Rural Schools in Spain: Strengths and Weakness

Sergio Andrés Cabello (*), Jordi Garreta Bochaca (**)
(*) Universidad de La Rioja, España
(**) Universitat de Lleida, España

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Highlights:

1. Many stereotypes about rural schools do not correspond to reality.
2. The relationship between the community and the rural school takes place through informal channels.
3. The rural school is very much connected with the surrounding entities, energising the community.

Abstract: Despite advances in research on rural schools, their standing remains subordinate to that of urban schools. Also in Spain, although it has gained presence thanks to the enhancement of the rural environment and the incorporation in the public agenda of the depopulation of rural areas in the interior of the peninsula. This article is based on a survey of 1,730 primary schools in Spain as a whole, of which 9.2 % are rural. The aims of the project included the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools in various areas, the link with the community and the role of the family-school relationship. The results of the study show that some stereotypes about rural schools, in terms of not being modern and lacking innovation and quality, do not currently hold true, and that the family-school relationship is the differentiating factor in relation to the link with the community.

Keywords: Multi-grade schools; coordination of actions; channels of communication; community; school management teams.

La escuela rural en España: fortalezas y debilidades

Ideas clave:

1. Numerosos estereotipos que existen sobre la escuela rural no tienen correspondencia con la realidad.
2. La relación entre comunidad y escuela rural se produce a través de canales informales.
3. La escuela rural está muy conectada con las entidades del entorno, dinamizando la comunidad.

Resumen: A pesar de los avances en las investigaciones sobre la escuela rural, su posición sigue hallándose subordinada a la urbana. También en España, aunque ha ganado presencia gracias a la puesta en valor del medio rural y la incorporación en la agenda pública de la despoblación de las zonas rurales del interior peninsular. El presente artículo se basa en una encuesta de 1.730 centros educativos de Primaria, de los cuales 9,2 % son rurales. Entre los objetivos se encuentra el tratar de analizar las fortalezas y debilidades de la escuela rural en diversos ámbitos, la vinculación con la comunidad y el papel de la relación familia-escuela. Los resultados del estudio demuestran que algunos estereotipos sobre la escuela rural, en relación

con su escasa modernidad, innovación y calidad, no se cumplen en la actualidad, así como que la relación familia-escuela es un hecho diferencial en relación a la vinculación con la comunidad.

Palabras clave: Escuelas multigrado; coordinación actuaciones; canales de comunicación; comunidad; equipos directivos de escuelas.

Sergio Andrés Cabello. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1703-005X
E-mail: sergio.andres@unirioja.es
Jordi Garreta Bochaca. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3434-9441
E-mail: Jordi.garreta@udl.cat

1. Introduction rural schools: international perspective

Rural schools are a focus of international research, but much of this research is at the expense of analysing urban schools and vice versa. In this way, rural schools lose the spotlight when the two realities should be compared, highlighting the similarities and differences that exist between them (Biddle & Price, 2016).

The OECD points to a number of common characteristics of rural communities: geographical distance from densely populated centres; low population density; difficulties in recruiting, retaining and developing professionals; the importance of schools as an axis of social cohesion, albeit with difficulties in keeping them running, etc. (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019a). However, these rural schools and their contexts do not fit the same profile (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019a; Beach et al., 2018). There are different social, economic, and cultural patterns, just as schools do not have the same level of human and financial resources to carry out their work (Reeves & Bylund, 2005), and the dynamics of the community-school relationship are different (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019).

One of the determining factors in the favourable social context of rural schools having a real impact is whether they are adequately resourced. Reeves & Bylund (2005) point out that an increase in the number of rural schools has an impact on their

performance, even in comparison with other types of school, as they are more willing to improve. All this, from a starting point of a more precarious recent past and against low expectations. Similarly, other studies emphasise how professionals are as or more creative and committed to school and education than in other schools (Beach et al., 2018).

The role of teachers is crucial. Research findings suggest that this is a paradoxical situation. The positive side is the relationship with the communities and the autonomy they have; the negative side is the challenges arising from their location in terms of forming networks and adapting curricula to fit the local context (Chapman, 2020). Similarly, another of the main shortfalls observed in rural schools is excessive teacher turnover and difficulties in retaining teachers (Berry et al., 2017; Hardwick-Franco, 2019).

Many schools in rural areas are multi-grade, which affects teachers' work. Smit & Humpert (2012; following Mulryan-Kyne, 2007; Wallin & Reimer, 2008) indicate that these teachers need continuous support as these small schools also have few teachers. In this way, internal team development can be difficult or limited, and one way to address this situation is to create networks between small schools so that a variety of successful differentiated instruction strategies can be shared. In fact, these networks are important as they involve an exchange of experiences and curriculum development in response to the needs of students and families in these social and cultural contexts (Cárcamo, 2016; Peirano et al., 2015; Vera et al., 2012).

If the role of teachers is crucial, the same is true of management teams. In rural schools, their role in leadership, teacher coordination and links with the local community is more important than in urban settings. However, they must be conscious of meeting the needs of the local context in which they work in order to build effective leadership (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019).

There is no doubt that the closeness between the school and the rural communities, the links that are established between the school and its surroundings, is one of the main strengths of these schools. Sun et al. (1997) argue that schools in small rural populations are characterised by closer and more intimate social relations, a context that promotes interactions. While social norms in rural areas may provide good opportunities for interpersonal interactions with other members of the community (e.g., church attendance, school parents), low socio-economic status, a shortage of good job opportunities and low demand for high educational attainment may limit investment in education. The work of Byung et al. (2012) also shows that rural students have more community support and social resources compared to non-rural students, and these resources were associated with a significant increase in the likelihood of attaining a university degree, conditional on socio-economic status as a determinant.

The role of school-community proximity would transcend the factors outlined above. In this way, there are strong formal relationships between the two domains; school facilities are a central space as "a common feature amongst most rural communities is the central social, institutional, and economic role of the school. More than in urban places, rural schools function as the centers of community" (Shafft, 2016, p. 139), and its members invest personal time and financial resources in the school, creating synergies and strengthening each other (Barley & Beesley, 2007). In this way, a relationship of trust is established, which influences families' support for teachers, often due to pre-existing relationships with the school. The close connection of school and community also facilitates the leadership of the head teacher and high expectations for students, but more research is needed to explore this issue further. Indeed, the relationship between school and town is comparable to a symbiosis conditioned by community dynamics, either positive or negative (of trust, social cohesion, and security or of mistrust, control and vulnerability and insecurity) (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). School staff assume that all parents and families in rural schools are familiar with the school's grading practices, curriculum standards, the value placed on parent and teacher beliefs, the methods schools use to communicate with parents (e.g., newsletters, websites, and daily folders) or attendance policies (Garcia et al., 2016).

There is a factor that differentiates rural schools in relation to their context, which is the subject of most of the international literature. This is none other than the link, not only with the community, but also with a specific culture and way of life such as the rural one. The school would thus play a central role in maintaining it (Beach et al., 2018, 2019; Beach & Vigo, 2020; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Shafft, 2016; Villa & Knutas, 2020; Zuckerman, 2020). Beach and Vigo emphasise that "schools have developed strong links to families and the local community through teachers, parents, pupils and community members, working hard together for their school and its survival" (2020, p. 205).

2. Rural schools:spanish perspective

Studies on rural schools in Spain are less extensive, unlike in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, or the Scandinavian countries, for example. However, in the last decade, the impact of rural depopulation on public opinion has grown, generating a large theoretical and empirical corpus on the issue. Spain has

some of the most depopulated areas in the European Union, mainly located in the inland regions of the peninsula (Andrés Cabello, 2020; Andrés Cabello & Pascual Bellido, 2018; Molinero, 2019; Murciano & Pontones, 2019).

The analysis of rural schools in Spain in recent years would be marked, in part, by the role they play in relation to the phenomenon of depopulation. This has a bearing on three main factors that are reflected in research on the issue: the role of maintaining schools to avoid such a scenario, as has occurred in other countries; the predominant narrative about the lack of services and resources in rural areas; and the value placed on rural schools, their proximity and accessibility, low ratios and the methodologies used in them (Benito, 2013; Llevot & Garreta, 2008; Morales-Romo, 2017b; Vázquez, 2016). In this way, there are well established narratives about the rural environment, rural schools, and the interaction between the two.

However, there is also no shortage of broader views on the issue, based on the diversity of rural school situations in Spain due to the location and context of the regions in which they are located. Several research groups have been analysing the school situation for decades, regardless of the visibility that depopulation has acquired (Domingo & Boix, 2015; González et al., 2021; Santamaría, 2020). Similarly, there are also quite a few case studies (local, county, regional), as well as comparisons between different schools, which focus on the strengths and/or weaknesses of their situation (Álvarez-Álvarez et al., 2020; Morales-Romo, 2013; Villagrá et al., 2013). There is also research that focuses on aspects such as the leadership of management teams, the role of the teaching staff, etc. (Álvarez-Álvarez & Ugarte-Higuera, 2019; Mayoral et al., 2018). Proposals concerning the incorporation of ICT in rural schools, the digital divide, and the deficit of resources in rural areas are also relevant (Morales-Romo, 2017a; Raso et al., 2014; Villagrá et al., 2013). In contrast, and in contrast to the international perspective, there are fewer analyses of the link between rural schools and the community.

Hernández-Díaz (2000) points out two stages for rural schools in Spain in the 20th century: a period of neglect and underfunding until the 1960s; and the last four decades, when the country was developing, which led to a demand for and improvement of the rural school network. However, despite these advances, by the mid-1980s, and in line with the rural exodus, rural schools seemed to be an endangered pedagogical species. The rural school, in a society that claimed to be *post-modern*, was perceived as an anachronism. However, their enhancement for pedagogical reasons (changes in educational policies and the actions of teachers themselves) and for sociological reasons (changes in the social structure and in the collective representations of the inhabitants of rural areas), would lead to a new

approach to these spaces and their agents. An example of this is the case of Catalonia, where the rural environment is of great symbolic value (Alabart & Vila, 2007; Burrial et al., 2008).

Nowadays, rurality in Spain is heterogeneous and has been transformed in recent decades, resulting in a different scenario, not so closely linked to the primary sector, with the development of activities in the tertiary sector, the arrival of new settlers and the urbanisation of rural lifestyles. One could therefore not speak of a single rurality but of different ruralities and even of "new ruralities", and all this in a changing context with consequences for identities (Bustos, 2009; Morales-Romo, 2017b). And rural schools are not immune to this new reality, but rather respond to it. Their teachers are decisive in this regard and continue to be agents of social cohesion. Yet some of their challenges persist, such as improving the adaptation of curricular content, often with a framework transferred from urban areas to the different local realities, as well as continuing to collaborate in the cultural, economic and social dynamization of their environment in order to contribute to local and community development (Sepúlveda & Gallardo, 2011).

Moreover, in the case of legislation in Spain and its Regions, there is no single definition of what a rural school is (Santamaría, 2020). However, rural schools are characterised by the fact that, even with a low number of students, they meet the need for quality education, and have their own specific organisation in order to adapt to the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of the environment, while respecting the identity of each individual as well as the collective identity and the heterogeneous rural culture that exists (Bustos, 2009; Sepúlveda & Gallardo, 2011). Schools in rural areas in Spain would mainly cover the Pre-Primary (0-6 years) and Primary (6-12 years) levels and would be *Centros de Educación Infantil y Primaria* (Pre-Primary and Primary Education Centers - CEIP), considered autonomous schools; and *Colegios Rurales Agrupados* (Grouped Rural Schools- CRAs, where the definition changes in some Regions), which is a grouping of several schools in small localities to share teachers and resources, many of them being multi-grade or one-room schools (Morales-Romo, 2013; Ponce de León et al., 2000). Boix (2019) indicates that rural schools can be defined as small (few students), local, public, and multi-grade (a graded school, even if it is located in a territory affected by rurality, is not considered a rural school).

Therefore, the absence of a specific definition of rural schools is a handicap for analysing this issue. There is a diversity of situations, depending on the size of these schools. Even the model of Grouped Rural Schools because there are also differences between them. But CRAs, linked to small villages, are a very important reference, but not the only rural school option.

In this way, multi-grade is one of the reference school models and the multi-grade classroom is seen as a space of great pedagogical value, in which diversity is the basic principle of the teaching practices of its educational programmes. For Boix (2019), the main characteristics of the multi-grade classroom are: learning together with students of different ages, mixed didactic methodology and active-participatory didactic strategies, interspersing common times and spaces (multi-grade) with those grouped by grade, use of the environment in the curriculum and continuous and process-focused assessment. Furthermore, it is also commonly considered that in rural schools the relationships between teachers and students are very good, as is the collaboration with families, as they all have the possibility to get to know each other better and interactions are more frequent and take place in multiple contexts (Tahull & Montero, 2018). According to Samper (2016), teachers highlight that rural schools allow for more personalised actions and interaction with students due to the low student-teacher ratio (which also allows for better management and control) and the possibility of working with different age groups in the same classroom.

As can be seen, some of these aspects are linked to research topics already seen at the international level. However, others have been less widely discussed, such as the expectations placed on rural students in relation to studies and their professional future (Lorenzo et al., 2016); or the effects of the increase in the diversity of the student body due to the increase in the immigrant population, which in other countries is discussed in many publications (Gimpel & Lay, 2008; Lichter, 2012; Odenbring & Johansson, 2019; Reed, 2010; Tuters, 2015; Wenger et al., 2012), while in Spain such studies are much more limited (Bengoechea et al., 2012).

3. Material and methods

The study aims to address the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools in Spain today in comparison with urban schools. The starting hypothesis is that one of the great strengths of rural schools is the proximity and relationship with families and the surrounding community. But we believe that this is not the only reason, given that rural schools are also innovating in a similar way, and possibly more than other schools. In view of these objectives and hypotheses, a quantitative research methodology was chosen, specifically the design of a survey and a questionnaire addressed to representatives of school management teams throughout Spain.

3.1. Participants

The population on which the study focuses is schools providing pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) education in Spain. Given that the aim is to analyse how work is done in schools, it was decided that the best informant profile is that of people who are very knowledgeable about how schools work, i.e., members of management teams with years of experience in the same school. The sample (n) was calculated using the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training's data on the number of existing schools in the 2018-2019 academic year (N; population of existing schools providing primary education 18,998), both public and private. At a confidence level of 95.5 %, in the worst case (p = q = 50 %), with a statistical error of ±2.3 %, the sample (n) was 1,730 schools.

This sample (n) was compiled proportionally according to the distribution of the population (N) from a table of random numbers and, therefore, selected at random, although ensuring that the sample represented the provincial territorial distribution and distribution by ownership of the existing schools -applied to the lists of schools in each Spanish province (provincial lists that were previously compiled and in which the name of the school, its postal address, e-mail address and contact telephone number, as well as the ownership, were listed in alphabetical order). More specifically, the profile of the respondents to the questionnaire is as follows: 57.2 % are head teachers, 26.2 % are heads of department, 17.2 % have other responsibilities in the team. Of these, 9.14 % are schools defined by the education authorities as rural. The analysis will focus on the latter, but always with two levels of comparison: with schools not labelled as rural and with schools differentiated according to the number of students (i.e., comparing schools defined as rural with schools with up to 50 students, from 51 to 100, from 101 to 250, from 251 to 500 and more than 500). The idea is to compare at two levels, according to the label given by the authorities and according to the number of students in the school, since rural schools in Spain have a low number of students (in our sample the average number of students in rural schools is 49, while the average number of students in other schools is 220). The former are in towns with an average number of residents of 932, while the average for the rest would be 238,432.

Finally, in relation to the sample, 79.2 % of the schools surveyed were public schools; 18.2 % were private charter; and 2.5 % private. The following table (Table 1) shows the distribution of the sample by Autonomous Community, in a representative manner.

Table 1.
Schools surveyed by Regions.

Regions	N	%
Andalucía	335	19.4
Aragón	52	3.0
Principado de Asturias	40	2.3
Illes Balears	43	2.5
Canarias	92	5.3
Cantabria	20	1.2
Castilla y León	103	6.0
Castilla – La Mancha	88	5.1
Catalunya	300	17.3
Comunitat Valenciana	176	10.2
Extremadura	62	3.6
Galicia	117	6.8
Comunidad de Madrid	121	7.0
Región de Murcia	65	3.8
Comunidad Foral de Navarra	28	1.6
País Vasco	70	4.0
La Rioja	12	0.7
Ciudad Autónoma de Ceuta	4	0.2
Ciudad Autónoma de Melilla	2	0.1
Total	1.730	100

Source: Own elaboration, survey pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary
(6 to 12 years) school management teams (2019-2020).

3.2. Instrument

The instrument used to collect the information (i.e., the questionnaire) was designed by the project's research team following a previous empirical-theoretical phase. From a theoretical point of view, in addition to examining the results of research carried out on the subject in Spain and abroad, discourses and policies from the documentation of the different educational authorities (ministerial and regional) were analysed. This, plus a round of documentary interviews (two in each Autonomous Region or autonomous city) with representatives of the education authorities, led to the design of the instrument, which was made up of questions of different types: open, closed, single or multiple choice. Before its application, the

instrument was validated by three experts with a background in psycho-pedagogy and sociology in order to assess and review the questions and their appropriateness in terms of responding to the objectives. The questionnaire was then tested by sending it to respondents from different provinces and both public and private schools in order to verify that the questions were correctly understood, structured and ordered before being used in the study (this process was carried out by administering the questionnaire to the respondents and then analysing the questions to ensure that they were appropriate to the objectives and information to be collected).

3.3. Empirical procedure

The empirical work was carried out by means of telephone surveys (from 1st October 2019 to 31st January 2020) as this considerably reduced costs and provided an easy means of accessing and obtaining a response from the population, as educational authorities have lists of schools. Once the empirical telephone survey was completed, all responses that had not been previously coded were coded and tabulated. Subsequently, statistical analysis was carried out using *Pulse Train's Star* programme, with which univariate and bivariate analyses were performed and statistical significance tests (T-test for proportions at 95 %) were applied.

4. Strengths and weaknesses of rural schools in Spain

4.1. Coordination in Spanish rural schools

A first level of analysis stems from a set of questions in the aforementioned questionnaire which aims to identify the degree of coordination of rural schools (those defined as such by the existing education authorities in Spain) in comparison with non-rural schools, as well as comparing them according to the number of students enrolled in the school (grouped in intervals), given that one of the characteristics of rural schools is that they have a small number of students and a strong network of relationships. But is the network important to them? Are they coordinated more than other schools? And

with whom? In order to answer these questions, we asked whether they collaborate and/or coordinate with the regional education services[1], the regional social services, the education services and the social services of the municipalities in which the school is located, as well as with whom else they do so (Table 4, in Annexes).

In general, we observed that coordination/collaboration with municipal authorities (town councils) is comparatively greater than with regional authorities, which are further removed from the day-to-day life of the school. 85.2 % collaborate with the town councils' social services and 82.9 % with the educational services. However, this coordination/collaboration is greater in non-rural schools and is related to the number of students in the school (as the number of students in the school increases, coordination and/or collaboration with both town council services increases), with rural schools in the middle ground and showing more coordination than expected for their number of students (given that their average number of students is 49, they should show the same results as schools with 50 or less students but not labelled as rural, but their coordination is greater). This was the case for all services tested, indicating that rural schools have more coordination than expected for their number of students, although the most coordination was found in schools with the most students (especially those with more than 500 students). In addition, as the option was given to mention other co-ordinations, 5.9 % mentioned that they do so with other schools, representing 6.4 % of rural schools and 5.8 % of non-rural schools. In other words, the network with other schools does not appear to be very relevant for the respondents.

However, the network is not only with authorities or other schools; one of the strengths of rural schools is the relationship and interaction with families, so the questionnaire also included questions related to this topic. One of the results suggests that respondents feel that schoolteachers are sufficiently prepared to communicate with families (only 3.6 % feel that they are not) and it is mainly respondents from non-rural schools who feel this way, where the percentage is 3.8 %, compared to rural schools, 1.3 %.

And what specific actions are they taking to communicate with their families? Differentiating between what we have called rich[2], poor, ICT resource and support

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1• It is worth remembering that the Spanish State is divided into Autonomous Regions and two autonomous cities, most of which have their own competences, within a general regulatory framework, in education and social services.

2• According to Macia (2018) the wealth of a medium is determined by four variables: 1) its ability to allow immediate feedback; 2) its ability to convey visual messages and other signals beyond verbal communication; 3) the possibility of using language to help explain an idea; and 4) the possibility of personalising a message.

channels of communication (see: Daft and Lengel 1986; used in Spain by Macia 2018), we noted the high use of rich channels (interaction and two-way communication) in rural schools (91.1 %) compared to non-rural schools (84 %). When looking at the number of students in both rural and non-rural schools with a similar number of students (with 50 or less) the use of rich channels is high, as well as in schools with more students (in schools with more than 500 students, 90 % report using these communication channels). Looking deeper into which rich channels are used in rural schools, 63.3 % use individual interviews, 51.3 % use informal communication at school drop-off and pick-up times and 39.9 % use direct personal contact at different times. Rural schools and those with fewer students are the most likely to use these informal situations to communicate with families. Their size obviously facilitates this type of relationship, which fosters the aforementioned greater interaction with families.

On the other hand, poor channels are also used in rural schools (78.5 %) as well as among other schools, with no difference compared to non-rural schools and no clear relationship with school size (in terms of number of students). The poor channels most used in rural schools are school diaries (42.4 %), written notices and memos (36.6 %) and group meetings (36.9 %). ICT resources are also widely used, with 74.1 % of rural schools mentioning them, although they are mentioned more in non-rural schools (80.7 %) and there is an increase in their use in schools with more than 100 students.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that support channels are in the minority in rural schools (1.9 %) and among other schools (4.9 %). When rural schools mention support channels, they refer exclusively to the parents' association, while other schools refer more to other support professionals (translators or other mediation professionals) (Table 5, in Annexes).

4.2. Actions undertaken by rural schools

The questionnaire also included the actions carried out by the schools. Firstly, the questionnaire asked whether there are any plans focused on welcome processes or on coexistence, which, although not compulsory, are increasingly present in schools. Subsequently, the questionnaire focused on the work done to improve and make changes (in line with educational innovation) for two academic years (2018-19 and 2019-20). Specifically, it focused on whether they took action and, if so, what action they took with regard to: student grouping, school subjects, school facilities,

school time, school materials and assessment. The first intention was to determine whether rural schools are more or less innovative compared to other types of schools.

As can be seen in Table 2, regarding programmes/plans, 78.2 % have the coexistence programme, 70.2 % have the student welcome programme and 62.5 % have the family welcome programme. When comparing rural and non-rural schools, we only found a statistically significant difference in the coexistence plan, which is more common in rural schools (86.1 %) than in other schools (77.4 %). Again, rural schools, when viewed in terms of the number of students enrolled in the school, responded positively more than their counterparts (non-rural schools with 50 or less students) for all three plans. This continues to point to the fact that, compared to other schools of similar size, rural schools are more dynamic.

Table 2.
Programmes/plans in primary education (%)

	Rural/Not Rural			**Rural and the rest by number of students**					
	Total	**Rural School**	**Not Rural**	**Rural**	**Less than 50**	**51– 100**	**101– 250**	**251– 500**	**More than 501**
Reception of families	62.5	61.4	62.6	61.4	41.1	55.7	63.3	68.2	55.0
Reception of students	70.2	67.7	70.4	67.7	47.4	62.1	70.8	77.4	60.0
Coexistence	78.2	86.1	77.4	86.1	71.6	77.6	79.3	76.4	72.5

Source: Own elaboration, survey pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) school management teams (2019-2020).

Focusing on the actions taken to improve the school, the most frequently mentioned was that they work on teaching methodologies (66.1 %), followed by groupings (50.4 %), school materials (46.5 %), facilities (41.7 %), assessment (34.7 %) and school time (14.5 %), as listed in Table 3. Again, when comparing, rural schools are more active in all directions, although sometimes the difference is not statistically significant. Rural schools are, in particular, more likely to work on teaching methodologies (70.3 %, 65.6 % in non-rural schools), assessment (43.7 %, compared to 33.8 %) and groupings (59.5 %, compared to 49.5 %). When comparing by number of students, the difference in rural schools remains the same in comparison to schools of a similar size, except for action taken on school time.

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Table 3.
They take action regarding... (%)

| | Total | Rural/Not Rural | | Rural and the rest by number of students | | | | | |
		Rural School	Not Rural	Rural	Less than 50	51–100	101–250	251–500	More than 501
Teaching methodologies	66.1	70.3	65.6	70.3	58.9	58.0	66.5	67.7	70.0
School materials	46.5	51.3	46.1	51.3	44.2	37.4	47.0	47.7	55.0
Groupings	50.4	59.5	49.5	59.5	55.8	38.5	47.8	53.1	62.5
School spaces	42.7	46.8	42.3	46.8	36.8	35.6	43.1	44.0	47.5
School contents	41.7	45.6	41.3	45.6	42.1	37.4	39.3	43.3	67.5
Evaluation	34.7	43.7	33.8	43.7	29.5	27.0	34.6	34.7	50.0
School time	14.5	17.7	14.2	17.7	18.9	14.4	13.8	14.1	10.0

Source: Own elaboration, survey pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) school management teams (2019-2020).

More specifically, in terms of improving and adapting *teaching methodologies*, rural schools have focused on incorporating and promoting project-based methodology (55 %) and more active, participatory, and cooperative methodologies (48.6 %). To a lesser extent, they mentioned incorporating or promoting methodological changes in specific subjects (12.9 %) and promoting the learning corner methodology (9.9 %). When compared with non-rural schools, we found no significant differences other than the fact that rural schools incorporate (5.4 %) more projects and activities with the environment than other schools (3.8 %), and that the aforementioned more active, participatory or co-operative methodologies are more common in non-rural schools (59.7 %) than in rural schools (48.6 %). When comparing by number of students in the school, it can be seen that rural schools and those of similar size (50 students or less) do practically the same in terms of teaching methodologies.

In reference to *school materials*, rural schools working/acting to improve them have mainly done so by developing their own materials (32.1 %), using ICT (information and communication technologies) and LKT (learning and knowledge technologies) supports for materials (32.1 %), incorporating ICT and LKT materials (27.2 %), using/incorporating materials that can be handled by students (14.8 %), adapting materials to methodological changes (13.6 %), eliminating textbooks (11.1 %), among other minor responses. Compared to non-rural schools, rural schools are more likely to develop their own materials (22.1 % of non-rural schools do so) and to adapt materials to methodological changes (6.6 % of non-rural schools). However, non-rural

schools do more to eliminate textbooks (17 % compared to 11.1 % of rural schools), digitise materials (11.7 % compared to 3.7 %), use ICT and LKT for materials (41.3 % compared to 32.1 %), and incorporate ICT and LKT materials (34.5 % compared to 27.2 %). As can be seen, rural schools do comparatively less work in ICT and LKT, which we believe limits them.

Looking in more detail at actions taken with respect to **groupings**, rural schools stood out for intra-cycle groupings (31.9 %), flexible groupings (29.8 %), intra-classroom groupings (21.3 %), splitting of groups -of grades- (12.6 %) and heterogeneous groupings (11.7 %), among other minor actions. In comparison with other schools, rural schools have increased intra-cycle groupings (31.9 %, an action taken by 17.4 % of other schools), with no other significant differences.

With regard to *facilities*, actions taken in rural schools focused on adapting and improving playgrounds (40.5 %), improving the school's interior spaces (17.6 %), creating new classrooms (16.2 %), adapting spaces to methodological changes (13.5 %), improving the school's exterior spaces (13.5 %), improving the general aesthetics of the school (6.8 %), adapting spaces to the profile of the pupils (4.1 %), and adapting spaces to ICT (1.4 %). Overall, what is noteworthy, beyond physical or aesthetic improvements to the school, is that the changes referring to methodologies and new technologies are of little relevance overall (and the same applies to non-rural schools or in terms of the number of students).

As regards to *school subjects*, 56.9 % of rural schools adapt and organise subjects according to methodological changes (42.8 % of non-rural schools and an action carried out much more by rural schools compared to all others when differentiated by number of students: 27.5 % of schools with 50 or less students; 40 % of schools with 51 to 100 students; 43 % of schools with 101 to 250 students; 45.8 % of schools with 251 to 500 students; and 44.4 % of schools with more than 500 students). The remaining actions concerning school subjects, far removed from the top action, are the incorporation of new subjects such as robotics, radio, etc. (15.3 %) and values (15.3 %). In fact, the incorporation or improvement of value-related subjects is higher in rural schools than in other schools (for example, 10.8 % of non-rural schools mention it, and in comparison with schools with a similar number of students, this figure drops to 7.5 % in schools with 50 or fewer students).

In terms of *assessment*, rural schools are mainly working to increase the number and diversity of assessments they carry out (36.2 %), to incorporate and strengthen continuous assessment (27.5 %), to incorporate and strengthen competence-based assessment (20.3 %), to incorporate and strengthen self-assessment (18.8 %) and to

tailor assessment to the profile of the students (11.6 %) and to methodological changes (5.8 %). Non-rural schools follow a similar pattern and only differ in increased (up to 19 %) tailoring of the assessment to the profile of their students, a response which is linked to the larger or smaller number of students in the school (this response is 11.6 % in rural schools, 14.3 % in schools with 50 or less students, 19.1 % in schools with 51-100, 17.2 % in schools with 101-250, 20.8 % in schools with 251-500 and 30 % in schools with more than 500 students). Beyond this, in terms of assessment, the actions implemented are similar across the different school profiles.

Finally, regarding the management and organisation of *school time*, rural schools modify timetables (distribution of subjects or time for them, 39.3 %, 24.7 % in non-rural schools), dedicate student time to reflection and preparation (32.1 %, lower percentage in non-rural schools, 20.6 %), tailor times to student profiles (17.9 %, lower percentage in non-rural schools, 12.6 %), incorporate one-off topics (7.1 %, much higher percentage in non-rural schools, 24.2 %), and turn non-educational time into educational time (3.6 %, compared to 10.3 % in non-rural), among other minor responses. As can be seen, rural schools are more committed to changing timetables, dedicating more time to preparation and reflection and tailoring school time to the needs of the students. Although the other schools also act along these lines, they do so less and promote one-off incorporation of topics (conferences or themed weeks) and make more use of "non-educational" time in order to make it "educational".

5. Discussion

Despite images that still stereotype schools in rural areas as less modern, and that they should continue to fight against negative stereotypes linked to isolation and fewer opportunities for education in rural areas (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019b), the present study reveals that these are not true as they take innovative actions, and in many cases more so than schools of a similar size in urban areas. Likewise, the link with the community is also noted, with a stronger family-school communication/relationship than in urban schools and a greater use of informal channels, as a result of this proximity factor. Furthermore, there is also coordination with other institutions in the surrounding area in the same vein as indicated by other international studies, which would make it valuable in creating a stronger community.

This study shows that rural schools are strongest in terms of their relationship with families, whereas, although the community-school dynamic is very important (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Byung et al., 2012; García et al., 2016; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019), as well as networking with other schools (Smit & Humpert, 2012) and the relationship with other agents of the educational and social authorities, the results of the research carried out do not particularly contrast with research on urban schools.

It is also observed that rural schools are more active and innovative, especially in terms of incorporating new teaching methodologies, assessment and grouping of students. This positive difference is found with respect to non-rural schools and, also, with respect to schools with a similar number of students (less than 50 students). What rural schools share in common with urban schools is making time use more flexible in order to adapt it to the needs of students, to prepare activities and to reflect on them (adaptations that may be more difficult to carry out in schools with more students). In this regard, according to Reeves & Bylund (2005), schools in rural areas develop their potential to improve results much more than other school profiles if they receive investment. In fact, in Spain, the results of students in rural schools are no worse than those of their urban peers, showing greater resilience (Santamaría, 2020).

But it is not all positive, there are also weaknesses. Of these, the lower use of ICT and LKT in rural schools stands out. Although one could say that this is offset by everything we have presented above, we believe it also limits them and prevents them from developing their full potential. This limitation would manifest in both teaching and learning activities. Teachers with greater use of new technologies, beyond improving their teaching, would contribute to ensuring that rural school pupils are incorporated on equal terms into a world in which technology is essential.

In short, rural schools offer a series of opportunities in all areas that affect the family-school-community relationship, with a positive impact on their learning methodologies and student results. This study shows the value of communication channels, the relational process between families and rural schools and the existence of educational innovation in rural schools, which further distances them from the image perpetuated in Spain of an anachronistic school in a post-modern society (Hernández-Díaz, 2000).

6. Conclusions

The rural school is one of the spaces in which there is greater participation and involvement of families, in the creation of community in short, as can be seen in the

data presented in the previous pages. The size of the schools and their small number of students, the proximity and accessibility of teachers to families are determining variables in this process. In addition, communication channels are not as standardised or formalised as in schools with more students or in urban settings. They are also schools where innovative teaching methodologies can be developed, especially in unitary schools where students from different grades share classrooms. In this way, the rural school is a space for educational innovation, especially in a context determined by inclusive principles and values and attention to diversity.

For these reasons, among others, there has been a change in the vision of rural schools in recent decades. This change has been accompanied both by the provision of resources and by the maintenance of educational centres in small localities, even with five students or less. In this way, the rural school has become a value for the permanence and attraction of the population in rural areas. And the relationship with families and the proximity, the communication facilities, facilitate this transformation.

Furthermore, the rural school is more integrated in its context, with the community. There is a greater interrelation with the different actors in its environment. The school in the rural environment, even its very existence, becomes an indicator of the maintenance and dynamism of a locality. For this reason, the school can be a driving force for the transformation of this kind of locality. Although, obviously, it will also depend on the role of the management team and the teachers.

However, it is no less true that weaknesses and inequalities also persist in relation to rural schools, some of which are more identifiable through qualitative studies, such as school ethnographies, or in-depth interviews with the agents of the educational community and of the municipalities. The first of these is obviously of a demographic nature, with the threat of depopulation and the loss of inhabitants in many municipalities. Secondly, we must not forget the high turnover of teachers, who spend very little time in these schools and do not even live in the localities, which does not mean that their commitment is reduced. And thirdly, we must also consider the implications of small municipalities, where there are also challenges linked to coexistence, cultural diversity, etc.

Therefore, the rural school is a fundamental asset for its environment and a key agent for its development. But neither should we fall into idealisations or fail to con- sider the weaknesses and limitations that arise with respect to it. Rural schools still have some way to go, but there is no doubt that the foundations have been set.

7. Future orientations

The results of this research are being developed by taking a qualitative perspective (ethnography in rural schools) on the strengths and weaknesses detected. In particular, it is possible to analyse in greater detail how they are working with families and the community. In addition, it is particularly interesting to delve into how certain rural schools are innovating and thus attracting pupils from their catchment area. For this reason, the empirical work will be carried out in schools that have been identified in previous studies as attracting families and pupils.

In this respect, it is essential to focus on what aspects rural schools contribute as a factor in maintaining and attracting the population in these environments. Studies should focus on qualitative aspects that provide more information on the social dynamics of the localities, as well as on the role played by the municipalities and their agents as a whole. In this way, the role of rural schools is also key as tools for social innovation. This work must be interdisciplinary in nature.

One of the least studied areas in the empirical corpus on rural schools is that of teachers and professionals in the education system. The focus has been placed on their rotation and itinerancy as an obvious weakness, but there is no study of the factors that would lead teachers and educational professionals to establish themselves in a more stable way in rural areas. As a hypothesis, one of them would be the rootedness and origin of teachers from the rural environment itself, who want to carry out a life and work project in their environment. This is a line of research that needs to be explored in greater depth because it could facilitate greater stability for rural school staff.

8. Funding

9. References

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Annexes

Table 4.
Coordination/collaboration with social and educational services (%)

		Rural/Not Rural		Rural and the rest by number of students					
	Total	Rural School	Not Rural	Rural	Less than 50	51–100	101–250	251–500	More than 501
Coordination/collaboration regional Education services									
Yes	69.0	71.5	68.8	71.5	60.0	68.4	69.4	67.9	90.0
No	22.1	20.9	22.3	20.9	30.5	21.8	21.3	23.3	10.0
Don't know/No answer	4.6	1.9	4.8	1.9	5.3	4.6	5.0	5.1	-
We have no cultural diversity/Not relevant	4.3	5.7	4.1	5.7	4.2	5.2	4.4	3.8	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Coordination/collaboration regional social services									
Yes	66.2	66.5	66.2	66.5	52.6	66.1	66.5	66.4	85.0
No	24.8	24.1	24.9	24.1	36.8	24.7	23.3	25.8	15.0
Don't know/No answer	4.7	3.8	4.8	3.8	6.3	3.4	5.7	4.2	-
We have no cultural 4.3 diversity/Not relevant	5.7	4.2	5.7	4.2	5.7	4.5	3.6	-	
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Coordination/collaboration Education services municipalities									
Yes	82.9	77.8	83.4	77.8	75.8	79.3	38.3	84.5	97.5
No	10.9	14.6	10.6	14.6	20.0	14.4	9.8	9.2	2.5
Don't know/No answer	1.9	1.9	1.9	1.9	-	1.1	2.1	2.3	-
We have no cultural 4.3 diversity/Not relevant	5.7	4.1	5.7	4.2	5.2	4.3	4.0	-	
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Coordination/collaboration Social services municipalities									
Yes	85.2	81.0	85.6	81.0	74.7	83.9	86.8	85.7	97.5
No	9.0	12.0	8.7	12.0	20.0	11.5	6.8	8.7	2.5
Don't know/No answer	1.6	1.9	1.6	1.9	-	-	2.0	2.0	-
We have no cultural diversity/Not relevant	4.2	5.1	4.1	5.1	5.3	4.6	4.4	3.6	-
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration, survey pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) school management teams (2019-2020).

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		Rural/Not Rural		Rural and the rest by number of students					
	Total	Rural School	Not Rural	Rural	Less than 50	51–100	101–250	251–500	More than 501
Rich' communication channels	84.6	91.1	84.0	91.1	93.7	82.8	84.0	82.5	90.0
Individual interviews	69.9	63.3	70.6	63.3	76.8	64.4	69.4	72.0	87.5
Informal communication at entrances and exits	26.5	51.3	24.0	51.3	47.4	33.9	24.1	17.5	15.0
Word of mouth/ direct contact (in general)	26.2	39.9	24.8	39.9	49.5	32.2	25.4	18.2	15.0
Phone call	33.8	30.4	34.2	30.4	34.7	33.9	35.3	32.7	37.5
Parents/parent delegates in classrooms	2.7	0.6	2.9	0.6	-	2.9	3.3	3.1	-
Poor' communication channels	77.7	78.5	77.7	78.5	77.9	69.5	77.0	81.0	77.5
School diary	44.4	42.5	44.3	42.4	40.0	41.4	42.1	48.4	50.0
Newsletters and circulars	36.6	36.1	36.7	36.1	35.8	43.7	36.2	36.5	22.5
Group meetings	36.9	35.4	37.0	35.4	43.2	28.7	36.2	39.2	42.5
Through pupils	5.0	5.7	4.9	5.7	2.1	8.0	5.2	4.2	2.5
Posters	3.4	1.9	3.5	1.9	-	3.4	3.8	3.8	-
ICT resources	80.1	74.1	80.7	74.1	72.6	69.0	81.8	84.1	85.0
Websites and blogs	27.1	17.7	28.0	17.7	23.2	26.4	26.8	31.4	20.0
E-mail	26.3	28.5	26.1	28.5	22.1	24.1	25.8	28.2	22.5
School online platform	35.8	24.1	37.0	24.1	23.2	30.5	37.9	39.7	45.0
Mobile applications (like whatsapp)	34.2	34.2	34.2	34.2	43.2	32.8	33.2	34.7	32.5
Social networks (facebook, insta, youtube...)	3.2	1.3	3.4	1.3	2.1	2.9	4.7	2.5	-

| | | Total | Rural/Not Rural | | Rural and the rest by number of students | | | | | |
			Rural School	Not Rural	Rural	Less than 50	51–100	101–250	251–500	More than 501
Support channels		4.6	1.9	4.9	1.9	3.2	3.4	4.7	6.1	2.5
	Non-professional translators	2.4	-	2.7	-	2.1	2.3	2.6	3.1	2.5
	Professional translators	1.2	-	1.3	-	-	-	1.1	2.2	-
	Other professionals	1.2	-	1.3	-	-	1.1	1.6	1.4	-
	Ampa	0.9	1.9	0.8	1.9	1.1	-	0.7	1.3	-
Others		1.1	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.1	2.3	0.9	1.1	-
None		0.1	-	0.1	-	-	0.6	-	-	-
Don't know/no answer		0.3	-	0.4	-	-	0.6	0.3	0.5	-

Source: Own elaboration, survey pre-primary (3 to 6 years) and primary (6 to 12 years) school management teams (2019-2020).

Authors' contribution

	Sergio Andrés Cabello	Jordi Garreta Bochaca
Conceptualization	50 %	50 %
Data curation	0 %	0 %
Formal analysis	0 %	0 %
Funding acquisition	50 %	50 %
Investigation	50 %	50 %
Methodology	50 %	50 %
Project administration	0 %	100 %
Resources	0 %	0 %
Software	0 %	0 %
Supervision	0 %	100 %
Validation	0 %	0 %
Visualization	50 %	50 %
Writing – original draft	50 %	50 %
Writing – review & editing	50 %	50 %

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