

Chapter # 26

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL SCHOOL IN THE RURAL COMMUNITY:

A perspective of school multifunctionality

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ABSTRACT

Latvia is facing major demographic changes that threaten the existence of local schools in rural communities. National education policy has led to closing small rural schools; this process, however, affects not only children and teachers but also the whole community: it increases social inequality, makes it difficult to provide qualitative education as close as possible to where children live, and promotes further depopulation of rural areas. Transforming schools into multifunctional community centres can increase the quality of life of local communities. As a result of the case study of Garoza elementary school in Jelgava County (Latvia) conducted in 2025, the authors support the idea of more opened schools experimenting with different forms of learning in collaboration with the community as suitable scenario for small rural schools in Latvia. The research aimed to explore the opportunities for rural school multifunctionality in local communities, taking into account their needs as well as to develop recommendations to promote sustainable development of local schools. The results show that the multifunctionality of rural schools can provide solutions for their sustainable development and strengthening local community through adapting schools to the different needs of local communities and acknowledging significant advantages of the rural environment and small schools.

Keywords: rural schools, multifunctionality, community, education policy, sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Latvia is facing major demographic changes that threaten the existence of local schools in rural communities. In Latvia, historically schools have been the centre of local communities; however, in many cases this experience had to be re-introduced (Tūna, 2015, p. 499). Tūna suggest that rural schools are significant local actors for life-long learning and rising social cohesion. Laizane (2012) in her doctoral thesis have emphasized ecological approach towards rural school analysis. To maintain a small school with a small number of children and ensure high quality teaching is complicated. Therefore, according to the priorities set by the Ministry of Education and Science, all municipalities in Latvia but especially in rural areas are implementing the school network reform by closing small local schools.

After the administrative territorial reform in Latvia, since 2021, 38 schools were closed in total and 142 schools were reorganized or merged with the other school (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024). The process often is full of emotions and protests; however, some municipalities seek a compromise. The process of school network optimization affects not only children and teachers but also the whole community: it increases social inequality, makes it difficult to provide qualitative education as close as possible to where children live, and promotes further depopulation of rural areas or in other words - “slow death” of local

community (e.g., Koroleva et al., 2017; Svendsen, 2009). In Latvia and other countries (e.g., Sweden), those who argue for closing the schools, in addition to the financial arguments, claim that small schools provided a low quality of education, isolation, small groups, and social vulnerability (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020, p. 615).

The research of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (thereafter OECD) envisages that local schools can be developed according to different scenarios. In this study the authors believe that scenario “Schools as learning hubs” where “diversity and experimentation are the norm”; “opening the “school walls” connects schools to their communities”, and “favouring ever-changing forms of learning, civic engagement and social innovation” indeed is a key (OECD, 2020, p. 49). Small schools often turn into the only one significant local hub maintaining crucial functions of community life. Based on the case study in Garoza parish, the paper aims to explore the opportunities for rural school multifunctionality in local communities, taking into account their needs as well as to develop recommendations to promote sustainable development of local schools. The authors examine the main challenges and opportunities of adapting rural schools to the different cultural, social and economic needs of local communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Interest in small rural school research is acknowledged in many countries and regions. Fargas-Malet and Bagley (2021) refer to the number of studies in European countries focusing on the potential these schools have “for the building of community engagement and social cohesion for sustainable change” (p. 823). In Lithuania, Misiūnienė (2019) has studied possibilities for activities of a full-day school in a multifunctional centre in case when schooling opportunities in local rural community are limited. These examples show how traditional interpretation of what is school and teaching process and what school can offer to wider public is changing. Based on their case study in a small Swedish municipality of Ydre, Cedering and Wihlborg (2020, p. 606) claim that after the local school closures local families referred to reduced life quality and loss of social networks when they had to travel longer distances to other schools. Meanwhile, the local municipal council considered the school closures to be beneficial to the community. The study emphasized also the level of integration of a school in community’s daily life, and the authors call for local policies “that can improve life quality and make everyday life more sustainable for people in rural areas” (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020, p. 615). More recent study (Limbert, 2025) shows similar results: instead of consolidation outcomes, sustaining local schools foster stronger community ties, engagement, identity, and local economy as well as helps to reduce CO2 emissions. Limbert (2025, p. 60) also claims that maintaining existing schools can be more economical in the long term compared to consolidation costs and busing students to larger institutions.

Although this paper does not focus on rural community school management models, regarding the school and learning process governance, it is important to emphasize the role of the school founder (the state, municipal or other agency) as well as the one of the school administrators that may use a number of practices and strategies to foster family-school-community partnerships. As Cummins and Patel (2025) reveal, among the number of these strategies, some are as follows: encouraging parent leadership and advocacy, leadership presence in the community, and establishing the school as a social and cultural broker. In Latvia, schools are traditionally funded and maintained by the municipalities. The state provides grants for teaching staff remuneration. Parents are represented in school boards and thus involved in the decision-making processes.

As Smit, Hyry-Belhammer and Raggl (2015) state, there are two strands of discussion linked with teaching and learning in rural schools: one discourse focuses on limited opportunities of students to attain high educational success in rural schools, disadvantages and inequality compared to urban schools, and the other discourse emphasises rural schools as a place for experimentation and pedagogical innovation. Regarding the first discourse, it is important to understand the local rural community context in order to analyse some learning and teaching processes as well as the outcomes (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009). For example, in schools, where the place-based education approach is introduced, a greater attachment to local community and its context is achieved, students become proactive investigators of the multiple environments they live (Yemini et al., 2025). This is a way how to ensure locally driven, community based, or ecologically focused education. Based on empirical evidence, Svendsen (2009) points out that “multifunctional centres should ideally contain public services (e.g., school, kindergarten, library, health care), private enterprises [...], and “facilities for local voluntary associations [...]” (Svendsen, 2009, p.3). Transforming *schools into multifunctional community* centres can help preserve schools and strengthen the quality of life of local communities. Research conducted in Latvia by Supule (2019) indicates that “rural schools and municipalities positively evaluate the approach of community schools with extended functions” (p. 171); however, extended functions and the community school model is not enough strong argument for keeping a school open as it rather is “a form of competition between municipalities” (p. 171). In Latvian municipalities, however, there is no strong support yet towards changing approach and transforming rural schools into community centres.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was completed in two phases during April and May, 2025. Firstly, a literature review was conducted as a desk-research, and, secondly, the focus group with school management, teachers, and local government representatives (six participants in total) was organized to collect views from the local stakeholders on the possibilities for adapting schools to community needs and the necessary support mechanisms. Qualitative research approach was applied and particularly case study methodology (Yin, 2003) was selected to analyse multifunctionality of Garoza elementary school and its role in local community which is Salgale parish (Jelgava County, Latvia). The advantage of this methodology is that a case is investigated deeply as a united and integrated entity by using several data collection methods (Creswell, 2007).

The focus-group was conducted in the school, it was 1 hour and 30 minutes long and was recorded. The researchers followed the respective ethical guidelines: all invited discussion participants were informed about the aim of the discussion, informed consent was received, participation was completely voluntary with an opportunity to withdraw anytime, participants were asked permission to record the discussion. Before the discussion, participants were introduced with the main topics and questions. Focus-group took place in a friendly and cordial atmosphere; the participants were quite insightful and interested in the topic, and elaborated on each other's ideas. Later, the audio recording was transcribed with the tool *Transkriptor.com*. After revision, the focus-group data were coded and analysed according to the main discussion topics. They are: 1) the role and interaction of Garoza elementary school with local community of Salgale parish; 2) community needs and multifunctionality of a local school; 3) sustainable development and future perspectives of local rural school.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The first school in Garoza parish was founded in 1886, so it has a long and rich history. In 2026, it will celebrate its 140th anniversary. The school survived, despite the consequences of the First World War, when it turned into ruins. Location of the parish and the school is shown in the Figure 1.

*Figure 1.
Location of Garoza elementary school and its coat of arms.*



In 1926, the school was renovated and during the Second World War it remained intact until today (Skolas vēsture, n.d.; Štelmahere et al., 2016). Contemporary exterior of the school and its main buildings are shown in the Figure 2.

*Figure 2.
Garoza elementary school, Spring 2025 (author of the photos: Liga Paula).*



The number of pupils has varied from approximately 70 to a little bit over 100 from year to year. Besides the elementary schooling program, the school has pre-school unit providing Montessori education what the school is very proud of. During some period after 2000, the school was renovated and its infrastructure was greatly improved according to contemporary requirements combining historical buildings with new amenities and infrastructure. During its rich history, the school has changed its name several times (Štelmahere et al., 2016); now it is Garoza elementary school.

In Salgale parish there are two villages: Emburga and Garoza. The territory of Garoza village is 156.9 km², its population is around 1500 inhabitants. The local school in Emburga was closed as the village is near to some neighbouring parish and Jelgava County municipality decided to optimize their costs. The Garoza elementary school now is also one the biggest employers in the village, it also serves as important community hub involving community people in joint activities. The school regularly participates in a number of projects. One of them is related to training seniors in computer skills and digital literacy. The school has experience and skilled personnel to work with children with some learning disabilities therefore it is popular among the parents also from the neighbouring parishes and Jelgava city as Garoza elementary school can ensure inclusive learning environment in smaller groups.

Regarding the role and interaction of Garoza elementary school with local community, the focus-group discussion revealed a number of links and activities. The school has strong networks with local community groups especially children's families and their parents. Even more, children with behavioural and learning disabilities from near Jelgava city are accepted in the school as it has inclusive learning policy. As school representative stated: *"Children from Jelgava and the surrounding area are transported to the school by Salgale parish school bus, because the school in Garoza provides an individual approach, works with children who did not do so well in big forms of a city school, implements inclusive education. What cannot be achieved in the city, small schools do it, you could say they do the work that city schools did not do."*

The school representatives named a number of local organizations and activities where school is involved. Amongst the other, cooperation with the local motorcycle trial club was mentioned. The club offers various creative activities for pupils and educators (e.g., career education). Through sport children learn the importance of sports, increase their purposefulness; in sport camps organized in the open-air they acquire certain survival activities in the forest, etc. Cooperation with local churches was also emphasized, e.g., pastor came to address children at Christmas service. Garoza elementary school has strong cooperation with the Music and Art School and with the local library. Also, local entrepreneurs were mentioned as cooperation partners: *"There is an excellent cooperation with an entrepreneur next to the school, who was engaged in berry farming and shares his experience with students about practical knowledge and skills useful for life."*

A number of activities and events take place at Garoza elementary school, in which the residents of Salgale parish also get involved: Easter celebration, National Day concerts and balls, disc golf, motorcycle rides, sports festivals, march on Lāčplēsis Day (November 11) to the Vareļi Monument and much more. The overview of the school's multifunctionality is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1.
Overview of Garoza elementary school's multifunctionality
in the context of local community.

Community school's function	Implementation level	
	Currently	Intentions for the future
Educating school children families (events, lectures)	community level	will be continued
Course organizing (computer training for seniors)	community level	will be expanded
Organizing local culture events (concerts, balls)	community level	will be continued
Organizing sport events and training	community level	will be expanded
Organizing children camps with specialization	limited opportunities	solutions must be developed
Specialist consultations (psychologist, speech therapist)	school level	will be expanded
Centre for interest-related education (after-school activities)	community level	will be expanded
Extended day program (two groups)	school level	will be continued
Offering preschool education (Montessori education)	community level	will be expanded
Availability of workshops (design and technologies)	school level	solutions must be developed
Tourism destination (heritage oak tree, museum)	community level	will be continued
Eco Garden (in strong cooperation with pupils' parents)	community level	will be continued
Cooperation with community library	community level	will be continued
Cooperation with a local music and art school (Salgale parish)	community level	will be continued
Inclusive education for children with special needs	community level	will be continued
Latvian plain air painting camps during summers	community level, national level	will be continued
Memorial procession 11 to local Vareļi monument on November	community level	will be continued
Offering boating to Ozolnieki village, camping sites in summers	idea to be implemented	will be continued

The school is very proud of its Eco Garden program which is part of the international project. Next to the school building, there is a garden (Figure 3.) where each form and group from the pre-school unit has their own plot and greenhouse where they grow different crops.

Figure 3.
Eco Garden in Garoza elementary school, Spring 2025 (author of the photos: Liga Paula).



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The aim of the programme is indoor and outdoor classes that promote pupils' interest in a healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyle, encourage them to acquire knowledge about organic, environmentally friendly cultivation and use of crops in the household, as well as smart, sustainable collection, use and protection of wild plants that are friendly to the environment and people (Kraukle-Veisa, "n.d."). After crops are harvested, children together with their parents and teachers cook together, prepare preserves for the winter or use products for school lunch meals (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Products of the school Eco Garden, Autumn 2025 (author of the photos: Rebeka Grinfelde).



The program has defined number of objectives (Kraukle-Veisa, n.d.) such as 1) learning to classify, compare, generalize, and apply the knowledge acquired in natural science, informatics, home economics, visual arts, and foreign language classes; 2) learn the basics of organic cultivation of crops, the principles of collecting, wisely using, researching, and protecting wild plants in the natural environment; 3) practically use IT technologies, Latvian and foreign languages; 4) get to know the climate and natural environment of their country in comparison with the natural environment of other countries, promote and seek solutions together with foreign students for a modern, healthy, environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle.

During discussion the participants shared slightly different opinions about multifunctionality of school and its future as a community center. Executive of local community was quite sceptical: *"A school must be visible in today's society and it is visible in Salgale parish, but this requires constant advertising, which takes away the strength and energy of the school to carry out its basic tasks what is teaching."* One of the teachers, however, responded: *"I agree that it is necessary to earn money and think about financing, but the school attracts families who earn money, pay taxes, which go to the municipality, so the school must be more open and multifunctional."*

Asked about the challenges that small rural schools face and respective decisions what local authorities should make in order to optimize school network in municipality territory according to the national education policy guidelines, the representative of municipality (decision-making authority) acknowledged that this is also parents' responsibility whether local school will exist and develop or not. He put it this way: *"Community residents must take responsibility for driving past the school, but of course they have the right to educate their children in Jelgava, where their work."*

When speaking about the future vision of the school, its principle mentioned: *“The school is very well located geographically, so it can attract interested parties outside the community. We want to create the first school in Latvia as an example of good practice. A school where the main focus, in parallel with studies, would be directed towards the acquisition of social skills by students in order to gain competence in completely independent self-education, to acquire survival skills.”* Therefore, her plan is to attract entrepreneurs who would be interested in helping to create an appropriate place and invest in the material and technical base, so that children could develop respective professional skills, as well as acquire various household skills. School staff plan to work towards creating a partnership between the municipality and entrepreneurs to develop a school what prepares children from the community and surrounding communities for their first work skills and to start an independent life. This is closely in line with the ideas presented in the OECD research and the scenario “Education outsourced” (OECD, 2020).

The results show that the multifunctionality of rural schools can be an important solution for their sustainable development and strengthening of the local community. By adapting schools to the different needs of the local community, while simultaneously using the advantages of the rural environment and small schools, it is possible to ensure their existence and promote regional development. To achieve this, strategic cooperation between school management, municipalities and the local community is necessary.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Due to the critical demographic indicators of Latvia, rural schools can exist by supplementing educational services with multifunctional and diverse activities that meet the needs of the local territorial community. Rural school can be considered strong if it has good educational quality and close ties with the local community, however, they cannot compete with city schools. The Garoza elementary school has proven its ability to work with students who are not accepted into a city school due to low achievement, however, showing progress and student development dynamics in smaller school.

Although Garoza elementary school already offers a wide range of valuable multifunctional activities for the local community, educators show great interest, encouraging new, creative ideas and readiness for various experiments, just to maintain the sustainability of the school. The school is currently focused on the goal of the Eco Garden program - to promote students' interest in a healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyle and the ability to use knowledge and skills to solve problems in changing real-life situations.

The executive of the local community is more sceptical of the school's efforts to become a multifunctional community center than the decision-making units of a County, indicating that teachers should deal with the educational service offer and not invest energy in ensuring other activities. Both the political decision-makers and the executive of the local community confirm that there would be no risks in future maintaining the school's infrastructure if the heating system were replaced with a more economical solution.

The local community and the school management agree that children must learn to survive in today's rapidly changing world and be ready to self-organize in diverse and unexpected situations in the future, therefore, they see an increasingly close cooperation with entrepreneurs from the local community who would be interested in material and spiritual investments in the Garoza elementary school as a challenge for school development.

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KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Multifunctional rural community school: a type of publicly funded school that serves as both an educational institution and a centre of community life.

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