

7 Exploring the Local Context from Multiple Perspectives

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School-In takes a holistic view of ‘place’, which means that the geographical context is considered a mediator for physical, social, and economic processes affecting the community (Agnew, 2011). As local institutions, schools are a part of the geographical context and are both influenced by and influencing the place. Therefore, the project should consider the local context of the participating schools. As social institutions and parts of the local community, schools offer a central meeting place for youth. Research findings show that expectations in the local community are decisive for inclusion in schools (Midtsundstad & Langfeldt, 2020; Horrigmo & Midtsundstad, 2020; Horrigmo, 2015). Thus, the chosen research approach should contribute to collecting information and exploring how school organisations can benefit from the interplay between school and the local community in terms of inclusion.

To approach this aim, we strove to construct a picture of the place. We were interested in how different schools, as parts of the local community, are affected by different local cultural, social, and economic processes. The picture should include unifying and dividing forces within the local community of each actual place to see the openness and possibilities for inclusion within the local milieu outside school. A challenge when exploring a place is that a place is no longer a clearly delimited geographical unit isolated from other places. Therefore, a place must be seen in relation to other places. A relational perspective on ‘place’ implies an openness to both internal and external relations.

This part of the project was based on an ethnographic approach and being *inspired by ethnography* (Geertz, 1973; Geertz, 1994; Wolcott, 1990; Bryman, 2004), as well as Berger and Luckmann’s *social construction of reality* (1966). To make sense of the place as part of the method, a ‘picture’ of the place was constructed. In our case, the place referred to the catchment area of the school. The picture of the place included how mechanisms of the local community worked and how the dynamics influenced the place and created tensions within the community formations. Such a picture, or ‘place construction’, was made for each of the innovation schools participating in School-In, referring to a partly limited location and situated knowledge as described by Haraway (1988). The specific place constructions were based on a performative approach (Law, 2007, 2008). ‘Performative’ means that the method contributes to constructing the realities they are about to discover (Berg, Dale, Førde, & Kramvig, 2012). For example,

knowledge traditions are performative, helping to create the realities they describe. The performative methodology is built on a 'relational logic', meaning that elements in a system are and achieve their form and character only in relation to each other (Law, 2008).

In School-In, the pictures of the places were social constructions that emerged in conversations between the researchers and strategically chosen representatives of the place. The conversations had two foci: the researchers' understanding of the initiating steps and the local inhabitants' understanding of the place. It was emphasised that the constructed picture should be representative and recognisable to the dwellers of the place.

Places are imprints of a series of collective actions created by those who reside in the place or by those who influence the place through their daily presence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Because places are socially powerful and more than just a spatial background (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005), they must be treated with the same care as personal data in the research process (Clark, 2006). Full anonymisation can be difficult to achieve (Singleton & Strait, 1999). Therefore, repeated reflections on anonymisation have been part of the research process (Clark, 2006; Yin, 2014).

Indeed, persons and their actions and perspectives became the carrier of place information to the School-In project (Andersen, 2013). Thus, in our cases, only the essence of what seemed necessary for the research purposes was highlighted in constructing a place. As far as possible, the place was kept hidden by various types of disguises, and local references were not provided. Site-specific events and activities are omitted for the same reason in the dissemination, and visual illustrations are also withheld (Clark, 2006).

In the School-In innovation, the place constructions were regarded as important background knowledge for interpreting teachers' understandings of the local milieu. They were also considered part of the holistic school mapping process which formed the basis for the Mental Mapping Response method (chapter 4) and the school's choice of development area. Using the place constructions as cases in research makes it possible to compare places and thereby understand significant mechanisms for formations of social patterns in local communities that affect schools or are affected by schools. Yin (1981) points out that the term 'case'... attempts to examine: (a) a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1981, p. 59). Thus, in our case, the place constructions are used to gain insight into the interplay between a school and its local community.

Attempts to categorise local communities based on a general understanding of the place, such as industrial, urban, or rural places, did not bring us any closer to an understanding of concrete communities. Such methodological issues are often discussed based on the concepts of 'space' and 'place' (Agnew, 2011; Gieryn, 2000). 'Space' as a concept has developed as universal and general, while 'place' is seen as specific and contextual. This has implications for our methodology because space affects place in different ways.

Space and place represent two analytical approaches for ongoing processes that have impetus for the actual schools. The research approach should also consider how new relational conditions influence place. Methodological trouble related to the lack of contextual understanding and contextualisation is discussed by Atkinson and Ryen (2016). Literature on place methodology pinpoints the value of the connection between theories of place, research procedures, and research results (Dale & Berg, 2012). The methodology has offered a sort of circular dance between theory, method, information, and indicators (Wadel, 1991). Places are part of the wider space meaning that region and municipality merge with the school and the school's local community. Agnew (2011) pinpoints the necessity of taking *location*, *locale*, and *sense of place* into consideration as elements when studies are anchored locally.

7.1 Mapping the terrain for the innovation in School-In

To make a place construction, the dynamics of the school's *local context* and a wide range of information and indicator sources were needed. These were collected and integrated into a place construction in the sense of a *thick description* (Geertz, 1994). The descriptions considered how *macro-* and *mesostructures* influence local practices of the community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). It was of particular interest in School-In to investigate what people had in common and what they shared, because this could contribute to explaining parts of the school's culture and its interplay with the local community. In the following, we explain how constructions were made based on documents, map reading, 'driving around', local expert interviews and group interviews with teachers and students.

The mapping was done according to *Place Theories* (Massey, 1984, 1991; Agnew, 2011, 2014; Cresswell, 2015; Aarsæther, 2016), and the place constructions were made in line with Berger and Luckmann's work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), referring to ordinary people's constructions of knowledge and world views based on experiences in their everyday lives.

Places as *milieus exercise a mediating role on physical, social and economic processes and thus affect how such processes operate* (Agnew, 2011, p. 2). This view allows the school and its community to be seen as partners in an ongoing co-creative interplay concerning the community, *the local milieu*. To illustrate this, what happens in the classroom or schoolyard matters in leisure time, and vice versa.

When investigating the local milieu as a territorial unit or place, *location* comes to the foreground as a phenomenon having consequences for daily life and *sense of place* (Agnew, 2011). The location in space, in terms of relative placement and proximity to other places, has consequences for how communities are formed, draw their boundaries, and are developed with reference to the physical, social, and economic structures. Therefore, we were interested not only in historical, social, and economic information about the place but also in its relative location to nearby places.

The patterns of community formed through different *social ties* were of vital importance for understanding the dynamics of inclusion rooted in the local place. Based on questions concerning the qualities of social ties (Granovetter, 1983), we constructed an understanding of local community types (Putnam, 2000). *Weak social ties* are based on interests and acquaintances with little emotional involvement, but are open to linking various alliances and groups in society, such as networks. *Strong social ties* have similarities with ties in primary groups, between people who already know each other well. The social ties, and density of interconnections, as well as the community patterns, were read through the lenses of Putnam's operationalising of the concept of *social capital* – *bridging social capital* and *bonding social capital*, associated with *types of solidarity and trust* (Putnam, 2000, 2007) as well as *community trust* (Wollebæk, Lundåsen, & Trägårdh, 2012). Putnam (2000) sees weak ties as a source of bridging social capital that strengthens the community's openness and ability to act inclusively. In contrast, the strong bonds bind together a small group that closes around itself and appears exclusive and closed to others. A local community will consist of both types of social ties.

To construct a picture of the place's social community, we were interested in which social ties had the strongest influence in the local community and how the smaller groups were interrelated (Massey, 2005). This was to be able to gain an understanding of the possibilities for inclusion and exclusion. Places are relational and are localised relatively to other places. It is, therefore, necessary to form a picture of the geographical direction of the social ties – internally at the place or externally towards other places. When involving internal and external movements by examining social ties, it is possible to get a picture of where people are involved – on-place or off-place.

7.2 Seven-step method for mapping the local milieu

Against the backdrop described above, a seven-step method was initiated to map the terrain and make constructions of the actual places. In a multiple-step method, every step should contribute something unique to understanding the place as a supportive milieu to the inclusiveness of schools. The seven steps guaranteed a wide range of information and indicators.

7.2.1 Step 1 – gathering information for the constructions of place

Places are in continuous change and should be viewed as time-space configurations made up of intersections of many encounters between *actants* – things and people (Agnew, 2011). Acknowledging that concerns of local communities were affected by emplaced forces rooted in history and traditions, and by spatial forces such as centralisation, urbanisation, and commuting, we considered place and space to converge in practical life, mediated through existing structures. To capture both the place-based

and spatial processes, we used different sources to gain an overview of the place, such as (1) statistics; (2) local history; and (3) website information.

Statistics Norway offered information at the municipal level. The municipalities provided graphs of population growth going back to 1950, which enabled an understanding of how such growth has changed up to the present day. More variables were found in statistics, including age distribution, proportions of immigrants, and patterns of ‘stayers’ and ‘movers’ in the municipalities. Statistics showed the size of homes in relation to the number of residents, the number of single parents and couples living with and without children, as well as the median income for different categories of families. We used graphs showing the type of work in which the inhabitants were engaged as well as graphs showing the population’s level of education to construct a picture of the occupational composition at the place and the extent to which people commuted. The enrolment of children in kindergartens could be used as an indicator of mothers’ participation in the workforce. Statistics indicating the number of students using public transport to local schools added elements to the construction of the density of place. The number of local association assemblies and teams in which inhabitants participated gave an impression of activities during leisure time. These statistical variables gave us indicators of standards of living, equality, and inequality among the inhabitants of the place that could influence the local school and milieu.

Another source was text dealing with *local history*. As part of the identity of the place, local history was a valuable starting point to understand the community and its practices and possible centripetal and centrifugal forces. The Norwegian Institute of Local history (NLI), a part of The National Library of Norway, was our source of information. Local history was often written through the lenses of individuals who had done something extraordinary, however, stories or unusual happenings that became part of the inheritance of the place could also punctuate the historical narrative. These local characteristics could contribute to the inhabitant’s pride in being part of the place. It was also common to describe the struggles of daily life, livelihood, traditions, religious life, and community. The narratives were presentations of the place and its people that gave a glimpse of former and existing structures.

Websites were indicators of how a place was presented to the world outside. For instance, a place could be promoted as a relational place, a place for recreation, a place of urbanisation and centralisation, or a place of traditions and history. Thus, information could be built into the place construction on whether the places presented themselves as urban, rural or as hybrids.

7.2.2 Step 2 – map reading and place

The new regionalism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Daniels, Douglas, Vodden, & Markey, 2019) recognised regions as proper and effective spatial frameworks for development. Planners and politicians embraced the idea of ‘fluidity’ for fostering regional development characterised by open and elastic boundaries for both geographical and jurisdictional reasons. The ideas of functionally divided areas, such as

shopping malls, office parks, and designated work areas, stem from this framework where space is an essential geographical category, a spatial specialisation of functions. Based on these ideas of functionally divided areas, we pursued the construction of functional work and residence regions.

The use of space as the main category in planning and decision-making poses challenges for academics thinking about places and the relationship between space and place as analytical categories (Agnew, 1989, 2011, 2014; Massey 1991; Gieryn 2000). With respect to the relationship between space and place, the places used in School-In had to be located relative to and delimited from other places. We found that *map reading* was a fruitful entrance to the process of constructing a picture of the place, keeping in mind that increased mobility to and from the place had resulted in a shift away from a former self-referential local system with total particularism. The map itself served as an artefact representing space as an ordered surface in relation to a certain position, providing information about distances and locations. We read the map bearing in mind to look for opportunities for the schools to obtain support for inclusion from the local community.

On the map, the spot where the place name appeared was chosen as a starting point to identify the place's connections to the surrounding world. Roads, railroads, motorways, airports, and coastlines within range were all indicators of how the place could relate to other places both within and outside the region. This made it possible to gain an understanding of how easy areas were to reach and the availability of infrastructure. The spatial avenues led both to and from the place. The map helped trace structures of space that could affect the community locally and, thus, delivered information about prerequisites for centripetal and centrifugal forces for the place construction.

Through map reading, we perceived the extent of the place and how it was not necessarily limited by boundaries drawn for governmental reasons. Map reading gave us an impression of internal spatial distributions, such as where people lived, whether housing was scattered or clustered, and whether the place had one centre or several central places. It also provided the place construction with indicators of opportunities for networking internally and externally at the place.

7.2.3 Step 3 – driving excursions and reading the landscape

The place was also mapped through touring in the form of local driving excursions to 'read' the landscape. Landscapes consist of both nature and man-made structures. Typical characteristics such as architecture, settlement patterns, meeting arenas, sports facilities, distances, and more general infrastructure can supply information about social conditions. Litter or tidiness can provide information about the place conditions, and buildings can bear the mark of decay or prosperity. Social similarities and differences can be read through the lenses of architecture because social structures are, for the most part, related to material structures and local epochs of development.

Human settlements have transformed the natural environment and made it into what can be observed as permanent fixtures of the landscape (Ingold, 2008). Equality or inequality can be interpreted in the architecture and size of houses as well as the location. These might be indicators of injustice born and manifested locally through, for instance, segregated neighbourhoods. Examination of primarily the physical environment reveals structures that are important for people's opportunities for involvement in the place. These types of information were discussed further with one or two local experts.

During these touring excursions, stops were made to write down impressions and to speak with random people about the place. Observations of the landscape provided an opportunity to observe the same elements as students and other residents, as well as daily visual images that become part of their subjective life-world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

One strategy for obtaining information was the use of occasions that arose during the stops we made on our excursions. These occasions were situations where we had a chance to talk to various people about random things, and could arise at the grocery store, at the petrol station, in the café, in the park, outside a workplace, etc. If there was an opportunity to ask questions, we would take it, and as a result, some *elucidating moments* (Hastrup, 1992) grew from the empirical world. We would test the situation by commenting on the weather or other general issues, and then ask if the person knew the place and was aware of information that could be of interest when constructing a picture of the local community. What could be of importance for a newcomer to know? What do the inhabitants do for a living? What do people do on ordinary days? Where do people meet, and how are they informed of activities in which they can participate? These were questions that were asked in random settings to complete the picture. The answers to the questions were adapted to former findings, making the descriptions and the picture thicker.

The touring activity was conducted three to four times, with a duration of about five to six hours at each place. The point of going on these excursions was to make sense of the place. It created a better understanding of the place conditions and resulted in greater resonance in conversations with local experts, teachers, and students. The places were relatively spread out, consisting of several smaller places located far apart. Having visited every nook and cranny in the area helped us to understand what the students, in particular, expressed and referred to during the interviews. This local knowledge lent legitimacy to the interview situation and enabled us to distinguish between what students and teachers knew something about and what they did not know about. Information from the touring activity was influential in the innovation in that it enabled us to provide professional input to the staff who had chosen the local community as their development area.

7.2.4 Step 4 – the local expert interview

The use of key informants is derived from a technique applied in the ethnographic research method (Payne & Payne, 2004). Key informants have more information to share than ‘ordinary’ dwellers (Meuser & Nagel 2009). Thus, we were looking for a person who was well known for their local knowledge and had legitimacy among ‘ordinary’ dwellers as one who knew the people and place well. Local experts were chosen as key informants for the purpose of gaining insider information in the most effective way. Given our interest in community and community formation, the local expert needed to know of structures representing unifying and dividing forces within the local place. It was crucial to find the right persons or ‘*strategic informants*’. All communities have one or two individuals that possess special skills as informants. These are called ‘natural observers’ (Tremblay, 1957, p. 693). We were looking for people who could provide information about place development and also speculate and draw conclusions about the place.

The eligibility criteria for School-In informants were assessed in line with Tremblay’s criteria for selecting important informants: *community role, knowledge, willingness, communication skills, and impartiality*. There are some pitfalls when a local expert is chosen. Some informants may be so detail-oriented that an overall understanding is lost. Others may have an interest in conveying the place in a certain way, such as in an idyllic way or with a bias in relation to certain interests. To avoid this type of bias as much as possible, contact with local people is important when experts are selected. Therefore, the process of selecting local experts was conducted by asking three different people to list two or three names of people who could tell ‘the story of the place’. The name that occurred on all the lists was contacted as a key informant, considering the agreement as a sort of validation of choice. As it turned out, the key informants were mostly people with long residency in the place, 50–70 years old, male or female.

Questions likely to supplement the knowledge provided in the previous steps were asked. The questions concerned (1) place characteristics and community; (2) socio-economic factors; (3) mentality; (4) homogeneity vs. diversity; (5) working life and opportunities; (6) equality and women’s role; (7) recreational activities; (8) population compositions; (9) attitudes towards school and the school system; (10) youth; and (11) values. Examples from the semi-structured interview with the local expert are gathered in table 7.1.

The interview with the key informant was conducted as a conversation. The first question was designed to trigger the informant’s own construction of the place based on his or her personal interest and knowledge. However, the following questions in the interview guide served as more of a checklist to ensure we got all the information we needed since local experts are often good storytellers and might present their place in the way they see fit. The information was compared to the data material obtained in the other steps, and discrepancies were clarified. This was ideal for achieving internal consistency within the different steps of the final construction, and for obtaining a reliable picture of the place (Tremblay, 1957).

Table 7.1: Topics and examples from the local expert interview guide

	Topics related to the place	Examples from the semi-structured interview guide:
0	Introduction	Please describe an overall picture of the local community
1	Place characteristics and community	What does the term 'local community' mean to you? What were the old livelihood activities and income sources? What do the people here do for a living now? Do you know how many inhabitants this place has? Where do they live? Where do they work?
2	Socio-economic factors	How would you describe social equality and inequality in this place? What about criminality? Drugs? Are there any 'dark sides of life'?
3	Mentality	Is there a kind of 'place mentality' here? How would you describe a person from this place? Where do the lines of communication go? Who interacts with whom?
4	Homogeneity vs. diversity	Does the place have one central place or does it consist of several smaller places? If it consists of several smaller places, are there differences between those surrounding the school? Are there any borders defined socially, religiously, ideological, or based on different activities or work?
5	Working life and opportunities	What does working life look like and what kind of workplaces does the place have? Is there diversity of professions? What about commuting?
6	Equality and women's role	Who provides for the family? Who stays at home during maternity leave?
7	Recreational activities	What activities (religious, cultural, sporting, political) are offered in this place? Is there any polarisation (new vs. old, immigrants, religions, political parties, etc.) between any of these groups? Are there connections between age groups or gender, activities?
8	Demographics	Are there any immigrants? From where do they come? How do you think they like the place? Why do people continue to live here? Are there any dialect differences within the place? Any changes?
9	Attitudes towards school and the school system	How are peoples' attitudes towards education? How do they speak about school? What role do you think the school plays for the future of this place?
10	Youth	What status does the school have among youth? What leisure activities do the youth take part in? Do they have any 'heroes'? Do they spend their time in the place, or are they seeking something elsewhere?
11	Values	What are people proud of at this place? What are they embarrassed about? If you were to give the place a compliment, what would you say? What is the school's most important undertaking for the local community and what is the most important thing students should learn in school?

The conversation with the key informant was recorded, and essences and core elements were noted. The storyteller's story, voice, and words delivered necessary details about the place to contribute additional information to the place construction.

7.2.5 Step 5 – group interview with students

During the group interviews, the students were invited to talk about the place and common activities for those who live there. Preferably two boys' groups and two girls'

groups at each school were interviewed, with the optimal number in the groups being 5–7 students. Students were to be as old as possible, preferably belonging to the oldest class cohort, which means those from 7th grade (in 1st to 7th grade schools) and 10th grade (in 8th to 10th or 1st to 10th grade schools).

The topics for the group interaction were to provide the study with information from students' opinions of the place with reference to location, locality, and sense of place, including normal experiences and common or typical things to do. The use of focus groups with students had three purposes: (1) to reach more individuals and get more information; (2) to reveal information from the interaction among people when discussing place; and (3) to consider issues among young people. Thus, the students were an obvious link between school and the local milieu. The interview technique allowed for the discovery of what students agreed or disagreed on when talking about typical activities and what created enthusiasm and engagement regarding the place and each other. The intention was to form a picture of the students' commonalities. The togetherness expressed in the groups showed ways of being together in the local community (Horrigmo, 2015). The interviews provided information about what the school could expect when looking at the local milieu as a supportive element for inclusion.

The interviews were not strongly orchestrated, and interruptions were allowed to get an impression of tensions in the groups and to see to what extent the students could handle focus on topics that affected them. The role of the researcher was to guarantee that all questions were asked and to gather the necessary information (table 7.2.).

Table 7.2: Interview guide – group interview with students

	Topics related to the place	Examples from the semi-structured interview guide:
0	Location of students within the place	Where do you live (not house number)? How far away from the school? Have you always been living here? What does the term 'local community' mean to you?
1	Everyday activities and relations	What is typical for young people to do when not at school? Together with family, friends? What are the most typical things for people in general to do? Where do people meet? Are there normally many individuals at the same place or just a few? Do you meet with each other in your spare time? Do you visit each other's homes? Where do the people you spend time together with live?
2	Leisure activities and interests	What are young people interested in here? What kind of music do people listen to; what kind of movies do they watch; do they enjoy sports activities; do they talk about politics, fishing trips? Do young people do many of the same activities? Where do these activities take place?
3	Gender and activities	Do girls and boys take part in the same activities?
4	Homogeneity vs. diversity	Does the place have one central place, or does it consist of many smaller places? If the latter, are there differences between the smaller places whose residents attend the school? Do you think there are any differences between the people who live here? Is there any difference between those who participate in different activities based on e.g., religiosity, place of residence?

	Topics related to the place	Examples from the semi-structured interview guide:
5	Working life and opportunities	What do people who live here work with? Is there a type of job that is dominant in the place? Is there a diversity of professions here in this place? What about commuting?
6	Sense of place/ Values	Is there anything about the place that makes you proud? What is the best thing about living here? Is there anything that makes you embarrassed by the place? What do you think people from ... say about people who come from here? If I were to compliment the place, what could I say? Do you think people here experience a sense of belonging to this place? How would you describe a person from this place? What would happen if I forgot my wallet outside?
7	Life at school	What is the best thing about school? What do you like least about school? How would you describe good free time at school or a bad break at school? Do you notice anyone being excluded from the other students at the school?
8	Teachers	What would you say is typical of a good teacher (without providing a name)? What would you say is typical of a bad teacher (without providing a name)? Do teachers use the place in teaching, as examples or for projects? Do you use the place itself as something to learn from? Are teachers involved in what is happening in the place? Do the teachers live here? Do you learn about the place in school? Does it matter where the teachers live?
9	Future	Ten years from now, where will you live, what kind of jobs will you have, will you have a family? Where do you foresee living in 10–15 years? Will you have lived here, lived away for a few years, moved for good? Do you think most people will stay here or eventually return to this place?
10	Newcomers	What would it be like for a newcomer to this place and at this school?
11	Open question	Can you think of something else I should have asked you about?

Listening to the interviews afterwards proved to be a suitable way to understand group dynamics. The nuances in how the students talk to each other (jokes, petty quarrels, claims) gave a good impression of them as a social group. The essence of each answer was transcribed from the recorded interviews and added to the place description.

7.2.6 Step 6 and step 7 – teaching staff's focus group interviews and questionnaire

Step 6 and step 7 concerned other mapping instruments in School-In that were supplementary sources to the construction of place pictures. Step 6 related to the teaching staff's focus group discussions described in chapter 9. Some of the questions concerning the local milieu in the focus group interviews provided valuable insight into the staff's knowledge and understanding of the place, local nature, and ties to local businesses and regional activities. In this way, the focus groups supplemented the place construction with an understanding of social, economic, and man-made structures affecting the local community. Step 7, the last step, involved information from the questionnaires described in chapter 10, including information on the makeup of the teaching staff in the different schools, their belonging to the place, as well as information on expectation structures and the link to the local context.

As a whole, the seven steps provided information used to generate the construction of the place picture. Of course, this method is influenced by many aspects and subjective interpretations. Thus, these must be treated and valued as ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1994) of the place and the people involved in the community.

For the school development in School-In (chapter 3), the constructed pictures of the different places have been used in various ways. After the first meeting with the schools, the focus group discussions among the teachers were analysed, adding further information to the picture of the place. At the same time, the already constructed picture served as a background for interpreting the teachers’ expressions. This information showed what the teachers knew about the students’ homes, and how the teachers perceived the place and community. The teachers’ reflections were discussed, and the students’ discussions during the group interviews were analysed. For schools that had chosen a development area related to the local community, the local research was used to design the questions for the Dialogue Café and as theoretical and research inspiration for work with school development.

7.3 Theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for further research

In School-In, there was a need for a method that could contextualise school and identify structures of how it was anchored in the local milieu, considering the fluidity of regionalisation. The place was often affected by spatial forces that had to be taken into consideration to understand the opportunities of schools for gaining support from the local community based on inclusion. The seven-step method was instrumental in helping construct the picture of the school context, the structures in the community, and the spatial forces.

In making place constructions of each specific school context, we observed a variation in regionalisation structures. Hence, there is a need to develop geographical and sociological concepts that can facilitate research on school contexts. For instance, the geographical rural-urban dichotomy could be supplemented with ideas of regionalism and aspects of mobility, commuting, centralisation, urbanisation, and migration.

The theoretical approach of Agnew (2011, 2014) linked to the three concepts of *location*, *locality*, and *sense of place* and the discussion on the relationship between *space and place* seem promising for further elaboration of the theoretical and methodological implications of the research. Knowing that spatial forces do affect places is not enough; there is also a need to understand how spatial forces matter. This could be of vital importance for the development and future of the school and the region.

Based on theories of place, we developed a research design where constructions of ‘places as cases’ could enable comparisons between the different places surrounding the schools participating in School-In. Although places have specific features, some governmental, spatial, social, cultural, and political traits will be pervasive, making comparisons interesting (Agnew, 2011). This was the case in School-In. How spatial

forces mattered for the actual places surrounding the schools, and how the schools were dependent on existing structures within the community were pivotal, for instance, to the capacity for inclusion (Horrigmo & Midtsundstad, 2020).

Our method sheds light on a school's role in a local place. It shows important aspects for students' inclusion, knowledge of their region, identity development, and their belonging to the place. In addition, it sheds light on mobility issues and community changes that significantly influence schools (Horrigmo & Midtsundstad, 2020). What role schools should have as dynamic but established institutions in times of change must be further investigated.

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