴ It should be noted that MSAs in small municipalities may consist of one person only; this may be a part-time job or be included with a wider set of responsibilities. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to respondent category.⁵

Table 2 shows that most of these municipalities are organized in

Table 1

Respondents, Norwegian School Structure Survey, 159 rural municipalities.⁶

	N
Head of municipal school administration	123
Other in municipal school administration	26
Municipal Chief Executive (<i>rådmann</i>)	12
Other	1
Do not wish to say	1
Total	163

³ The questionnaire had questions about experiences of school closure in the municipality, how decisions on school closure are made, which stakeholders are involved, collaboration between different stakeholders and respondents’ own views on school structure issues. It can be downloaded from http://fsi.lu.lv/userfiles/image/NFI_RUDEGED_2015-2017/Ext/NFI_wp2_municipality_EN_G_master_3004.pdf.

⁴ We used the organizational data base (Organisasjonsdatabasen) with data from 2016 to obtain data on municipal organization. Only 74% of the municipalities participating in the survey had provided such data to the data base. For more on the data base, see <https://nsd.no/nsddata/serier/kommunalorganisering.html>.

⁵ We do not differentiate among the various categories in the analysis, as there were few respondents in other categories than head of school administration. It should be noted, however, that the mean population size was a bit larger where the head of the school administration answered (5452) than where the Municipal Chief Executive responded (4102).

Table 2

Mean and median population size of rural municipalities in Norwegian School Structure Survey, by type of municipal model (N = 113).^a

	Mean population size	Median population size	Share of municipalities%
Traditional organization (TO)	4834	2995	65
Two-level model (TLM)	5565	3727	35

^a Municipalities on which we lack information about population size and/or municipal model are excluded.

accordance with the TO, typically with a head of administration responsible for school matters in the municipality, generally in combination with responsibility for other sectors. Mean and median population sizes are somewhat larger in municipalities with a TLM than in municipalities organized by the TO.

The questionnaire had a few open-ended questions where respondents could fill in text to explain their responses or the dynamics of school closure. These open-ended questions have been analysed; some quotations from the responses are used in the subsequent sections on results. The type of municipal organization (TO or TLM), municipal size (the sample has been evenly distributed into three groups), and the outcomes of the school-closure debates are indicated, to add context.

To obtain a better understanding and explanation of the survey results, we also collected data from three qualitative case studies in rural municipalities that had undergone or were currently undergoing school-closure processes. These three municipalities were selected because of high levels of conflict involved. All three case-study municipalities had closed schools; and in all three the main argument had been the drop in the number of pupils. Keeping the schools open would have had implications for municipal finances, with uncertainty for the teaching and social environment. One of the municipalities is organized according to the TLM; the others have a TO organization. In September 2016, we conducted 19 in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders in these three municipalities: municipal administration, politicians, interest group representatives, teachers, headmasters and parents (including one group interview with eight parents).

In the first case municipality, ‘Fjellbygda’, the major change in school structure, which reduced the number of schools from eight to two, had taken place more than ten years ago. Local mobilization to save a community school resulted in a private Montessori school. According to an MSA interviewee in ‘Fjellbygda’, the Montessori school is no longer specifically for the local community, but has become a regional pedagogical alternative.

In the second case, ‘Innsjøbygda’, a small school with fewer than ten pupils had been closed about five years earlier. At the time of our study, another small school feared political pressures for closing the school in the future. Local arguments for keeping the school were the long travel distances and community development. To avoid closing community schools for economic reasons, the municipality had introduced property tax some years earlier when the issue of school closure had first been raised. In our interview, the current MSA officer reflected on experiences from the neighbouring municipality. There they had decided that having fewer than 25 pupils would be a criterion for school closure. We were told that this had given predictability for all parties, decreasing the level of conflict there.

In the third case, ‘Åsbygda’, there had been a recent political decision to move the sixth and seventh grades of a local community school to the central school. The conflict was still ongoing during the interviews. The municipality had closed other schools earlier, and the community feared that moving two grades to the central school would be the first step in closing their school permanently. However, the MSA reported that the politicians wanted to keep the schools, but that this was difficult due to financial constraints.

We have furthermore included information about the municipality

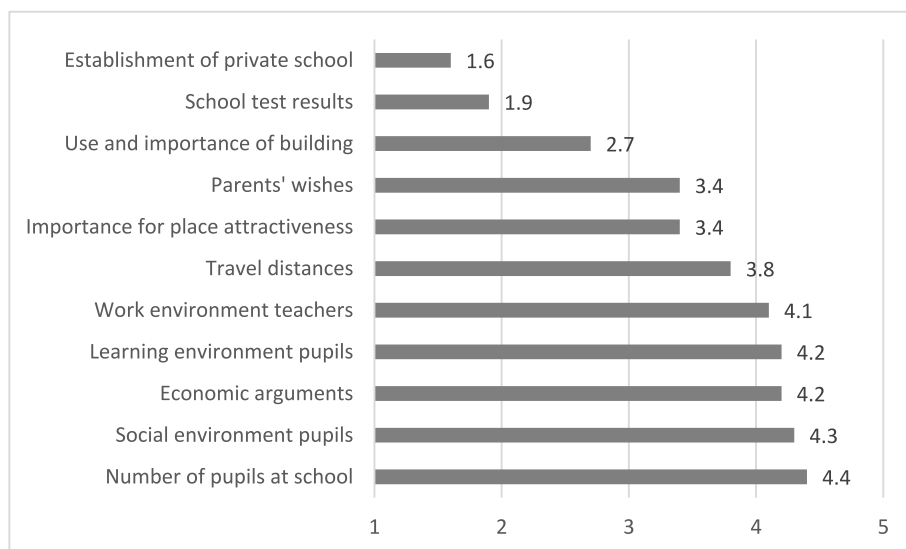


Fig. 1. MSA's assessment of issues most emphasized in debates on school closure (arguments for or against). Means on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important), (N = 89).

'Havøy' in the introduction and the conclusion. Many of the municipalities sent detailed information about the school-closure processes in open questions in the questionnaire, which was also the case with this municipality. As the case is very illustrative, we decided to include it even though we did not visit the municipality.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants granted confidentiality. As school closure is a sensitive issue, names and facts have been adjusted slightly (without compromising authenticity), so that statements or situations cannot be traced to real persons or places.

5. Municipal school administration's experiences and concerns around school closure in rural municipalities

In the school structure survey and in the qualitative case studies we asked about experiences with school closure in the municipalities and what issues are mostly on the agenda when school closure is being discussed. In particular, we examined the role of the municipal school administration during such processes and how they collaborate with other key stakeholders. Furthermore, we also looked into the main concerns and opinions on school closure from the municipal school administration's point of view.

5.1. Experiences with school closure

More than one third (35%) of the rural municipalities surveyed had schools that had been closed or merged during the past five years, which confirms that the issue of school closures is relevant for Norwegian municipalities. An additional 25% of the municipalities reported having had discussions about school closure; the remaining 41% had not had any such plans or discussions. Looking to the future, 36% of the respondents expected new school closures to take place by 2020.

In municipalities where school closure had taken place or been discussed, 31% of the cases ended in closure; 24% ended in merger with another school; 29% were retained; 6% were replaced by a new school; while 11% had some other outcome (or did not answer). This shows that when school closure is raised on the municipal agenda in rural communities, it will not automatically be implemented: mobilization against school closure often succeeds. We found no systematic differences in responses as regards population size or whether the municipality had a TO or TLM type of organization.

Almost half (49%) of the respondents who had experienced school-closure debates recognized that processes involving school closure

often stir up tension and conflict. However, regarding the previous debate in their municipality, only 12% reported conflicts involving the entire municipality, whereas 37% held that the issue mainly concerned the local community in question, not the municipality as a whole. In addition, 39% said that there were differences of opinion, but little conflict; the remaining 13% felt that there had generally been agreement as to the decision.

Various types of arguments feature in debates on school closure. From local media debates and the research literature, we listed the points that appeared to be most important, and asked respondents to assess to which extent each point had been emphasized in the most recent debate about school closure in their own municipality. It should be noted that some of the items on the list may be used to argue in favour of or against closure, depending on the conviction of the individual. Some would, for example, argue that the learning environment tends to be better when a pupil can relate to the local environment, while others hold that pupils learn better in bigger schools with more resources. What we were looking for were the issues that tend to dominate the local debate, according to the MSA.⁶

Fig. 1 shows that the number of pupils, the social and learning environment, the work environment of teachers, as well as economic issues, are all high on the agenda. Slightly less emphasized but still prominent, were points such as travel distance, the attractiveness of the place, and parental wishes. Least emphasized were the use of the school building, the impact on school exam results and the possibility of establishing a private school. Different from the survey results, the use of the former school buildings was high on the agenda in all the three case studies, as the school was considered an important institution for the whole community. These school buildings were for example used as kindergartens, often combined with day-care facilities for school children,⁷ and community centres for the general benefit of all residents.

Economic arguments are ranked as the third most important argument in local debates about school closure by the MSAs. As demonstrated in the case studies, economic arguments should be understood as

⁶ The total adds up to more than 159, as it was possible for several respondents to collaborate on filling out one questionnaire – for instance, if they needed factual information from others person in the municipality.

⁷ The municipality is obliged to offer subsidised day-care facilities for school children (SFO) before and after ordinary school for 1–4 grade children, and for children with special needs up to grade 7.

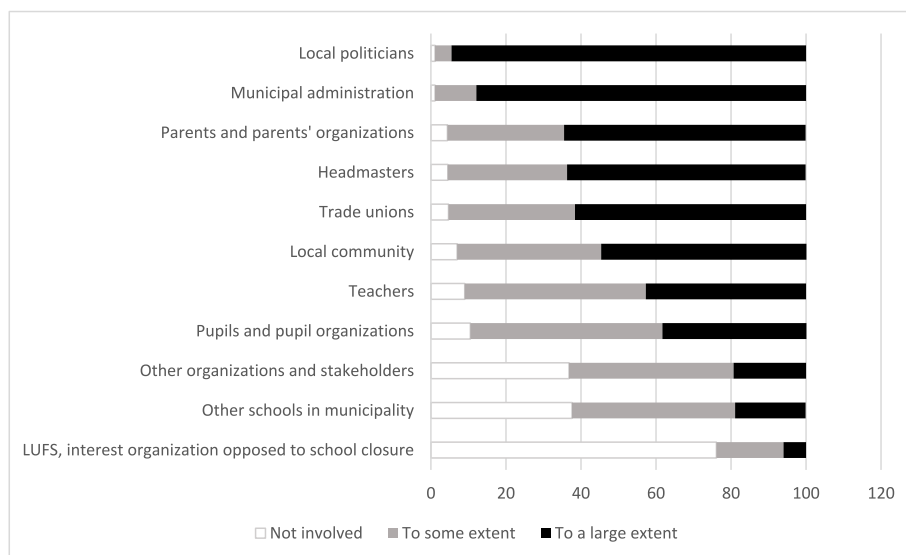


Fig. 2. MSA's assessment of the degree of involvement of various stakeholders in discussions of school closure/merger. Percentage of respondents (N = 91).

part of the local room of manoeuvre. In " sbygda", the MSA held that the politicians wanted to keep the school structure, but they realized that this would not have been economically sustainable. In "Fjellbygda", the MSA explained that it is the budgetary process that pushes change in the school structure: "We can save teachers by optimizing location and number of pupils in each class."

Interviewees in our case studies expressed deep concern with preventing community depopulation. In "Innsj bygda", the MSA held that parents' free choice of school could be a reason for people to decide to stay in the community. Rather than attending the local school, some pupils could then move to larger schools where more of their friends attended. However, in this way the free school choice might exacerbate school-closure processes and add fuel to local fears of losing their school.

Naturally enough, travel distance is emphasized more often in municipalities where distances between local communities are sizeable. There are currently no rules as to how long a distance or how much time a pupil may have to spend on daily school transport. According to our survey data, virtually all rural municipalities have pupils who rely on organized school transport. In nearly half of the municipalities, this share was more than 50%. However, we found considerable variation, from 3% to 100%. The longest travel time (one direction) averaged 40 min for those living furthest from the school. Thus, many Norwegian pupils already spend a considerable part of their day getting to and from school, and the time naturally tends to increase when a school closes (Solstad and Solstad, 2015).

We found only small differences in responses between respondents in municipalities organized according to a TO and those with a TLM. However, respondents in TLMs were less prone to emphasize pupils' learning environment as a key issue. Further, respondents in small municipalities said that in their debates less weight is put on pupils' learning environment and considerably more on economic arguments than was the case in larger municipalities.

5.2. MSAs' perceptions of own position in school-closure processes, in relation to the other actors (multi-level governance)

The MSA plays an important but often invisible role in debates on school closure. Regardless of model of municipal organization, their main role is to secure good conditions for education in the municipality and to follow up initiatives from the politicians or the municipal chief executive. This tends to occur when the municipal council must decide on new budget plans, or when they want to investigate demographic prospects and the future environment for children in the municipality.

MSAs have an administrative position, but in some cases we found that they were influential because it was their job to make the initial reports and proposals to the administration sorting out pros and cons for changes in school structure, before they were processed and distributed to the politicians.

In line with the MLG approach, the survey confirmed that many stakeholders are involved when the issue of school closure is raised at local level. Besides local politicians and municipal administration, who are obliged to involve in almost all such cases, parents and parents' organizations, headmasters and trade unions (the teachers' union in particular) involve if their interests are at stake. According to the survey respondents, as shown in Fig. 2, these actors are the most active. However, in most municipalities where school closure has been on the agenda, the local community is also heavily involved in the issue. All listed stakeholders except LUFs, a national interest organization working against school closure, have been involved in most municipalities, at least to some extent.⁸

While it is part of the role of the MSA to get involved in potential school closure, other actors are involved because of their interests. The various types of stakeholders are often internally divided in their views.

In two separate questionnaire items (Fig. 3), we asked how active the various actors were in favour of/against school closure among the many stakeholders (still seen in relation to the most recent school closure discussed in the municipality). Politicians were divided on the issue – whereas almost all the local administrations, if actively involved, worked for school closure.

Headmasters are also generally in favour of school closure; but, according to our respondents, they are more divided than local administrations, whereas other stakeholders tend to be more active, to varying degrees, in seeking to retain the school. Further, in the majority of municipalities, members of the local community work actively to prevent school closure.

In a multi-level setting it is relevant to examine how MSA representatives see their own role and how they assess their collaboration with other key stakeholders, as this is likely to affect their collaboration with others on the issue of school closure. We asked respondents to evaluate their collaboration with a larger set of stakeholders at various levels of governance assumed to be important for them in performing

⁸ However, from interviews we got the understanding that LUFs, when invited, had been an important actor in some municipalities. See also <https://lufs.no/files/2007/08/lufs-eng.pdf>.

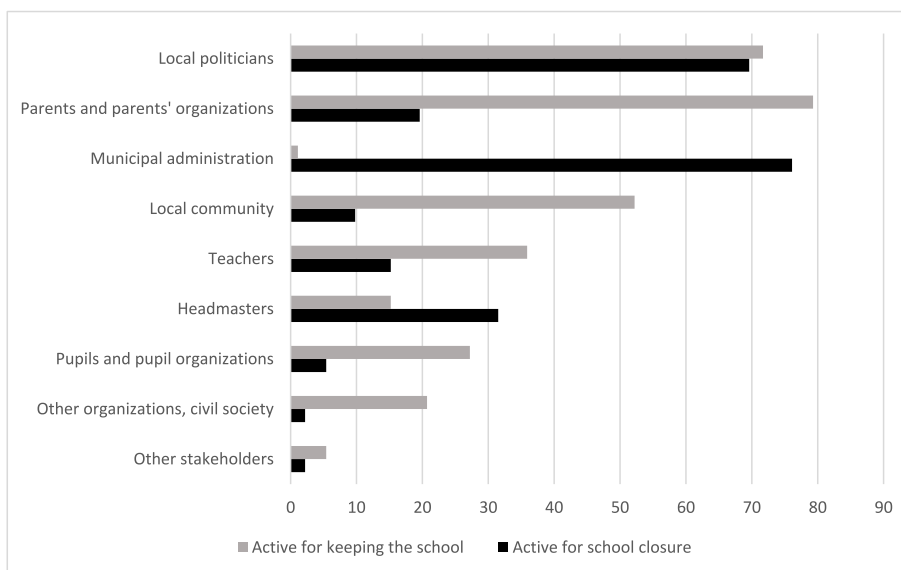


Fig. 3. Closing or keeping the school: MSA’s assessments of stakeholder involvement and direction of their involvement, in % (N = 91).

their work. Fig. 4 presents the mean results on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 4 (very good). They rate their collaboration with own administrations, including the headmasters, as close to the maximum result (a score of 3.8). The quality of the collaboration with higher-level authorities appears more mixed, with better scores for the county governor and KS (Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities) than with the Ministry and Directorate responsible for education. However, with the exception of the Ministry of Education, collaboration with all local stakeholders is generally ranked very close to ‘rather good’ (i.e. 3 on the scale) or better. Municipal organization (TO and TLM) and population size do not affect the results.

The MSA in the three case studies consisted of only one person. That entails a lot of responsibility but also greater possibilities for individual influence. In all three cases, we found that the MSA collaborated regularly with the local schools, with the municipal council and the committees for living conditions and education. However, the municipalities differed in their choice of procedures regarding school closure. One opted for a formal hearing process, one initiated open meetings in the communities as well as meetings with parents, while in the third municipality the MSA and the politicians had to respond to community

initiatives for establishing a private school as an alternative to closure. Collaboration with the local communities was not always straightforward: in all three cases there were conflicting views on closure among the local residents. Thus, collaboration with other actors had to be conducted with caution, adjusted to the specific context. This also shows that collaboration was not necessarily impeded by the occasionally sharply diverging views on school-closure issues. Regardless of the procedures, there were protests and conflicts in all three municipalities. In two of them, interviewees stressed that it could be advantageous if those in the administration lived outside the municipality: they would not risk being accused of having personal preferences that influenced their decisions. On the other hand, administrators living outside could be accused of not knowing the local situation.

Survey respondents confirmed that in communities with differing interests, MSAs include the arrangement for participatory processes to ensure local legitimacy for the decisions, as part of their role:

Information meetings were organized in all school districts, and many politicians participated. What was special was that politicians, on their own initiative, promised to listen to the various inputs at the

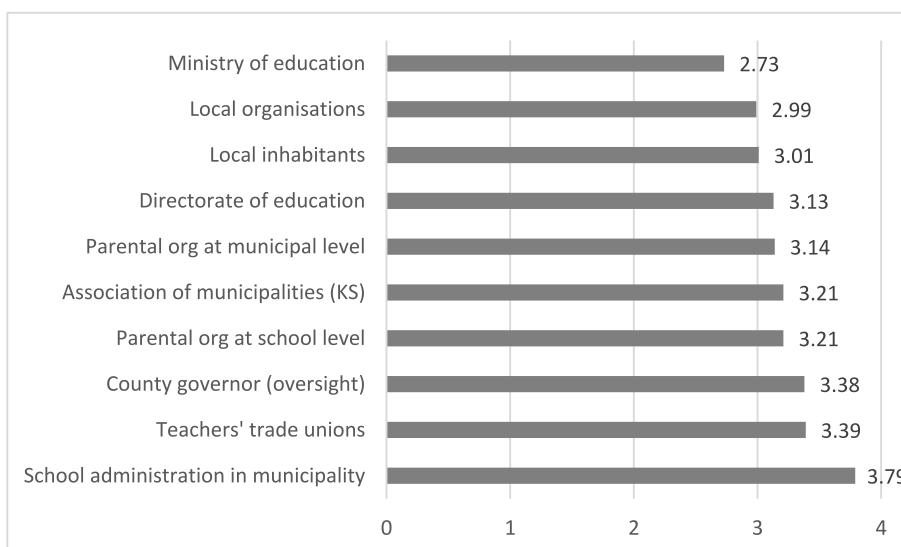


Fig. 4. MSA’s assessment of their collaboration with different stakeholders. Means on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 4 (very good), (N = 155).

information meetings, without starting any discussion. All those who were present could raise their concerns and express their opinions without being contradicted – that resulted in a very good process. All felt that they could express themselves and give their opinions, and that made it easier to accept the final result. (Survey respondent, TO, large municipality, school was not closed down).

Some respondents gave examples of what they considered best practices that could be useful to other municipalities involved in processes of school closure:

We established a steering group where representatives of parents in four school districts were in the majority, supplied with representatives from the administration and asked the politicians to keep in the background (to which they agreed) in the discussion meetings, and we appointed an external consultant to guide the process. This gave the process a high level of legitimacy, with little noise and clear conclusions, making it easy for the politicians to agree on afterwards. (Survey respondent, TLM, small municipality, school was closed down).

The quotes illustrate two things: the facilitating role of the MSAs and how this facilitation opens for practising multilevel governance in a local and decentralized context.

5.3. Municipal school administrations: main concerns about school closure

In the previous section, we saw that when there are debates about school closure in a municipality, the MSA tend to support closure. However, in the three cases which had all experienced school closures accompanied by local conflicts, the MSAs and the heads of the local administration underlined that there were also good reasons to keep small schools. The schools had been closed, not because they did not perform well, but because of the falling numbers of pupils, new demands as to education and teacher qualifications, the social environment for pupils and the teachers' working environment – and financial considerations. They all recognized the role of the school in the community and its importance for community development:

The community school is so much more than just an institution for education! It is education, it is a meeting place, it is an institution with teachers who used to be the wise people in the village, and it is a place for common memories for the inhabitants. (Municipal Chief Executive, 'Åsbygda')

What considerations do MSAs take in preparing and arguing the case for school closure? Politicians and local community representatives (parents, interest organizations) often dominate the public debates about school structure and school closure, whereas the MSAs operate backstage. Given their role in school-closure issues, however, it is not unlikely that their personal convictions may affect the basis for decision-making.

One of the survey items provides a good overview of how MSAs assess the various aspects that need to be considered in the event of a school closure. In the questionnaire, respondents were presented a set of statements, and were asked about their agreement/disagreement with each of them, from 1 (disagree fully) to 4 (agree fully).

We see that survey respondents tended to support arguments that speak in favour of school closure, but there are important nuances. MSAs generally gave preference to larger schools which, in their view would provide a better learning environment without negatively affecting the pupils' social environment. The majority did not support the statement that 'teachers can give more individual attention to pupils at smaller schools' either, although more respondents agreed with that statement than with the statement about pupils' social environment. As they were even more prone to agree that it is hard to attract young families to settle in a community that has no schools, they are likely to give weight to the

effects on the community if a school is closed down. Transportation issues seemed to rank further down on the agenda: only in about one quarter of such cases did the MSAs see this as a problem in their municipalities. Finally, in view of the results presented above, it is hardly surprising that few MSAs said they would 'do everything possible to maintain small rural schools'.

In an MLG perspective it is noteworthy that the MSAs said they were quite satisfied with how school structure issues were handled in their municipalities. More than two thirds of the respondents (71%) agreed that the municipality achieved a good balance between school location and number of pupils. On the other hand, there was also a noticeable minority who disagreed either fully (10%) or partly (19%).

In open-ended questions the respondents could further elaborate on their opinions on school closure. We examined these statements to see whether respondents employed arguments mostly in favour of or against school closure. The distribution of answers confirmed that, with small schools, MSAs tended to highlight arguments in favour of closure. Of the 29 relevant replies, they could be grouped so that 12 were clearly in favour of closing small schools, 2 were clearly against, while the remaining 15 replies were either neutral, contained arguments for both sides, or were more of an explanatory nature with reference to experiences in their own municipalities.

Though these open-ended answers cannot be deemed exhaustive or representative of opinions regarding school closure, they do indicate some of the issues that MSAs considered relevant. A recurrent theme was the quality of education, as with this statement:

The municipality must give highest priority to the core activity of teaching. (Survey respondent, municipal model unknown, large municipality, schools had been merged).

Arguments about the better quality of education were often combined with other arguments supporting school closure. Some emphasized the professional and social environment for teachers. Others held that the pupils' social environment is often better at a larger school where it is easier to find likeminded friends. Economic arguments for centralization were also mentioned by several respondents, but rarely as the main point – rather as a secondary reason for school centralization, as in this statement:

I think we adults are immoral if we decide to keep the smallest schools. The learning environment will be too narrow there, and some pupils are going to be the only ones in their grade. What about those who cannot find friends there? Schools in Norway are quite small, and it would be an advantage to increase the size of the schools considerably. The way we keep doing it now is neither pedagogically nor economically sustainable. We spend far too great a part of our school budgets on just a few pupils. This does not provide for equal educational services in the municipality. (Survey respondent, large municipality, TO, schools had been merged).

The economic savings achieved by closing down a school can be reduced, however, if the local community decides to replace the public school with a private school, such as a Montessori school. As noted, the economic gain for the municipality of closing the local school will then be both minor and less predictable. This was reflected in critical statements by some respondents, such as the following:

When a municipality [...] closes a small school for learning and pedagogical reasons, a big problem is that it is so easy to establish, for example, a Montessori school, allegedly meant to save the local community. If the municipal council chooses to close the school, that should be a decision that also includes private schools financed from the same cash box. (Survey respondent, medium-sized municipality, municipal model unknown, school had been replaced by private school).

Some MSAs were concerned that there were too many emotions

involved in school closure-processes, and that feelings tended to outweigh rational arguments: “Too many points of view are based on feelings and unfounded assumptions, and not professionalism”, and “Discussions about school structure are based more on feelings than arguments” are examples here.

The two statements that were favourable to small schools in local communities and sceptical of school closure were related to different issues, both of which are familiar from the data presented above. The first emphasized the importance of small schools for the local community. The second saw the mix of pupils from different age groups as advantageous for the social environment:

In district municipalities there will always be schools that have fairly few pupils (...). This offers good opportunities for a mix of ages, in turn providing good opportunities for differentiated teaching. This can help to promote the development of social competencies in a different way from places where pupils find themselves in groups that are homogeneous in terms of age. (Survey respondent, small municipality, TO, schools had been merged).

The main concerns of the MSAs in the case-study municipalities did not diverge much from responses obtained in the survey. Their main concern for the future was how to secure good education in municipalities where the number of pupils is falling. In two cases, the good quality of the small schools in teaching, reading and mathematics was underlined. Another positive factor related to small schools was that the teachers knew ‘all their children’, while in bigger schools some pupils could disappear in the crowd. As stated by one interviewee: “we have a dilemma, since our small schools have good teaching quality, but we still have to close”. National requirements for teachers’ qualifications were also noted by interviewees in the case-study municipalities as a new driver for closure of small schools, because more specialized teachers are replacing the generalists who used to cover many subjects in the small rural schools.

6. Discussion: municipal school administrators as agents of centralization?

We have examined the complex horizontal and vertical governance

of Norwegian rural school closure through the lens of multi-level governance and from the perspective of the (often-overlooked) MSAs. Our findings show how school-closure processes take place within a complex interplay of state, municipal and civil society actors that have very different views and motivations around school closure outcomes. MLG emphasizes decision-making authorities being dispersed between territorial levels of government (Peters and Pierre, 2001). In this study we find that the higher levels of governance are framing and limiting the room of manoeuvre when it comes to changes of school structure at local level. The various interactions and interlinkages in trying to influence and work out local decisions related to school closure take place between public and civil actors, mostly in rather horizontal processes, and mostly at the same territorial level. In the MLG approach, decision-making competencies are shared between actors of different levels and sectors (Hooghe et al., 2001). In our study it is clear that the different local stakeholders have different competencies and that it varies between local cases which of them that are being valued. While the MSA has a formal and professional role in the process preparing for political decisions on school closure, other local stakeholders are part of the horizontal processes based on a combination of arguments and engagement.

Our main finding, which was clearly illustrated in Fig. 3, is that when there are conflicts about school closure in a rural municipality, the MSA usually takes the side that supports closing a small school. Further analysis, exemplified in Fig. 5, showed that they believe this can provide the best possible school for the children, in terms of learning environment and pupils’ social well-being. Given the economic constraints experienced by the municipalities, and the fact that school structure is virtually the only part of the school budget that the administration can influence, economic factors also receive considerable attention, as shown in Fig. 1.

Official Norwegian policy has been not to close schools for economic reasons alone. However, some scholars (e.g. Solstad, 2009) argue that budgetary considerations are the main reason for school closure but are often masked by arguments about school quality. Both our case studies and survey findings show that both school quality and economic considerations matter when MSAs reason around school closure.

Despite the highly differing ways in which school matters are

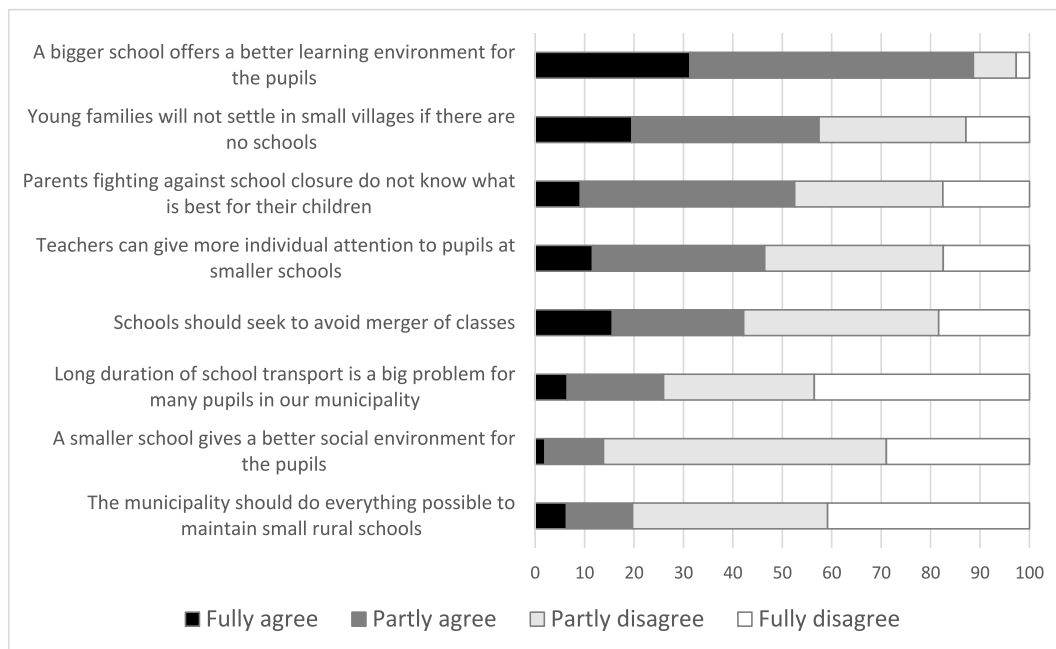


Fig. 5. MSA’s attitudes towards school closure and small vs big schools. Level of agreement with statements, % (N = 155). Note: ‘Do not know’ and ‘no answer’ removed (under 10% for all items except ‘Parents fighting for school closure’ for which it was 25%).

organized in the municipalities, we found only small, non-systematic differences in how MSAs in municipalities with TO or TLM experience and perceive school-closure issues. Neither does the population size of the rural municipalities have much impact. What our survey data indicated to be crucial for the school closure outcome is mobilization on the part of the local community, and political engagement in the municipality. However, it should come as no surprise to find that MSAs, as indicated both in survey results and case studies, draw on their professional commitments in emphasizing the perceived educational aspects over local community aspects.

Though MSAs recognize the importance of a school when it comes to attracting young families to live and stay in a local community, the impact of the school closure for the local community is usually a secondary concern and is rarely accorded top priority. By contrast, many other local actors see the survival of the school as a precondition for the continued existence of their community as a vibrant entity. In handling such conflicts of interests, interviewees in the case studies were concerned about alternative remedies to attract in-movers.

Our survey data revealed great variation in practices and outcomes with regard to school-closure strategies. Some municipalities decide to maintain only one large school in a central town, other municipalities decide to keep mixed-classes schools even with fewer than ten pupils. MSAs may be in favour of school closure, but our study shows that faced with high mobilization of other local actors, many municipal councils decide to keep the school going, despite contrary advice from the school authorities. That there is such large variation in school structure set-ups, and no automatically guaranteed outcome when school closure is on the agenda are both clear indications of strong local-level influence, decentralized decision-making and active local democratic practices. Moreover, the local community has a further weapon against school closure. Replacing the closed school with a private school reduced the economic gain expected by the municipality. Thus, although MSAs are clearly influential stakeholders because of their role and profession, it is often hard to establish the balance of power among the actors in school-closure conflicts, as indicated also by the variation in contexts and outcomes.

As many of these municipalities are small, and people in the MSA tend to know the parties involved, we found that some feel considerable pressure against their often-unpopular viewpoints. Their opponents may be neighbours or relatives, who often have children or grandchildren who will be affected by a decision about closure. MSAs in the case studies held that living outside the municipality could be an advantage since it might give them other perspectives, and they are less likely to be personally involved in the conflicts. On the other hand, those who live outside the municipality can be seen as not legitimate participants in the debate, and be accused of not understanding local conditions.

Even if MSAs tend to favour school closure in cases where there is conflict, they are sensitive to the various opinions and stress the necessity of open and transparent processes that involve a range of views and stakeholders. This was underlined by many of the survey respondents in open survey questions. MSAs are aware that forcing a decision on an antagonistic local population, and convincing politicians who must rely on local support, is not likely to succeed. Several respondents highlighted the importance of such processes for making a decision that would enjoy local legitimacy.

Several MSA respondents expressed appreciation that decisions about school structure are decentralized and that the municipalities can take contextual factors into account when deciding on school-closure issues. Many also wished for clearer guidelines from higher-level authorities. They felt that such guidelines could help them to balance and weigh the often contradictory concerns around a possible school closure, and to gain legitimacy for local-level decisions on a difficult and sensitive issue. The lack of clear guidelines that often left the MSA in a squeeze between different competing actors could be one reason why local MSAs gave a lower rating to their collaboration with national-level educational authorities than with other institutions with a stake in

school-closure issues (Fig. 4). That local adjustments, due to geographical, topographical and other contextual factors, would nevertheless need to be made was not seen as a good argument for not having clearer guidelines and national-level recommendations.

Finally, some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, we have discussed school closure mainly from the perspective of MSAs, which – even with the inclusion of some perspectives of other actors in the qualitative case studies – results in a certain bias in terms of what topics are deemed important. Similarly, the constellation of actors and the multi-level governance set-up have generally been viewed from the perspective of the administration. Our justification, given the limited scope of the study, is that the MSA has often been overlooked, as it is not particularly visible in public debates about school closure. We argue that the MSAs deserve more attention, given their importance in preparing school-closure cases for politicians and establishing arenas for community discussions on the issue. For a fuller understanding of the role of local MSAs in school-closure processes in a multi-level perspective, future studies should examine also how their role is assessed by other key stakeholders.

Second, the case studies were selected because of conflicts, and the survey respondents were asked to relate to the previous potential school closure that had been debated in their municipalities, as we were interested in their specific experiences with school closure. This approach, however, risks a bias towards conflict, as our study does not deal with cases where school closure had not been considered. We stress that only in half of the municipalities had school closure been on the agenda during the previous five years, and a much smaller minority expected such closures to take place in the near future. Any impression that the local MSA serves as a consistent agent for centralization would therefore be misguided. Moreover, centralization appears to be more an unintended result of many individual school closures, and as part of the general tendency towards centralization in rural areas, than as a deliberate policy aim as such.

7. Conclusions

School closure is a prominent and ongoing phenomenon in Norway's rural municipalities. Our survey of school structure in rural areas has shown that it is also widely contested, particularly in the local communities that are affected. This article has highlighted the role of the often invisible municipal school administrators (MSAs) in cases of school closure. Whether the municipality is organized according to a traditional or a two-level model, the MSAs tend to support the side favouring closure of the school in question. As the MSA has an important role in preparing the school-closure issue for voting in the local council, one would assume their position would prevail. However, our study of contested cases of school closure shows that active, vocal parents and civil society in the community often manage to align with local politicians to mobilize against closure of the local school. The trend may be towards fewer and bigger schools – but there are also many examples where these actors succeed in their efforts against the closure of local, rural schools.

The most important insight to the literature on rural education is the finding that MSAs' independent local discretion over school structure may in controversial cases lead to very different outcomes. This is also reflected in the outcomes in the two examples presented in the introduction:

In 'Innsjøbygda' there was a massive community mobilization against closure of the school and diverging opinions among the local politicians. The level of conflict fiercely affected relations in the community, and it was difficult to front a position different from the majority. There was no agreement of what was in the best interest of the children and the place. However, none of the conflicting parties was in a clear majority, and the main actors understood that they would need to make compromises. A process was initiated where the involved parties were invited to meet with the municipal school administrator and the

mayor to find a solution acceptable to the parties. In the meetings, parents and the administrative and political representatives succeeded in agreeing upon a deal that included closure of the school, but at the same time the opening of a new kindergarten, and, after some time, the introduction of a set of after-school activities in the affected community. This satisfied different parties of the conflict; the closure would not mean the loss of an important social meeting place. After some time even many of the parents who had been opposed to school closure were satisfied as they could see that their children were quite pleased with attending the central school.

In 'Havøy' parents and parents' organizations, pupils and their organizations, local interest groups and several individuals in the local community mobilized strongly against school closure. In addition to increased travel distance, the survival of the island community was their main argument. The mobilization was so strong that some of the politicians who had originally favoured closure changed their minds and voted against it. This tilted the balance and the school was preserved. The MSA still believes this decision was a mistake, both depriving the children on the island what they believe would be better education facilities and tying up resources that in their view could have been better spent on strengthening other schools in the municipality.

Though the outcomes were different, in both cases – and there are many more across the country – the municipal school administration found itself in a squeeze. On the one hand, they needed to respond to steadily increasing demands from national educational authorities and the outlook for steadily decreasing numbers of pupils, and to accept economic savings in a constrained municipal economy. On the other hand, they felt the pressure from groups and individuals to preserve threatened local communities, and to avoid long travel distances and the break-up of the pupils' local social and learning environments.

The Norwegian model, with decentralized governance of the municipal school structure where authority rests with the municipal council, does not solve this tension. It gives the municipal school administration indirect influence but not decisive power. Instead, this type of multilevel governance system on the same territorial level opens for involvement of all interested actors, which results in enormous local variations, and other winners and losers than a more centralized system would have entailed. The trends towards school closure and regional centralization of local schools would seem to be a side effect of such framework conditions as depopulation and general centralization, new national demands in the education sector, and municipal economic constraints, than a deliberate intention among municipal school administrations to close local schools. Thus, even though they may appear as agents of centralization, given the external constraints that they face, it is probably fair to say that municipal school administrations are striving to be agents for good rural education, limited by the multilevel governance system they are part of.

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Søholt has also been the project leader.

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