

EDITORIAL

Remote teaching to ensure equal access to education in rural schools

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Remote teaching to ensure equal access to education in rural schools

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An impending challenge in today's school is to ensure that all students have access to an equal education, which should in turn improve social and economic conditions for both individual and society (Lundahl, 2016). The equality aspect is especially accentuated in rural areas which, unlike metropolitan regions, often have significant difficulties related to long distances between schools, lack of qualified teachers and problems filling the classroom due to diminishing birthrates. This in turn restricts students' right to an equal education in rural areas (cf. Pettersson, 2017).

At the same time, digitalization of society is one of the fundamental challenges for the future. The development and broad availability of digital technologies has created new unique opportunities, and pitfalls, for rethinking and reinventing students' equal access to learning, education and collaboration in the digital age (Collins and Halverson, 2009). Distance and remote teaching are such examples used to ensure equal access to education, not least in rural areas (cf. Hilli, 2020; Pettersson and Olofsson, 2019). Using digital technologies for remote teaching have thereby also, to some extent, changed the way that schools operate and the ways that teaching is being conducted (cf. From, Pettersson and Pettersson, 2020). However, research, networks and collaborations within this area can be said to be scarce not only at a Nordic, but also at an international level (Barbour, 2013; Toppin and Toppin, 2016).

Based on the lack of research, networks and collaboration for developing remote teaching as a practice, the significance of a symposium was identified. In May 2020, the international research symposium Remote teaching to ensure equal access to education in rural schools was held at Umeå University in Sweden. At the symposium different strategies to systematically and proactively increase access to education at upper secondary school level using digital technologies were discussed. One basic assumption that emerged during the discussions was that the existence of, and access to, new information technologies is necessary but not sufficient. In the discussions it became obvious that it will be of complementary importance who is empowered to design, create, invent and choose to use the technologies that enhance their personal and professional lives.

The symposium resulted in an open call for a special issue of *Education in the North*, which resulted in a huge interest not only from the Nordic countries but from researchers all over the world. As can be seen in this special issue, research from Australia, Azerbaijan, Finland, Iceland, Scotland, and Sweden

with different focuses on aspects of equal access to education in schools are represented. The great promise of this special issue lies in its potential to provide research of interest to a wide audience, including researchers, practitioners and policymakers in both Nordic and international contexts.

Remote teaching as digital education – a promise and a challenge for equality in school

As mentioned above, using digital technologies for remote teaching may, to some extent, change the way that schools operate, and the ways that teaching is being conducted. As Öjefors Stark and From among others argue, simply having access to digital technology is not enough. In their study, they investigate development of remote teaching from three perspectives: school leaders, regional officials and researchers. The findings show a consensus that remote teaching challenges traditional classroom teaching. Interestingly, it seems that the combination of new forms of teaching and new artefacts open a space for potential development in rural schools, meaning that school leaders' perspectives and support should be considered when developing remote teaching. The fact that access to digital technology is not enough is also a starting point for Siljebo, in his article he addresses the lack of a theoretically robust definitions of digitalization and digital transformation in schools. Based on educational theory, Siljebo develops an understanding of digitalization and digital transformation in terms of human learning and development. Using the theory of Engeström, and especially the concept 'Levels of learning', this understanding is also empirically tested. The analysis leads up to an interesting definition of remote teaching in rural schools.

Remote teaching – redefining practices

The transition from traditional classroom teaching to remote teaching can be a difficult and challenging process. Simply transferring classroom practices to online contexts rarely turns out to be productive. Thus, teaching and learning strategies need to be redesigned, taking the contextual conditions of schools, students, teachers, subjects etc into consideration. Teacher presence is one important but difficult example when designing distance, online and remote learning. In this issue, Hilli and Åkerfeldt examine teachers' perceptions and design for presence in distance education. Based on a critical examination of communication and interaction in different digital environments, Hilli and Åkerfeldt discuss how social and teaching presence depends on contextual aspects related to different school and learning contexts.

Access to learning and professional development can also be a challenge for teachers. In recent years, there has been an emergent need for special educational expertise in rural areas. However, special educators are often placed in community centres with long distances to rural schools. In their study, Pettersson and Ström explore special educational consultation with teachers in rural areas, performed by means of online and remote communication. Creative and promising solutions are presented, useful for both researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

To enhance the quality and access of remote teaching and learning, students' perspectives on the teaching and learning practices are important. In their study, Ilomäki and Lakkala investigate school students' experiences of online remote teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools. In the study, a deep and comprehensive picture of students' experiences is presented. Based on the results, Ilomäki and Lakkala discuss several useful recommendations for practitioners' development and use of remote teaching.

From a higher education perspective, Peltola and Suorsa examine what agency is like in the everyday life of students in the rural north of Finland. They suggest that in developing remote teaching and learning the individual's everyday life should be taken into account; the challenge lies in fitting this together with the flexibility, accessibility and elements that will support engagement with learning and belonging within a group of peers.

Remote teaching, new arrivals and minority groups – access and hindrances

One distinctive theme occurring in the contributions to the special issue is remote teaching as a practice aimed at providing equal access to education for newly arrived refugees and minority groups. These groups often share common predicaments related to access, but merely providing remote teaching may not be enough and may in itself be a hindrance. Reporting on a qualitative study in Iceland, Gunnthórsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir present findings on how municipalities organise and structure the support for students with an immigrant background and identify differences between municipalities regarding these aspects. The findings relate to educational policies regarding students with an immigrant background, support and training offered to teachers, and the challenges and opportunities in the education of these students in Iceland.

Participation in professional learning is a challenge for teachers in small remote rural schools, particularly those who teach in a minority language. Shanks, Walker and Coyle show that multiple factors isolate such Gaelic Medium Education teachers and make professional learning more difficult to participate in: remote rural location, language, pedagogical approaches, school size and technological infrastructure. The findings identify challenges in a digital-focused professional learning community in a remote rural location. Support and infrastructure are important and it is highlighted that remote rural and linguistic minorities can create professional learning opportunities together, if challenges are identified and thus overcome.

From an indigenous research paradigm focusing on equal access to education, Parfa Koskinen brings about an understanding of the mechanisms and practices of cultural reproduction and transformation contributing to the construction of remote Sámi language education in Sweden. Through the Bernsteinian concepts of classification and framing, discursive gaps/spaces are identified and described. Especially where framing is weak, self-governing gaps/spaces are located, though not fully executed as such due to a lack of financial resources. The findings highlight that remote education can play a vital role in counteracting historical assimilative politics responsible for today's situation regarding e.g. lack of licenced Sámi language teachers and teaching aids.

Remote teaching and equal access to learning during the COVID-19

Because of unpredictable situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have temporarily closed their schools, meaning that online learning has been the only option for students. These exceptional situations put heavy demands on schools to rapidly rethink previous practices and to implement digital technology to support students' equal access to learning. In their study, Chaseling, Paredes and Boyd examine secondary school principals leading schools in times of COVID-19, with a specific focus on the role of technology in supporting students' learning from home. When interviewing the principals, it turned out that technology was a relatively minor aspect. The wellbeing of students, staff and families as well as effective communication emerged as the more essential aspects. An interesting contribution of this study is the discussion on how, or to what degree, the disruption and changes experienced by the principals will lead to fundamental change in educational practice.

As evident in this special issue, times of crisis reveal significant differences in the conditions for schools and students to give and receive equal access to education, not least in rural and disadvantaged areas. In their study, Paredes, Chaseling and Boyd examine how principals in rural and disadvantaged primary schools in Australia experienced the transition to homebased remote teaching during the time of COVID-19. The study reveals several important challenges from seldom heard voices. Based on the results, Paredes et al make interesting points on how the expectations on remote teaching, as a "universal approach" for exceptional circumstances, can increase the risk of inequities and unforeseen challenges for rural, disadvantaged and isolated schools.

From a student perspective, Jafar and Alizade investigate student experiences and access to education in rural disadvantaged schools during a nationwide lockdown caused by COVID-19 in Azerbaijan. The study reveals several important findings interesting for both research and practice as well as policymakers. According to the study, the socio-economic disadvantages in rural schools influence students' attitudes to remote teaching. Based on these findings, Jafarov discusses how assessing attitudes to remote teaching, without understanding the factors shaping these attitudes, may lead to superficial understanding of the phenomenon.

Another challenge emerging during COVID-19, is the form of, and access to teaching and learning for immigrants and newly arrived refugees. These groups are often dependent on sensible integration into society, including social connections and meetings with other people. In their study, Busic, Hansson and Sullivan investigate the transition to remote and online teaching for newly arrived refugees and immigrants in Swedish schools. The study reveals challenges around students' lack of digital competence, feelings of social isolation and difficulties including social interaction, which in turn reduced the possibility to access and participate in education. However, based on the results, the authors discuss creative solutions by the teachers to resolve their students' difficulties.

Features

We are also very pleased to be able to present features on ongoing and completed projects within this theme. From a Nordic perspective, we have three projects presented in this issue. Hilli shares experiences and implications from a cross-school project in Finland conducted 2015-2017. The

research project includes activities on several levels (classroom, school and regional level) which also appear to contribute to the success of remote teaching practice in the schools. In a similar but ongoing project in Sweden (2019-2021), Lindberg et al. describe a research and developmental project focused on remote teaching in the rural north of Sweden. The project is conducted within the framework of a national initiative to try out sustainable collaboration models between academia and schools. In this feature, opportunities and challenges to develop knowledge on remote teaching, built on collaboration between academia and school practice, are discussed. Also from Sweden, Pettersson and Hjelm describe a remote teaching project (2019-2022) focused on mother tongue tuition. The aspect of equal access to mother tongue tuition has been a major problem in several areas in Sweden. This feature elaborates on the experiences of developing remote teaching for language learning and the development needs emerging from five years of practising remote teaching.

In this issue, we can also present a feature from Australia – a country with long history of remote teaching. After giving a thorough overview of schools providing distance learning in New South Wales, Downes, Roberts and Barbour describe how remote teaching and collaboration between schools can provide new possibilities to meet students' diverse needs, including gifted students. The authors provide an interesting discussion on the possibilities of remote teaching where the concept of 'school' and 'schooling' need not be perceived only as attendance in one physical setting, during a specific hour.

In a feature from Scotland, Hanser discusses and elaborates on the role of mobilities in education and how remoteness can be understood as a strength rather than a weakness that needs to be overcome. As Hanser points out, his notions of mobilities may trigger imagination to go well beyond the idea of mobile phones in schools.

Book reviews

We are also very pleased to present three book reviews in this issue. In the first book review, Chatzitheodorou shares her thoughts around educational responses to crises from reading the book "Crisis, austerity, and new frameworks for teaching and learning: A pedagogy of hope for contemporary Greek education", written by Chalari. In the second book review, Gray explores his own (re)conceptualising research through his engagement with the book "Educational research: An unorthodox introduction", written by Biesta. In the third book review, Johnston discusses the changes in the way we see visual literacy within an increasingly digital and multi-modal environment through Hope's book "Seeing Sense: Visual Literacy as a Tool for Libraries, Learning and Reader Development".

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