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Conceptualising Rural Schools in a Metro-centric and Globalist Culture: The Voices of Those who Live There

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Abstract

Although the definitions of rural schools vary across educational research and from different educative realities, all educative rural contexts are suffering from the same social and cultural situation (globalisation, depopulation and school closures) and the framing of these schools as a disadvantage, problematics and from a deficit discourse. This situation can affect the perceptions that teachers, families and students have about the rural school and the meaning it has for them, shaping a social imaginary around them that determines the educational practices and the sustainability of the territory. In this context, the purpose of this study is to advance theoretical knowledge of senses and meanings of rural schools from the voices of those who live there (teachers, families and students), challenging the prevailing negative representation and dichotomy culture between rural-urban context. For that, the research will be carried out in two phases: (i) exploratory and (ii) ethnographic study considering the experiences and perspectives of 8 community small rural schools in northern Spain (Aragón). The results reveal the existence of different meanings around rural schools. On the one hand, there are metro-centric perspectives that tend to reproduce an urban model in rural areas and show a reductive sense of rural schools as monolithic reality related to school organisation, services and school culture. On the other hand, there is a sense of the rural in relation to participation, community and sustainability, addressing a pedagogical and contextual approach valuing the idiosyncrasy of the rural realities. These discourses seem to be influenced by the implementation of metro-centric and neoliberal policies, which jeopardise the contextual logic of rural schools.

Keywords: *rural school, meanings, metro-centric approach, social capital*

Introduction

Rural schools across the world operate within social and educational contexts shaped by economic pressures, academic performance agendas, and technological development. Over the last century, migration towards urban centres has contributed to depopulation, geographical isolation, and the closure of schools in many rural territories, reinforcing the concentration of populations and services in cities (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2024; Pinilla, 2023; Villa & Knutas, 2020). Around the globe, and historically intensified in Spain, political, social, and educational systems have adopted a metro-centric and metro-normative nature (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2020). This framework is organised to respond exclusively to a homogeneous reality located within urban territories, treating the city as the universal norm (Corchón et al., 2013; Villa & Knutas, 2020). Consequently, this approach reproduces an educational system that benefits only a privileged few (Bagley et al., 2024), evaluating rural schools strictly through the lens of economic efficiency and profitability (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020) while ignoring local contexts (Corbett, 2020).

This metro-normative bias reinforces a deficit-based perspective of rural schools, frequently depicting them as low-quality institutions facing structural "shortcomings" or "gaps" that fail to offer true equality of opportunity compared to their urban counterparts (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Guenther et al., 2023). To address these inequalities, different governments have introduced specific plans and programmes aimed at supporting rural education. However, many of these initiatives have achieved limited results due to what Clarke and Wildy (2004, p. 559) describe as the "slippage syndrome". This concept refers to the tendency for policies and resources initially intended for rural schools to gradually shift away from their original purpose, ultimately benefiting larger or urban-centred educational structures instead. As a result, these measures often fail to respond to the needs of small rural schools and end up reproducing the very problems they were designed to overcome, including staff instability, school closures, and the transfer of students to larger centralised institutions.

At the same time, recent decades have seen important demographic and social transformations in rural Europe, especially in Spain. International migration and urban-to-rural repopulation movements have contributed to increasingly multicultural rural communities, where migrant and middle-class families seek new professional, educational, and lifestyle opportunities outside the city. In response to the persistent threat of depopulation and institutional neglect, many rural schools and local communities have actively developed grassroots strategies aimed at sustaining educational provision, fostering resilience, and revitalising community life (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2020).

Despite dominant narratives that portray rural schools as marginal spaces (Vigo & Soriano Bozalongo, 2020; Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste, 2020), and through the lens of the deficit paradigm (Gristy, 2021), alternative perspectives emphasise their role as places of contextualised learning, social cohesion, and local vitality (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2024; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). However, what is understood and meant by 'rural schools' remains insufficiently defined. Furthermore, in a context where inclusion, participation, and wellbeing are increasingly reinforced (UNESCO, 2024), there is a need for further inquiry and deeper conceptual analysis of the notion of the rural school beyond the urban-rural dichotomy that often underpins educational research (Gristy et al., 2020).

Moving beyond this urban-centric focus (Gristy et al., 2020), this article aims to contribute to the analysis of the meanings attributed to the rural school in Spain, questioning both its negative representation and the homogenisation of the category 'rural' (Guenther et al., 2015). The findings from the study on the meanings of the rural school presented in this article describe the ways in which rural schools are understood and conceptualised across eight rural schools in northern Spain (Region of Aragón), considering the experiences and perceptions of those who inhabit them—teachers, families, and students. All of this is considered considering their local conditions, limitations, and contextual opportunities, drawing on the theoretical framework of Doreen Massey and Bourdieu.

Conceptualising Rural Schools

This metro-normative context has shaped educational research, which largely focuses on urban areas (Bagley & Fargas-Malet, 2023; Bagley et al., 2024; Guenther et al., 2023). As a result, rural schools are often insufficiently contextualised, even in studies addressing geographical differences. Researchers frequently overlook the rural context (Stapel & de Young, 2011; White & Corbett, 2014),

and few studies conceptualise rural schools in ways that reflect their sociological complexity (Bagley et al., 2024; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2018), leading to simplified definitions (Beach & Öhrn, 2023). Despite this, the meaning of “rural” often remains implicit and shaped by cultural and relational dynamics (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Vigo-Arrazola & Moreno-Pinillos, 2025).

Rural schools are commonly defined through quantitative and organisational features such as population size, remoteness, small scale, multigrade organisation, and low student–teacher ratios (Gill, 2017; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020). However, their conceptualisation also involves important social and pedagogical dimensions, including their territorial location, close relationships with communities and families, and their role in sustainability, inclusion and social cohesion (Matías & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Moreno-Pinillos, 2022; Vigo-Arrazola & Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). In this sense, rural schools are often understood as context-responsive institutions connected to local life and values (Matías & Vigo, 2020) and capable of promoting community cohesion (Morales-Romo, 2019; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020), although these expectations may also place additional burdens on schools themselves (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020).

At the same time, scholars stress the need to account for contextual singularities to avoid urban-driven standardisation (Corbett, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Paterson et al., 2024). Research on teachers’ perceptions shows that strong connections to place and community foster commitment and inclusive practices (Autti & Baeck, 2021; Budnyk et al., 2023; Macdonald et al., 2025; Vigo-Arrazola & Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). However, comparisons with urban schools persist, often reinforcing idealised urban models and tensions with curriculum demands (Moreno-Pinillos et al., 2024).

In this literature review context, the following research questions emerge: (1) What meanings do teachers, families, and students attribute to rural schools? and (2) How do metro-centred educational policies influence these meanings? To provide a consistent theoretical framework, this study adopts a place-based perspective drawing on Doreen Massey’s Theory of Space and Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Capital.

Massey (2012) conceptualises space as socially produced, dynamic, and continuously constructed through relationships, where local and global processes intersect. This perspective challenges fixed binaries such as ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ and frames the school as an open social space shaped by social, economic, cultural, and political processes (Massey, 2012). Complementarily, Bourdieu’s theory highlights the role of social capital, emphasising relationships, community ties, and rootedness (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this sense, rural schools function not only as educational institutions, but also as key community resources connected to their territories (Corbett, 2020).

From this standpoint, rural schools are conceptualised as a situated, relational, and dynamic social space, where its identity goes beyond mere structural features such as size, isolation, or multigrade settings. Instead, its essence lies in a deep anchoring within the territory and the community, forming a social space in constant construction where local and global relations converge (Massey, 2012). By acting as a generator and sustainer of social capital, the school strengthens bonds of belonging and community cohesion (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), shaping a contextualised educational environment that responds to local needs and cultures (Hargreaves et al., 2009).

Rural Schools Within Metro-Centric Culture: The Case of Northern Spain

The conceptualisation of rural schools in Spain has historically been shaped by educational policies grounded in metro-centric perspective. Although policy discourses have changed over time, rural schools have consistently been defined in relation to urban standards and needs (Domingo & Lorenzo, 2020). From their identification as 'village schools' during periods of pedagogical renewal in 1979 (Santamaría, 2020, p.219), to their later classification as compensatory institutions aimed at reducing inequalities (Royal Decree 1174/83, p.13184), and more recently as "vanguard schools" within the Organic Law on Education (2020, p.219), rural schools have remained positions within frameworks largely designed from urban viewpoints.

This influence is particularly visible in the Region of Aragón, where this study was conducted. Despite covering 9.4% of Spain's national territory, Aragón has a low and uneven population density, with almost half of its population concentrated in the city of Zaragoza. This territorial imbalance has reinforced the concentration of public services and educational resources in urban context, contributing to the marginalisation of rural areas. In response to depopulation and geographical dispersion, rural schools in Aragón have adapted through multigrade classroom, unitarian schools and grouped school models, where students of different ages are taught together and several villages operate under a shared institutional structure (Corchón et al., 2013; Vigo-Arrazola & Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). These organisational forms reflect how rural schooling has had to respond to policies and territorial dynamics shaped primarily by urban logics.

In terms of educational policy, rural schools in Aragón continue to be framed through deficit-based perspectives, often described as institutions with fewer resources or limited opportunities compared to urban schools (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). To address these inequalities, the regional government create the category of "special difficulty" schools, mainly applied to rural schools, with the aim of reducing teacher mobility by guaranteeing their continuity for two consecutive school years (Poveda et al., 2023). According to Order ECD/1435/2017, this category includes grouped schools, unitary schools, itinerant teaching posts, and schools located in isolated or hard-to-access rural areas. However, around 90% of rural schools in Aragón fall under this classification (Table 1), which may reinforce processes of stigmatisation and marginalisation rather than ensuring greater equality or improved educational resources (Poveda et al., 2023).

Table 1. Mapping of 'Special Difficulty Schools' in the Region of Aragon

Subregion	Urban		Rural		TOTAL "Special difficulty schools"	"Special difficulties schools" + rural schools
	Primary schools	Grouped schools	Multigrade schools	Unitarian		
Huesca	71	21	19	7	28	26
Zaragoza	191	26	30	2	24	19
Teruel	52	27	3	0	19	17
Total	314	74	52	9	78	62

Research Materials and Method

This research is framed within two research projects. Firstly, the 'Strategies against depopulation: determinants of rural dynamism and the role of public policies' (PROY_S15_24), is focused on issues related to policies for social and relational capital. Secondly, 'The inclusion of student and community voices for a creative and sustainable education in a digital context. Policies and practices in compulsory education' (PID2020-112880RB- I00) considers the voices of the educational community members as a key element to know their perceptions of rural schools. The research, approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Zaragoza (Spain), was conducted between 2021 and 2025 through a qualitative approach organised in two phases: an exploratory study (Phase I) and an ethnographic study (Phase II). This approach allowed for in-depth knowledge to be gained.

The first phase involved 23 semi-structured interviews (INT) with teachers, management teams and families from rural schools in Aragón, followed by two online focus groups (FG). The second consisted of a 12-months ethnographic study in two rural schools, including 560 hours of participant observation, informal conversations (IC), field diary (FD), and 13 in-depth interviews with teachers and families (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Russell & Bargley, 2020). Participants were asked about their experiences and perceptions of rural schooling and its defining features, considering their voices became especially relevant. In this sense, when we refer to the "voices of the participants" in the study, it does not imply that they are given a voice through the study, but rather how they are recognised (Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). These voices constitute a form of representation, identity and power for the development of agency (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021).

To incorporate student's perspectives, the study adopted a child-centred approach using the drawing technique (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Students were invited to represent their rural schools through drawings and explain their meanings, allowing their voices and experiences to be recognised within the research process (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021; Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). This approach responds to the limited attention traditionally given to rural children's perspectives in educational research (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2024).

Participants

In the first phase, the participating schools and educational communities were identified through purposive sampling (Schatzman and Straus, 1973) among those who agreed to participate in the study. In the first phase, the main features used to identify the schools were: the type of school,

seeking a diversity of educational realities [grouped schools and multigrade classroom], the geographic area so that the three sub-regions of Aragon [Zaragoza, Huesca and Teruel] and being classified by the administration as 'special difficulty schools'. Finally, four grouped rural schools (GS1/GS2/GS3) and five multigrade rural schools (RS1/RS2/RS3/RS4/RS5) were select (Table 2).

Table 2. School Participants Phase 1. Exploratory Study

Region	School	Teachers	Students	Classrooms	Characteristics
Zaragoza	Small rural school RS1	6	46	3	Special difficulty 50% foreign students Medium socio-economic level
	Grouped school GS3	14	154	12	Medium socio-economic level Primary sector Technology project
	Small rural school RS3	3	28	2	Special difficulty Low-medium socio-economic level Primary sector
	Grouped school GS2	21	218	19	Medium socio-economic level Cultural diversity All educational stage up to 3 rd secondary
Huesca	Small rural school RS2	3	16	2	Special difficulty Repopulating families Medium socio-economic level Tourism and services sector Active methodologies Participation of the families
	Small rural school RS4	3	23	2	Special difficulty Rural educational community Medio socio-economic level Tourism and services sector Difficult access
	Grouped school GS1	32	352	31	Special difficulty Medio socio-economic level Tourism and services sector Very different educational realities
Teruel	Small rural school	3	23	2	Special difficulty Primary sector Low socio-economic level Difficult access

The second phase involved an in-depth ethnographic study. The following inclusion criteria were considered for the selection of schools that previously had participated in the Phase 1: (i) participation in the first phase; (ii) classification as special difficulty schools according to the R+D+i Project (PID2020-112880RB-I00) (iii) easy access to the schools for a long period of time, since the ethnographic method required it (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Finally, two small rural schools decided to participate (Table 3).

Table 3. School Participants Phase 2. Ethnographic Study

Region	School	Teachers	Students	Classrooms	Characteristics
Zaragoza	Valley Rural School [RS2]	6	46	3	Special difficulty 50% foreign students Medium socio-economic level Active methodologies Participation of the educational community
Huesca	Mountain rural school [RS1]	3	16	2	Special difficulty Repopulating families from cities (Vasque Country, Barcelona, Huesca and Zaragoza) Medium socioeconomic level Active methodologies Families' participation

Analysis

Following Schreier (2012), a deductive-inductive content analysis was employed. Initial categories were derived from the theoretical framework -specifically 'place' (urban vs rural) and 'school roles' (public service, territorial backbone, pedagogical value and innovation). These pre-established categories evolved as new themes emerged from the perceptions of teachers, families and students related to the meanings that they have about rural schools.

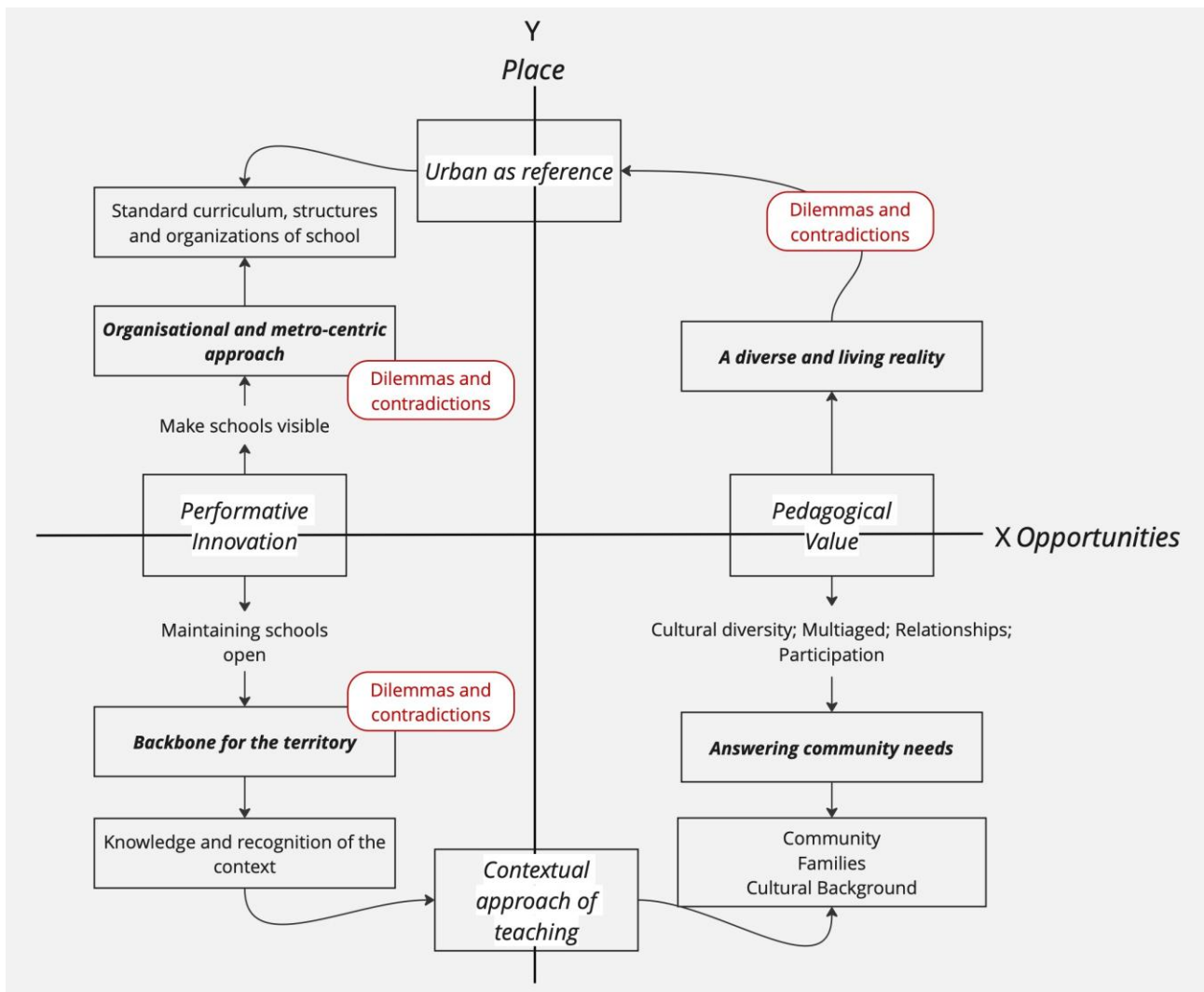
Data analysis occurred concurrently with collection (Walford, 2009). Initial findings were shared with participants (teachers and families) in focus groups (FC) for validation. This iterative process facilitated the constant regrouping of indicator and the emergence of refined categories, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The analytical framework is structured across two primary axes (Figure 1):

- *Y axis 'the place'*: Contrast standard urban-rural dichotomy with an approach recognising the unique idiosyncrasies of the context. It maps how participants defined schools through either urban parameters or site-specific interactions.
- *X axis, 'opportunities'*: Examines pedagogical possibilities. This ranges from viewing rural schools as inherently "innovative" from a performative point of view to recognising opportunities rooted in community, participation, the environment and cultural diversity.

Rather than maintaining a strict dichotomy, this analytical framework captures the complexity of rural school's meanings. Notably, 'dilemmas and contradictions' emerged as a key category, which is explored further in the results.

Figure 1. Categorisation of the Analysis Process



Results and discussion

All participants—teachers, families and students—recognised rural schools as an essential part of the education system, while also stressing the need for greater visibility, improved resources and better working conditions for rural teachers. However, perceptions varied across the three groups. Findings reveal that rural schools are often assessed through urban standards, particularly regarding accessibility, resources, services and school organisation. Multigrade rural schools are frequently structured according to urban models through ‘grouped schools’, an approach questioned by both families and teachers. Participants also highlighted the invisibility of rural schools within educational policy, arguing that this contributes to negative perceptions. At the same time, teachers, families and students viewed rural schools as central to community life, valuing their strong social relationships, flexible curriculum and place-based teaching practices that draw on the natural and cultural environment.

Rural Schools Defined From the Availability of Services, Access to Resources and School Organisation Compared With Urban Ones

When analysing the discourses of teachers and families, it was possible to identify a tendency to recognise the rural school in comparison with urban models. This type of school was defined in terms of the optimisation of resources, the availability of services, the school's location in the rural context and the influence of educational and social policies designed under urban standards. Along these lines, many of the teachers and families defined rural schools by drawing comparisons with urban schools, referring to services or access to culture. This often leads to pupils from smaller villages moving to schools located in larger villages, thereby reproducing the trends of depopulation and the unequal distribution of social, educational, health and cultural resources. This in turn reproduces an imbalance between rural areas.

We have a problem and that is that the services are very centralised. Many students go to the school in the largest town because of the school transportation service provided by the Government of Aragon. The only thing that this form of school transportation does is centralise the student body, while we have to do the math to see how many students, we will have next year (RS2_Teach_Int).

Families express concern about access to culture and educational activities. They recognise that there is no equality of opportunity, as there are fewer opportunities available in rural areas. *"I identify as limitations the lack of extracurricular activities and access to culture"*. (RS2_Fam_Int). This perception is also shared by the students themselves, who pointed out in the discussion group that they would sometimes like to attend activities in the city but are unable to do so due to time constraints, accessibility or financial reasons. To this end, they compare their experiences with those of children they know who live in the big city. *"My cousin goes to the theatre a lot with her school, but we can't because there's no theatre here"* (FG_Student4).

This conceptualisation of rural schools in comparison with urban models seems to respond to a binary logic highlighted in the scientific literature (Paterson et al., 2024). The centralisation of resources in large towns and, therefore, in larger educational schools, is related to the implementation of metro-centric social and administrative policies (Corbett, 2016). *"In the case of the grouped rural school my children go to, many families move their children from one location to another according to the services they offer"* (GS_Teach_Int). In this sense, it is evident that school choice by families residing in the rural territory is sometimes related to the services offered by schools, creating situations of competition between schools (Matías & Vigo, 2020; Vigo- Arrazola & Beach, 2022) of the same grouped rural centre or between educational centres in the same area.

Another aspect that has to do with the metro-centric reference is the organisational structure. Some participants specifically mentioned that the fact that educational policies are oriented towards urban schools encourages the tendency to introduce urban organisational structures in schools in rural areas. Beyond questioning *"the urbanisation trend"* (SMR4_Teach_Int), teachers referred to the imposition of an urban organisational model on the rural territory. This is related to maintaining urban school formats, which involve students of the same age going to the same class and graduating together (Corbett, 2016; Vigo-Arrazola & Moreno-Pinillos, 2025). In this sense, a strong movement of criticism of grouped schools emerged among teachers at small rural schools. They defined grouped schools as *"a threat to the maintenance of schools and the sustainability of the territory"* (RS2_Teach_Int).

Along these lines, in the feedback meeting held at the end of the fieldwork, some teachers agreed on the idea of “*creating a network of small schools that would allow maintaining the idiosyncrasy of the social and cultural contexts*” (GS1_Teach_FG).

Rather than adopting an administrative model of rural schools that imitates the large schools, a model that strengthens the autonomy and independence of small village schools and facilitates their coordination through networks and clear and true institutional support should be adopted (RS3_Teach_FG).

The Rural School Before Educational Policies: Invisibilisation, Stigmatisation and Oblivion

The interviewed teachers referred to the tendency of national and, in particular, regional educational policies to, on the one hand, impose urban models on rural areas and, on the other hand, render the latter invisible (White & Corbett, 2014). Specifically, teachers referred to curricular policies or those related to the attention to diversity/inclusion arguing that these policies do not consider the natural diversity that exists in the rural school, which is partly due to multigrading. “*Here it does not make sense to apply what we are told from Department for attending to inclusion, here we carry out actions that have to do with groupings, spaces and, co-tutoring naturally, because diversity is what we have*” (RS1_Teach_INT). These policies are designed for “*a few educational schools*” (RS2_Teach_IC) located in cities and have an organisational structure that is not replicated in rural areas.

Other teachers made special mention of policies that stigmatise rural schools, referring to legal provisions that classify these schools as ‘especially complex’. These policies seem to be designed to respond to the problem of teachers being permanently hired for positions at these schools but “*these stabilisation positions do not really meet this need. However, the rural school is already labelled as a school of difficult performance, I don't really know why*”. (RS3_Teach_INT).

The teachers’ perception highlighted how they experienced the difficulties resulting from the policies applied to rural schools from urban approaches. It was thus evident that the concept and meaning of rural school was subject to the influence of educational policies that were designed from a reductionist approach that tended to standardise and categorise schools from an urban perspective (Vigo- Arrazola & Beach, 2022). This influence of metro-centric policies favours the continued existence of a gap between the rural and the urban, reproducing a social imaginary and hierarchies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), making the urban more valuable than the rural (Hargreaves et al., 2009). Along these lines, what the participants expressed coincided with what had been pointed out in several investigations (Cedering & Wilhborg, 2020; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Hargreaves et al., 2009). This research pointed out that there is a recurring tendency in educational policies to overlook or undervalue rural schools. They depict a single urban school as dominant and tend to homogenise rural schools with respect to urban standards (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Kvalsund, 2019). The participants understand educational policies as an aspect of marginalisation towards the rural school (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Vigo- Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2020), which is defined from the deficit paradigm.

The School as the Backbone of the Territory

On other occasions, the participants, including families, teachers and students, had a concept of the rural school that went beyond the school.

Here, the school is not a closed place; all families and people in the village can participate. We often visit the town hall, and the village cooperatives collaborate in many school activities. Physical education classes are held in the natural environment, and science projects focus on cultural aspects of the village (Student_6th grade_FC).

In this sense, it coincided with the theoretical framework taken as a reference, based on the contributions of Massey's Theory of Spaces (2012) and Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is because the school is interpreted as a social product that is under permanent construction through the action of the agents involved (Gristy et al., 2020; Massey, 2012). This vision of rootedness and the maintenance of schools is particularly evident in the case of rural schools with less than nine units or small grouped schools. Teachers recognise that one of the functions of rural schools is to maintain the population and ensure that pupils are knowledgeable about their natural and cultural context.

Well, we believe that students have to know their social, cultural and natural context because it is their locality, it is the closest thing and we always think about the purpose. In the future, if we want their actions to have an impact on their context and environment, then the first thing to do is to know it. So, it is an opportunity to make population stay, but to do that, you have to know your village and that is where affectivity and rootedness play a role. (RS1_Teach_INT).

For their part, many families recognise rural schools as a place that can encourage pupils to stay and live in the village, thereby stabilising the population. In this regard, one of the participating families regrets that, due to the closure of the small school in their village, they have to take their children to the nearest group school. *"My children are leaving school next year because they are closing that grouped school site, and I feel sorry for them since they are not going to develop that feeling of rootedness and belonging to the place"* (RS4_Fam_FC).

The idea of the rural school as the backbone of the territory is reflected in how teachers understand and define their own practices. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews focus on the idea of territory, context and natural environment and how this resource is used by teachers in their teaching practice. They state that the use of the context in their practices *"is a way of fostering rootedness"* (GS4_Teach_INT).

We try to develop practices that connect with the context [...] We develop projects such as a school cooperative, we play sports in the natural environment, we take care of this natural environment with visits from the forest ranger, and we propose cultural projects that have to do with reviving local cuisine, learning about the history of the region, or learning about our ancestors (RS1_Teach_Interview).

The perceptions of the teachers about their practices seem to coincide with the meanings they attribute to the rural school, understanding it from the point of view of community cohesion and the fight against depopulation. Teachers do their job in a way that allows to know more about the natural, social and cultural context and helps the students value it, with the ultimate goal of fostering a feeling of rootedness and belonging. These perceptions of teaching practices and the very idea of the rural school as the backbone of the territory coincide with the contributions of studies that point to rural schools as the central axis of their context (Kalberg- Granlund, 2019). They also appeal to the *"symbolic value that rural schools have for the communities in which they are located, as they directly influence the maintenance and sustainability of the territory"* (Morales-Romo, 2019, p.23).

Some participants, particularly teachers and some families, acknowledged the challenges rural schools face in developing sustainability and a strong sense of rootedness. As one school director explained, “generalisations cannot be made when we talk about rural areas and sustainability, because not all schools play the same role” (RS1_TEACH_Int). Similarly, another teacher highlighted that, contrary to common assumptions linking rural schools with strong community ties, their context was marked by limited family involvement and students choosing urban schools instead (RS4_Teach_Int).

This perception is not common within the framework of this study but coincides with the contributions of different authors. Hargreaves et al (2009) affirm that the rural school is the centre of the locality and that fulfills a *community cohesion* role, which may be a “debatable and not very contextual sentence” (Hargreaves et al., 2009, p. 123). In accordance with this, it can be concluded that this idea can be expressed as a political and social mantra that is aligned with the construction of the meaning of rural in a decontextualised manner, without valuing the spatial and social particularities of schools and their contexts. This is again a reductionist approach to the notion of rural.

The School From the Pedagogical Value and the Relationship with the Community.

Even though it cannot be generalised, and regardless of the cohesive function that the rural school can fulfill in their communities, participants defined these schools according to their pedagogical value, considering inclusion, community and family participation and the relationship with the social, natural and cultural context (Budnyk et al., 2023). This is because the participants referred to family and community involvement in schools, as well as to the relationship between these and their context, with the aim of enhancing the development of social and cultural capital (Vigo & Dieste, 2020).

On the one hand, the participation of families is understood as a natural resource within rural schools: “We must understand the school as a living ecosystem in which relationships take place not only among students but also between families and people from the village” (RS2_Teach_FD). Thus, some participants emphasised that such participation could take place in any school, but that there is a “natural closeness in the case of rural schools” (RS2_Teach_Int). Other teachers referred to how family participation allowed the existence of a “cultural background that is part of the classroom” (GS1_Teach_Int). Family participation is not understood from the point of view of representation in institutional bodies, but as a pedagogical opportunity that facilitates a “circular feedback in which you can contribute from the school, and the families can contribute new points of view; it is the way in which traditions enter the school” (GS3_Teach_Int).

Along these lines, it is understood how engaging with families and the community is a way of producing and maintaining social capital (Bourdieu & Wacqant, 1992) facilitating participation, cooperation and the reconstruction of local culture and history (Villa & Knutas, 2020). Thus, the participants, both families and teachers, agreed that the main aspect to define rural schools was the relationship with the natural and cultural contexts: “*I understand that the rural school is closely linked to the territory from the point of view of nature and the natural environment*” (RS2_Teach_FG). Teachers referred to the environment “*as a resource that is a reality that is in turn part of the school*” (RS3_Teach_Int) and therefore, “*as a learning space*” (GS1_Teach_FG).

Many of the participating families have chosen rural schools because of the opportunities they offer for active participation in their children's education, as well as their proximity to the social and cultural environment.

We are from San Sebastian and a few years ago we decided to move to the countryside in search of tranquillity, and above all with our children's education in mind [Research question] What we were looking for was to be part of our children's school education, for our experiences, our background and also our thoughts to be part of the school, so that it wasn't the school on one side and the family on the other. This is possible in rural schools because of their proximity and because they tend to be small and familiar (RS2_Fam_Int).

This perception of the school in relation to the community and the context was seen in the students' representations when they were asked about it. The students recognised the participation of families and the relationship with the context, acknowledging them as valuable elements that defined their schools. *"I have drawn some parents cooking with us because I think that is what is different from other schools. They come almost every day, not always the same ones but they are important"* (FG_Image 1). Through their drawings, the students also recognize multigrade education as a value that sets them apart from other schools (FG_Image 2).

Figure 2. Students' Perceptions of Rural Schools

Image 1. Drawing by male student, aged 10, RS2. *"I have drawn some parents cooking with us at recess because I think that is what is different from other schools. They come almost every day, not always the same ones but they are very important"*.

Image 2. Drawing by girl student, aged 11, RS2. *"My drawing is of all of us together in class, there are younger kids, older kids but we are all together, doing the same thing"*.

Image 3. Drawing by girl student, aged 10, RS2. *"Well, we are my friends but outside of school because we go out into the environment to look for things in nature. That's very important at school, we go out a lot"*.



Students, their families and teachers, also defined their schools in comparison with urban schools, referencing close experiences they were familiar with. However, they mentioned the relationship with the cultural and natural context, family participation and collaboration with local entities as elements of value. This idea could be seen in the discussion group, in which the researcher asked the participants how they would define their school.

Student: For me the difference with other schools like my cousin's school in Zaragoza is that here we are all together, with different ages. In the other school, those of the same age are always together. And I think that's not very good because I learn a lot from those who are older.

Researcher: And don't you learn from those who are younger?

Student: Yes, I do, but maybe I also teach them. That can't happen in a class where everyone is the same age. Also, at my cousin's school my uncles and aunts don't go to their classes to do interactive groups or activities with the children, and here my grandmother, for example, comes to participate in the school cooking project or interactive groups. I think she likes it a lot too.

Researcher: Why do you think that happens?

Student: Well, I don't know, I guess because it's a town and Zaragoza is a city, with a lot of people and the schools are very big with a lot of children and of course, not all the parents can go to school, I don't know, I think so. (FG_Student2).

Families, teachers and students defined their rural schools based on the relationship with the community and the participation of families (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020). However, other participating schools (GS3/GS4), pointed out that, although family participation seemed to be a characteristic element of the rural school due to the undoubted proximity and to natural availability of resources (Moreno-Pinillos, 2022), it was sometimes complicated for this participation to take place. In fact, different teachers from the participating schools mentioned *"the romanticisation of participation in rural schools"* (GS4_Female_Teacher), or the *"forced participation"* (RS1_Male_Head teacher). These perceptions coincided with the findings of different studies which highlight that defining the rural school in terms of participation and the relationship with the community as a monolithic unit would attribute too much responsibility to teaching staff and to the school as an institution (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020).

Conclusion

Educational communities present rural schools differently to how they are portrayed by educational policies, offering different perspectives on rural schools depending on their socio-cultural reality. The results show how the narratives of those who inhabit the territory challenge the dominant narratives surrounding rural schools, demonstrating the pedagogical value of the social and cultural environment and questioning the culture of homogenisation that surrounds the definition of rural schools. When analysing the discourses of the participants, we concluded that it was not possible to speak of a single rural school. However, a binary logic between rural and urban still prevails when we try to define the rural and the rural school (Corbett, 2016; Paterson et al., 2024). While some teachers and families describe the rural school as a public school, with fewer resources and limitations, as opposed to the urban school, others emphasise the pedagogical opportunities (Budnyk et al., 2023) offered by the community and the context while also expressing concern about specific local issues. Likewise, the meaning that the participants attribute to rural schools is different for those who live the rural reality. This accounts for the importance of place and context and, at the same time, explains the relationship of rural population with space (Massey, 2012).

It is important to note that teachers, families and students have different perspectives. Teachers due to their in-depth knowledge of political and educational dynamics, generally express views on rural schools that emphasise the influence of policies designed to respond to a standardised, homogeneous school system such as that found in urban areas. Thus, this work reveals the pressure of educational policies and their influence on the creation of meanings about the rural school, since the design of an educational policy from a metro-normative point of view reproduces, in a certain way, that binary logic between rural and urban.

Finally, although the fieldwork data do not speak of pedagogical practices *per se*, they show how the meanings that teachers attribute to the rural school, whether influenced by their experiences or by policies, diametrically influence the type of pedagogical practices they carry out in their classrooms. In this sense, it is concluded that those teachers who identify the rural school in comparison with the urban one try to reproduce pedagogical practices that do not consider the community, the environment or multigrading. This line of research will lead to future ones. On the one hand, what representation of the rural school does teachers who live in and outside the place where the school is located have? On the other hand, how can the place where teachers live and their perception of rural schools influence the type of practices or curricular development?

The study also presents some limitations. First, there is an imbalance in the perceptions collected from teachers, families, and students, with teachers being more represented due to greater access during fieldwork. Participation from families was more limited because of time and availability constraints, although additional research focusing on families' perceptions and participation is currently underway. Second, collecting students' perspectives proved challenging due to ethical considerations in qualitative research, which restricted the inclusion of some data to protect the anonymity and integrity of underage participants.

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