"Yes, the power is in the town": An ethnographic study of student participation in a rural Swedish secondary school

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Abstract

This article is based on an ethnographic case study and highlights the importance of spatial dimensions and spatial inequality as means of understanding the participation of a group of youths living in a sparsely populated rural area of Sweden. The analysis took as its starting point Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of place and space as comprising extended social relations that are in a state of constant change connected to power relations. The data analysis focused on the activities that the youths took part in and how they expressed their participation and agency in society at local, regional and national levels. The results point to variability in youth participation at different levels and indicate that visible and meaningful social relations are important for youth participation and their understandings of participation. The trends suggest that student agency and statements in relation to possible and actual participation are strongest at both school and local levels, and decrease and change to more resistance and silence at regional and national levels.

Keywords: participation, education, spatiality, youth, rurality, Sweden

Introduction

Current research of youth participation and agency is to a large extent centred on youths who live in urban areas. This means that our knowledge of youths and their lives are mainly associated with urban localities. The lack of research regarding youths and their education in rural areas is obvious from an international, as well as a European and Swedish, perspective (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galdon, 2009). In Sweden, as well as in Norway and Finland, the depopulation in rural areas is an important issue that challenges community resources (Lind & Stjernstrom, 2015). This is strongly related to limited possibilities for schools, with some critical dimensions including long distances between schools and the students' homes, and problems in recruiting qualified teachers who have studied 'education'.

Today, Sweden lacks a coherent policy that clearly addresses the challenges and opportunities that rural areas are facing (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2017). There is ongoing debate about the growing gap between urban and rural areas in relation to spatial inequality and spatial justice. In some of the debate, Sweden is described as a divided country with a division between the urban and rural parts of the country (see e.g., Svenska Dagbladet [SvD], 2017). Nationally, there is an increasing trend of people moving from rural to urban areas and municipalities (Lundgren & von Schantz Lundgren, 2016). This development raises questions about the differences that may exist between urban and rural areas in relation to youth participation and agency, as well as about the question of social justice connected to spatial justice (Roberts & Green, 2013).

Some research from eastern European and Nordic countries has shown that youths from outside metropolitan areas are more likely to express low confidence in government and political

institutions than youths from elsewhere (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010), but further explanations for these findings have not been sought. Swedish educational research from rural areas is described as 'almost none existing' (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galdon, 2009, p. 28), and even research concerned with broader questions regarding youths in rural areas is scarce (see e.g., Svensson, 2010). Some research has pointed to the exclusion of youths in urban suburbs (Öhrn, 2012), while other research has shown that youths from rural areas are more pessimistic about their chances of participating in society (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010), and this might indicate different power relations in different areas.

In contrast, some Swedish research indicates that social relations and family are more important for youths within rural areas compared with urban areas (Holm, 2008). Taken together, the overall silence about rural areas could lead to significant and problematic issues. This could be related to future labour markets and educational opportunities for youths from rural areas being neglected (see e.g., Cuervo, 2014; Eskilsson, 2010). This is also central for questions about social justice connected to place (Roberts & Green, 2013) and it raises questions about the experience for the people who live in these areas (Shucksmith, 2012).

In this article, the importance of spatial dimensions and spatial inequality is highlighted as a means of understanding participation by a group of youths living in a sparsely populated rural remote area in Sweden. The analysis takes as its starting point Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of place and space as comprising extended social relations that are in a state of constant change connected to power relations. The data analysis focused on the activities the youths took part in and how they expressed their participation and agency in society at local, regional and national levels.

The context

Sweden lacks a national and clear definition of a rural municipality, but its 290 municipalities are all categorised as rural (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, 2011). Since 2016, there has been a new classification based on the concept of municipalities (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, 2016). In this classification, municipalities with a population of fewer than 15 thousand inhabitants in the largest settlement area and a commuting rate lower than 30% are classed as rural.

Forberg, the municipality in this study, is one of a group of municipalities categorised as sparsely populated, having a population density less than 70% and with more than a 45-minute drive to an urban centre with more than 3,000 inhabitants. The municipality is situated in the middle of Sweden and has a population of about 14,000 inhabitants. In the area where the school is situated, there are fewer than 3,000 inhabitants and the distance between the school and the town with the administration centre is about 100 kilometres. The distance to Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, is 400 kilometres and the journey by car takes about six hours. The labour market in the area is historically connected with the forest and water power, but work opportunities have decreased during the last few decades. Today the labour markets across the municipality are concentrated in the health care sector and in construction and extraction (Statistics Sweden, 2014).

The study described in this article focuses on questions about what the youths do and how they express their own participation and agency in society at local, regional and national levels, which are also connected with global perspectives and questions. The specific research questions addressed were as follows:

1. In what ways do students talk and act in connection with their own participation in society?

2. How are power relations between different places and spaces described and connected by the students?

The case-specific results presented in this article are a part of a larger Swedish research project called *Rural youth: Education, place and participation*, which was funded by the Swedish Research Council (ID 2013–02142). This research project is focused on the education and participation of youths in six different Swedish rural areas and investigates how secondary schools address students' social inclusion and agency. The starting point for this particular project was the lack of research in rural areas in Sweden, because urban areas are usually the focus. Because of the silence from rural areas, there is a risk that urban norms are taken for granted outside urban areas. Furthermore, spatial inequality and the importance of place and space may be ignored and rendered invisible.

In this article, data from one of the research project's six rural areas are analysed. This particular analysis was chosen because this area is remote, sparsely populated, and the kind of area that is rarely researched in Sweden (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). In Sweden today, there are 'disquieting tendencies' from extended social divisions and also an increasing gap in educational performances between rural and urban areas (Lundahl, 2016, p. 7).

Theoretical framework

The question of spatiality in educational research is important in order to highlight the power relations between different places and spaces at both national and global levels (Bright, Manchester, & Allendyke, 2013; Tuck & Mc Kenzie, 2015). Some research has been carried out without considering what constructs, constitutes and defines rural places (Corbett, 2014) and definitions and meanings of rural are generally lacking in both international and Swedish research (see e.g., Shucksmith & Brown, 2016; Svensson, 2010). However, concepts for defining rural areas and places are difficult to establish (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). Classifications used in educational research are seldom consistent with an analysis of power, whether theoretically or in relation to official political classifications (Corbett, 2014, 2015). Further, there is often a lack of articulated and theoretically informed definitions (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014).

Spatial inequality can be understood from at least two perspectives. One is how and why resources that are important for equality vary across different places; another is how places can become both makers and markers of inequality (Hooks, Lobao, & Tickamyer, 2016). Both these perspectives are important for understanding power relations. In this article, other perspectives are also brought into focus, bearing in mind the two already mentioned can be inter-related. A range of factors can have an impact on spatial inequality. Three that are implicated in studies in and of rural areas are economic structures, institutional arrangements and spatial/geographical contexts. For all three of these factors, the history connected with, for example, the social forces within areas have to be borne in mind.

The analysis in this article takes its starting point from Doreen Massey's (1994) conceptualisation of place and space as different, expansive social relations that are always changing over time. Central to Massey's theoretical concept of place is the understanding of place as relational: that places are constructed and communicated in relation to other places and spaces and, further, that places can be understood as articulations of spatial relations. The spatial relations contain multiple identities and these reflect different power relations through, for example, access and representation (Massey, 1994).

In this study, the students' experiences and statements of their own participation in society are understood as different views of spatial relations. A specific place can, at a specific time, show a particular mix of social relations, but the identity of a place is also relational in the sense that "it derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'" (Massey, 1994, p. 169). These are some of the aspects that make questions of spatiality important to consider and, in this article, the students' statements and experiences are analysed from different levels of society. Massey (1984) points to three central relations and how these three collaborate in one and the same place. These relations are between society and spatiality, society and nature, and society and social functions, for example, the economy.

Massey's (1994) questions and discussions about regional problems being only understood as regional problems—formulated as "in what sense a regional problem?" (p. 50)—are important for this article's interpretation of place as relational and intertwined with time. In particular, Massey's thoughts on power relations bring a wider context to the analysis of student adaptation and resistance in relation to their participation in local, regional and national levels of society. The students' adaptions and resistance are in this article understood as different ways of responding to power relations in society.

Places and spaces as social relations are central to Massey's theoretical understandings, as is the interdependence of places and spaces. Shucksmith and Brown (2016) present three dimensions of interdependence: rural-urban, global-local and nature-society and these dimensions are all important for power relations between different places and spaces. Regarding the first dimension, rural-urban interdependence, it is important to note the changing interactions between rural and urban areas and to not view the rural–urban relation as a dichotomy. In line with that understanding, there are no clear borders of separation and no essential differences between rural and urban areas.

The second dimension of interdependence, global-local, stresses the fact that global forces are at work and come from beyond national borders. Rural (and urban) societies are not independent of social, economic and technological forces that exist outside. Regarding the global economy, Shucksmith and Brown (2016) argue that "the logic of international capital is that investors seek the highest returns regardless of where products are produced and under what conditions. Hence, global capital has no sentiment for locality" (p. 9). Finally, the third dimension, concerned with the interdependence of nature-society, emphasises the fact that nature and society are not separate spheres and should not be considered in a dualistic fashion. They constantly build on and shape each other in a dynamic way connected with, for example, the labour market.

The particular focus of this article is students' agency, their adaptation, resistance and confidence in society in relation to their own participation at local, regional and national levels, and how this is connected to power relations. The analysis focuses on student participation and the identification of themes, from both observations and students' statements about agency, that are connected with the local school and the community and also wider regional, national and global issues.

Methods and locality

The analysis in this article is a part of a larger research project. In order to research a variety of ruralities and to avoid stereotyping rurality and rural youths (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014) as one category, six different rural municipalities were selected. This was to cover variation in, for example, demography and production relations. Therefore, sparsely populated areas, tourist municipalities and small industrial villages were included in the larger project. The schools across the larger project were located in different municipalities that varied with respect to size,

location and labour history. However, all schools were located in areas with few schools and the students often had to travel long distances to get to school.

The fieldwork included compressed-mode ethnographic fieldwork (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), with about 25 days spent at each school and in the surrounding area, mainly during one semester. Compressed-mode ethnographic fieldwork is intense fieldwork over a short period of time. The choice of ethnographic methods was based on the importance of the researcher's involvement in everyday life and learning, from the activities of participants to interactions with them in context. A further important point in ethnography is that high status is given to the accounts of participants' perspectives (Beach, 2017). In this study, it is mainly the students' perspectives that are in focus.

The fieldwork was carried out by one individual researcher at each school and area, even if others from the research team also visited those locations. This is in line with the theoretical understanding of context and places and spaces as relational (Massey, 1994). The author of this article was the individual researcher in Forberg and at Forest School.

The ethnographic design for all the schools in the larger project involved observations of classroom interactions and teaching content, together with field conversations and observations. In total, 340 hours of classroom observation were conducted. These were supplemented with observations in the neighbourhood. There was also a collection of local historical and other documents, for example, newspapers from the area and information material about or from the school. In addition, 136 students (68 girls and 68 boys) from secondary schools (Grades 8 or 9) were formally interviewed for the project. Interviews were also carried out with teachers and other staff at the schools or in the municipalities. The reason for choosing secondary schools and Grades 8 or 9 was based on the project's focus on youth participation. Each school could, for practical reasons, choose which grade and group of students they wanted to be part of the study.

Forest School, where the fieldwork was conducted for this case-specific analysis, is a small school with a total of 120 students and about 20 staff. The school is one of two upper secondary schools in the municipality, but the classes range from preschool to Grade 9 (students aged 6–16 years). All the students in the school occupy the same compact building and share, for example, the dining hall and a big central corridor. The school is situated in a quiet and remote area, about 100 kilometres from the town that is the administrative centre for the municipality and where the other secondary school is situated. Many of the students at Forest School have to travel long distances. For example, in the particular class that was studied, only three students could walk to school in about 15 minutes. The rest of the class had to get to school by bus or car on small roads, surrounded by forests and often during bad weather conditions.

The teachers and students at Forest School have often known each other for many years. Both students and staff usually have personal relationships outside the school, for example as parents-children or even grandparents-grandchildren. Forest School has a very strong connection with the local environment, history and nature. This was visible in many ways within the school. For example, pictures, paintings, maps and poems from and about the area were displayed on the walls throughout the school. In the main corridor, very large, visible glass display cases showed animals and natural scenery, which were characteristic of the surrounding area.

The observations and interviews were conducted in and with the 8th grade class (age 15) and 20 students (10 boys and 10 girls) were interviewed. Participant observations occurred during different subject lessons and during breaks and other activities. This article is based on

observations and interviews with Grade 8, but one observation is from a discussion with students from Grade 9 and that occasion was in the morning before lessons began. Data collection was concentrated mainly in one spring term of 2016.

Results

The analyses from the larger research project highlighted differences in the school's relations according to their spatiality and surroundings. This was one reason for choosing Forberg for this more specific case analysis. Some of the schools, such as Forest School, were very strongly connected with their local features, such as the landscape and history, while others were less connected with their surroundings. The overall analyses in the larger research project showed that these differences were related to the type of rural area; the schools in the sparsely populated areas clearly had a stronger connection with their surroundings and nature was materially important to them.

A deeper analysis of the empirical data from Forberg, focusing on student participation, is presented below. The results are presented at local, regional and national levels. However, it is important to stress that these levels are interconnected and shape each other, and that rural and urban norms need to be considered across all themes. The interconnections between these levels are also understood as communicated and articulated social relations (Massey, 1994).

Participation in school and at a local level

The students often expressed both an acceptance and an adaptation to their own circumstances and those of their teachers, family and friends. In the class that was followed, all students, except for one girl, stated that they liked living in the area. The satisfaction that they expressed was often strongly related to nature, the forest, the water and the things they could do there, such as hunting. The students' satisfaction showed that nature and society both build and shape each other (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016). The students also said that this particular area was a calm and quiet place to live and a place where they could feel free and safe. "It is nice and calm" was a common answer from many of the students when asked, "What is it like to live here?" These answers are in line with other research from Nordic countries (Rye, 2006; Stenbacka, 2012).

Almost all the interviewed students from Forest School demonstrated and expressed that they could change things in the school, providing examples of concrete agency and participation. They also seemed to know in what way they could change something, even if it did not always lead to exactly what they wanted. The students used formal ways—through class and student councils—to propose change, but they could also talk quickly and directly to teachers and the principal if they wanted a more informal approach to change. During the fieldwork, it was evident that the students (from Grade 8 and other grades) arrived promptly by just walking into either the teachers' or principal's rooms if they wanted something. As one student from Grade 8 stated in the interview, "We just stumble into the principal's room."

Other research regarding student participation also indicates the importance of close relations and the potential of communication between different groups at school (see e.g., Garpelin, 2003; Hugo, 2007; Johansson, 2009). In Forest School, this was obvious throughout the school day, as the power relations were built on close social relations. In different ways, the teachers at the school encouraged the students to use their power. A particular change that some of the students expressed a great deal of satisfaction about was that the school had started to serve free breakfast to all students every morning. The reason for the change was the long distances between home and school that many of the students had to travel. The students gave this as an example of their own participation and the potential for change within the school.

Yes and that was because we missed the buses and didn't have the time to eat breakfast at home and then they offered us breakfast here in school. (Fanny, interview, 27 May)

Another area of student participation and use of power was the school's own sports club. It is unusual for schools to have their own sport clubs in Sweden. At Forest School's sports club, the students had the chance to participate in both formal decision-making about the finances, as board members, and also with the practical work carried out within the school, such as arranging a thematic day with different activities for students across the school.

The school counsellor stressed how important the sports club was for the school's work with democratic processes and participation. She also said that this work was more important in a rural area:

Yes and again, a rural problem might be that they [the students] never during their leisure time experience a democratic forum. Then this naturally falls back to the school to work on, and as much as possible try to compensate for, but it is hard. (School counsellor, interview, 25 March)

In connection with sport, the older students at Forest School were active as volunteers, with a small 'salary' given to the class for a big international world championship held close to the village where the school is situated. In that way, the students in these classes could earn some money together. They used the money for a school trip at the end of their last year at school.

Many of the students talked a lot about their participation in this event and they seemed to be proud to be part of this activity, which was also economically important for the area. Another example of student participation and agency was that some of the students proudly described the part they played in the building of a new hockey rink, because they had talked to politicians about the need for this. The hockey rink was placed just outside the sports hall, which was the same hall that the school used during school days and it was close to the school.

The examples above all show how the students could use social relations to change different things, both in the school and in the local community. It was evident that they had a chance to participate and affect power relations. In effect, the students could engage with issues of importance to them and build different, expansive social relations that could change over time (Massey, 1994). However, there were also some difficulties for participating at a local level.

Almost all students were critical about the lack of transportation (e.g., very few buses) in the area. This initial and concrete lack of participation and possibilities for change led to isolation and created problems for students meeting up with friends and taking part in sports, cultural and political activities. The lack of transportation limited the possibilities for the students to develop multiple identities that were built on access and representation (Massey, 1994). The students mentioned that some of the bus schedules serving the nearby ski resort were cancelled when the resort closed for the season and the tourists had left the area. With such long distances and so few buses and other forms of public transportation, the students had to rely on parents, grandparents, older friends or siblings to drive them.

For the students and their families, this was—to a greater or lesser extent—a problem for either practical or economic reasons. To have a car was important and problems with the parents' cars were issues of interest and discussion in the class. During both interviews and observations, the

question of transportation was a common theme and it was visible during lessons and on other occasions at school:

> During the work with 'Picasso pictures' Frances suddenly in a loud voice says: "My mother's car is broken." Many of the other students say with a lot of compassion: "No! What a pity!" Then Frances explains and says: "Yes, there is no power in it, it doesn't accelerate!" (Field observations, 28 March)

Also in connection with limited social relations and long distances, many local sports activities and teams had closed down because there were too few participants. During the period of the fieldwork, there was only one organised sports team activity in the village: a soccer team for boys. Nothing was organised for the girls, except for the horse-riding that they engaged in. Although there was a soccer team for the boys, the travel to training and games involved long distances and could take hours for some of the students. With such long distances involved, the transportation to training and games was difficult to organise. One student, Frits, explained the situation like this:

> It is quite a long distance to everything so, for example, we play soccer but we can't train very many times every week. Because it is such long distances and if we had to travel so much every week it is not possible. It is 150 kilometres between the two players who live in the north and south. (Frits, interview, 23 May)

Participating in this soccer team involved a lot of organisation by the players, parents and trainers. The examples above are all connected to lack of transportation and this was an obvious problem for the students, as it influenced their lives in many different ways. Here their own participation had limits, as power relations outside the family and local community were difficult to change. Possibilities for transportation outside the local community were more important for the people who lived in the rural area than for those who lived outside of it. According to Massey (1994), power relations between those in different areas are built on both access and identity and here the students' access was strongly limited, thus indicating unequal spatial relations.

To summarise, the students' participation at school and at a more local level was strongly viewed as social relations within the community (Massey, 1994), which has also been described in other research from rural areas (see e.g., Holm, 2008). At Forest School and its local area, the interest in nature and sports activities seemed to be important for participation, and this created important power relations that the students could use in other situations.

The students often knew how and who they should talk to when they wanted to influence and change different issues at school and they could, to some degree, participate in important activities within the society as a whole. Many of the students and their families also had a historical connection with the place and that made some level of participation easier, at least for some students, because they knew who they could contact and talk to. However, this social contact had limits when it came to issues concerning relations outside the area where the students lived or had contacts. The particular problem of transportation was strongly interconnected with the wider region and, therefore, there were limitations on student participation. This highlights Massey's (1994) concern about regional problems as "only" regional problems.

Participation at a regional level

At a regional level, the students expressed resistance and less participation in connection with the town that is the administration centre of the Forberg municipality, as well as the bigger town

in the county. At the same time, students mentioned both these towns as places where they could potentially study and work in the future. During the observation period, some of the students in the class also wanted to go to these towns during the weekends, for example, to meet siblings or to go shopping. This shows that spatial relations can change over time (Massey, 1994) and that both access and representation are important for spatiality.

When activities connected with the school were taking place in the town that was the municipality centre, transportation for the students was both an expensive and critical problem that the school had to address. The principal ironically said in an interview that "it looks like it is up hill to us here." The principal's experience was also that the distance between the municipality's central town and Forest School seemed to be longer than the distance between Forest School and the municipality's centre. This also points to in the way that regional problems really are regional problems (Massey, 1994).

The lack of possible transportation might be one reason that the police were not at all popular with the students. When prompted during one of the interviews, one of the students stated: "Those of us who live here don't like the police." However, the police were not located close to where Forest School was situated; instead, they were in the town that was the centre for the municipality (at a distance of 100 kilometres). Research about youth and crime in rural areas (Ceccato & Dolmen, 2011, 2013) suggests a connection with alcohol, violence and family structures, but in this study of Forberg the students' attitudes to the police were not concerned with these problems. Recent research suggests that crime in rural areas is lower than in urban areas (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2015, 2017), but the presence of police is also low (Lindström, 2015).

The school staff said in interviews that students at Forest School sometimes drive various types of vehicle, even if they are not legally allowed to do so. One morning before their lessons started, a group of students from Grade 9 were very upset because of the police traffic control the evening before:

> When I arrive at the school in the morning I talk to some students from Grade 9. When I ask them how it is to live here, one of the girls says cosy and some boys say boring and that it is f****d off. One of the boys continues: "The police come all the time and are checking driving licences … Too many policemen on the roads!" (Field observation, 22 April)

During some lessons, the staff took the opportunity to teach and talk to the students about safety and security on the roads and the laws relevant to driving different kinds of vehicles. For one lesson, the school counsellor had arranged to show a film about safety on the roads. The film was about youths who drive cars illegally (and too fast or/and when drunk) and the story had a sad ending, with serious injuries and death.

> In the discussion after the movie one student wondered where the film was recorded because he recognises the place. During the continuing discussion both the school counsellor and the students describe accidents where either they or people they know were involved. A student describes that when his mother drove an ambulance [she is a nurse] she attended an accident where it was a person she knew who was hurt. (Field observation, 25 April)

According to Massey (1994), the importance of social relations is very important. In this excerpt, the student clearly communicated and articulated these relations, connecting them to a particular place which was well known to the students.

To summarise, in the observations and interviews concerning participation at a more regional level, the importance of concrete transportation is stressed. There is a strong interconnection and communication about how places are related to each other. The power relations are connected to economic structures, lack of institutional arrangements and the spatial context (Hooks et al., 2016). The students' actual and possible participation was limited because of the logistics of getting to and from the school and their homes. Professionals, such as the police, were seen as outsiders who were making this problem even worse when, for example, they monitored driving licences.

Participation at a national level

In Sweden as well as in Norway, debates connected with hunting wolves are well known and established (see e.g., Eriksson, 2016; Skogen & Thrane, 2007), and there is a division between rural and urban areas on this question. This division clearly dominated the students' statements about participation and agency at a national level. Here representation and access from rural areas indicated a spatial relation (Massey, 1994), where the domination of urban values stands as an important issue to communicate. From the students' perspectives, this was a source of both resistance and irritation. The students expressed much more resistance at the national level compared with the more localised levels. In particular, and almost exclusively, it was the "wolf question" that students talked about during the interviews connected to this level.

From the observations and the interviews carried out, the students described views about the protection of wolves as an urban norm and the power of these views in dominating those from rural areas. The students also pointed to the importance of hunting for food in areas where it is a long way to shop. From other research about rural youths, this connection between food and hunting is not so clearly articulated, but the issue can be understood by considering a number of different ecological, social and political factors along with direct experience of carnivores (Eriksson, Sandström, & Ericsson, 2014).

Some researchers have used the theory of social representation to understand why the conflict related to wolf hunting is so strong and inflammatory (Figari & Skogen, 2011), while others (e.g., Eriksson, 2016) approach this issue by considering the different power relations between groups in rural and urban areas. This is in relation to general ideas and also in specific relation to the issues of wolf hunting and political alienation. In some research, rural identities and political change are stressed as being important factors to consider, in order understanding the different views of wolf hunting. This, then, can be connected to Massey's (1994) ideas and can be understood as different power relations that not only relate to a regional issue.

In this study, the students at Forest School expressed views about how urban attitudes about hunting dominated rural communities where the wolves actually exist and live. According to the students, the result is that the views of people who live in the rural areas do not count at a national level. During the interviews, many of the students—both boys and girls—very strongly and clearly expressed the view that the debate and national restrictions on wolf hunting are examples of how the people who live in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, make decisions about and dominate the people who live in rural areas and how this connects to power. In the interview excerpt below, Frans talks about wolf hunting and who makes decisions about it:

> Yes, the power is in the town. And they decide a lot without knowing how it is in reality.
>   (Interview, Frans, 6 May)

In this respect, urban domination also leads to economic disadvantages for the students' families and this aspect has not been highlighted in other research. From the students' perspectives, this

economic disadvantage is because moose meat is an important food, particularly in areas at some distance from grocery shops, and wolves eat moose. Two students—Folke and Fia—in different interviews gave the following examples connected with food. They stated that the people who live in towns and have the power to decide do not know the situation in rural areas.

> Folke: Yes, connected with hunting it is a little different, with wolf politics and other issues. The people who decide, they do not know how it is up here. How difficult it is with hunting when the wolves eat so much. (Interview, 25 March)

> Fia: Well, this with the wolves, I don't think they [the people in urban areas] really understand how hard this is for us. We don't have so much food and shops here. We have nothing of this and we mostly hunt our food. And everything is almost gone; the wolves take it all. (Interview, 20 April)

However, even though there was often a strong and clear resistance against urban norms about hunting wolves, in relation to other issues the students seemed to follow and adopt urban norms as their own. This is in line with Massey's (1994) ideas that social relations change over time and, in different ways, conceptualise both place and space. Indeed, there were various examples, apart from the hunting issue, of how the students adopted urban and national norms.

In the research, the domination and student adoption of urban and national norms were more visible in the observations than in the interviews. The adoptions were connected with students as individuals (e.g., the way they talked), but they were also connected to the different environments in rural and urban areas. Regarding language dialect, there was an occasion during an English lesson when a student overturned a container and had white paint all over her hand. The accident was followed by this dialogue:

> Felicia says with a strong dialect: "Oh I overturned the can." Then two other students comment on her dialect, the ways she talks, and they repeat the word "overturned" with (almost) no dialect and one student says: "You can't go to Stockholm and say overturned that way." (Field observation, 22 April)

From this example, the students seem to have adapted to use the Stockholm dialect without any resistance at all. However, during an interview, two students questioned the urban dominance and indicated how they thought their living in a rural area was viewed from an urban perspective:

> Fiffi: What I'm thinking about is the picture of us seen by the people in towns, how they look at us. They might look at us as someone in old clothes, dirty hair, a cap and so on. Awful dialect and … that is not true.
> Interviewer: So that is their picture of people who live in the countryside?
> Fredrika: Yes, there are some who have that picture, but there are also people who don't. (Interview, 6 May)

In this case, the students questioned and reacted against a stereotype that concerned themselves. However, (national) urban norms were visible in some lessons. One example was in a reading test. Almost all the texts the students had to read and work with during this particular test had a strong connection with Stockholm. One task involved a map of different museums in Stockholm and another was about graffiti on Stockholm's metro. In the introduction to the text about the museums, the students read the following:

> *Stockholm has a very large range of museums. There is something for everybody. A rainy summer day doesn't have to be a lost day.* [The text used in the test was originally from a newspaper, *Metro*, 2001]

The other text (about graffiti) was introduced in the test as follows:

> *In Stockholm the police have recorded about one hundred who paint graffiti very frequently, and many hundreds more who are also active but to a lesser extent. The metro's special graffiti police consists of ten police spotters who work across the whole county but the local traffic authority also uses guards to track down the painters; all of this at a cost of about 50 million kronor every year.* [The text used in the test was originally from a newspaper, SvD, 2001]

The content in these texts was not questioned or commented on by either students or teachers. In fact, it appeared to be something natural to them.

To summarise, the students' participation at a national level often reflected a strong resistance to, and rejection of, some aspects of urban areas (specifically Stockholm), but at the same time there was silent adoption of some urban norms. The question of hunting wolves was the example that many of the students mentioned as an issue for them in a rural area. None of the students who were interviewed wanted reduced hunting or stronger protection for the wolves. The connection between how nature and society build and shape each other (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016) is worth noticing. Additionally, it was evident that spatial and power relations were an issue for resistance or rejection in some cases, but the normalisation of an urban perspective was sometimes taken for granted, as in the case of the texts used in the reading test.

Concluding remarks and discussion

The results of this study indicate variable student participation at different levels related to spatiality. In line with Massey's (1994) understandings of place and space as extended social relations, the students' expression and agency illustrated how such relations are important for participation at different levels and that one level interconnects with another. Furthermore, the results of the research suggest that visible and meaningful social relations are important for actual student participation and their understandings of power relations, but the results also highlight limitations that decrease the students' potential for participation.

Communication is a significant factor in participation, or rather in the potential or lack of participation. Massey's (1994) understandings of space as socially constructed and of social relations as spatial constructions make communication a critical point in considering power relations. The results of the research have revealed trends that show that student agency and statements in relation to possible and actual participation are strongest at the school and local levels, but they decrease and change to more resistance, critique and silence at regional and national levels.

At the same time, there is a strong interdependence between the different levels, according to communication or a lack of communication, in tangible ways (e.g., public transport) and in the less tangible understandings of different norms for rural and urban living that relate to participation and potential participation. The students' statements and expressions relating to some questions mark a clear dichotomy between rural and urban life, but this varies, depending on the issue and over time. Shucksmith and Brown (2016) defined three dimensions of interdependence—rural-urban, global-local and nature-society— and these are all visible in the students' experiences and statements about their participation.

It is important to stress the temporal and historical associations connected with the local area. Economic structures, institutional arrangements and geography are all embedded in the three dimensions outlined above. These also highlight the question of spatial inequality where resources are important for equality (Hooks et al., 2016). Historically, the area where Forberg is situated has a falling labour market and an economy that, to a large extent, was built on forest use and water power. The owners of forest and water companies are often large corporations and they take no responsibility for institutional arrangements in the community (e.g., public transportation). They use a global workforce and they have often originated from beyond national borders (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016).

In line with Massey's (1994) questions about whether regional problems are really regional problems, the students' participation is to a large extent concerned with the opportunities that are available for taking part in activities outside the school and the local area. This is also an issue for the school as an institution. Although school staff have tried to handle it in different ways, solving economic limitations is problematic and it is, of course, connected to other issues. When there are no real opportunities for students to take part in activities outside the school and the local area, they seem to react with resistance and critique urban norms.

This was most visible in the data regarding the students' attitudes to the police, and it was also evident in the issue of wolf hunting. The students highlighted the status of the relations, where they, as youths living in a rural area, explained that they have experienced subordination compared with people living in urban areas. The area where Forberg is situated is both sparsely populated and geographically remote, and the local population emphasises nature. Yet the students also acknowledged the challenges of rural life. Even if students polarised different issues, such as urban-rural dimensions, these issues constantly build on and shape each other in dynamic ways.

Most of the students were critical about what they understood as a dominant urban norm, a norm that they often referred to as "Stockholm". This norm is understood by the students as a national norm that is powerful and sometimes limits their lives and their chances of participation. The students cited many examples of hunting (or not hunting) wolves, along with how the police limited their opportunities for social relations and activities. However, in other situations the students adopted urban norms, with little resistance or no reflection at all.

The statement, "Yes the power is in the town," is more than a comment about distance. It links to relations, collaboration and connections in (and of) society—spatiality and society, nature and society, and social functions (Massey, 1984). The students' experiences and statements connected with participation can be understood from the perspective of both adaption and resistance built on power relations. These power relations are visible in the school and local area. They are meaningfully built on a history of social relations in both the students' private lives and in the school as an institution.

At regional and national levels, opportunities for student participation occurred to a lesser extent, a finding which is in line with other research (e.g., Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010). However, in the current case study, the data indicated students' perceptions of the subordination of rural areas and rural lives, in comparison with urban lives. The rural place can then be understood as both a mark and a maker of spatial inequality (Hooks et al., 2016), but this inequality originates to a high degree from areas outside the rural society—areas that the students criticised but in the future will probably live in, whether they like it or not. Currently in Sweden, there is no coherent policy for rural areas (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2017) and the description of a

spatially divided country is under debate (see e.g., Svenska Dagbladet, 2017). The voices from the students in this study confirmed this division and they pointed to different power relations that operated in the country. This indicates the importance of both a critical discussion and a policy for rural areas.

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