

RURAL SCHOOLS IN SPAIN. PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: A SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

We are going to analyze rural schools in Spain from a sociological viewpoint (there are a lot of studies from the point of view of pedagogy - especially from the eighties - but not sociological ones).

We will analyse the evolution that rural schools have followed in this context from the 70s. Specifically, the goal is to present a current panoramic exempt from stereotypes and based on aspects such as the equipment, transport and dining services and the demystification of false beliefs.

In addition, we will study the past, present and future of rural schools in Spain. We will describe these schools in terms of demography, organization, educational policies, social meanings, methodology, etc. and, on the other hand, we will try to predict the situation of the education in the rural areas of Spain in the next years.

The focus of this study will be the whole rural Spanish territory and more specifically the territory of the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León.

National data, mainly from own surveys and interviews are synthesized covering the following topics: economic and demographic context of rural education, location and characteristics of rural schools, policies and programs benefiting rural education, equipment, transport and dining services, public school finance policies and practices affecting rural schools, teachers in rural schools and the future of rural education in Spain. The report contains data tables and a section describing statistical data sources and the methodology.

One of our conclusions is that, in opposition to what the popular imaginary could consider, the schools in small villages have a more symbolic than real value because the need of the mobility has been internalized in the last years by the inhabitants of the rural areas - and this includes the parents of the students -.

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural schools in Spain changed dramatically in the last forty-fifty years. The demographic change and the exodus from rural to urban places promoted a new picture about these educational resources. Besides, some areas in Spain show hard geographical dispersion and small population size and density. This situation promoted important changes in rural schools in Spain. For example, in Castilla y León.

This report focuses on the status of rural schools in Spain but our research stays in Harvard University (Boston, UE), University of Stirling (Scotland) and the University of Stockholm (Sweden) will offer an international point of view about this topic.

This article sets out some results obtained from a qualitative and quantitative research with different educative actors.

The methodological approach is quantitative and qualitative. Data has been collected from participant observation, teachers and head teacher interviews and surveys, case analysis and document analysis.

The work was carried out in more than two hundred schools.

We applied two surveys. The goal of this survey research was not to describe the sample, but the larger population in Spain.

Survey 1: 100 Spanish schools participated in this personal survey. We visited 25 schools of different communities: Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, San Sebastián, Cádiz, Valladolid and so on. They were both rural and urban. Questionnaires were answered by the head teacher and four teachers in each school.

Survey 2: 125 rural schools of Castilla y León⁴. We selected a total of 600 rural schools in this region and sent a mail survey with instructions on how to fill out the survey and return it enclosed. The questionnaire was directed to the head of each school. Owing to the large dispersion of the population in this area we think this is an efficient method of survey distribution.

Table 1: Sample of rural schools⁵. Survey 2 (Source: own data)

School type	Nº of schools
Infant School (EEI)	6
Public Primary School	2
Grouped rural Schools (CRA)	43
Compulsory Education School (CEO)	2
Infant and Primary School (CEIP)	44
Infant, Primary and Secondary School (CEIPS)	1
High School (IES)	19
Compulsory High School (IESO)	3
Infant Primary and Secondary Concluded School	1
Primary and Secondary Concluded School	2
Infant, Primary and Secondary Concluded School	2
Concluded Secondary School	1
TOTAL	125

Besides, we carried out a case analysis in ten rural schools in Castilla y León⁶ where we interviewed teachers, parents, pupils and head teachers and examined the main academic documents. 44 personal interviews took place at rural schools and were recorded. These interviews have more flexibility than a paper survey, because, for instance, we could skip irrelevant questions, and both the interviewer and respondent could ask for clarification. As interviewers we could also control the order of the questions if that was important.

⁴ Castilla y León is a good sample of the constant process of depopulation. A great number of villages of that region are suffering, primarily caused by the continuous transfer of labour force from agriculture activities to the industrial sector and, more recently, towards the service sector of urban areas, is provoking the progressive demographic and economic decadence of rural areas.

⁵ Concluded schools are private schools (They choose the teachers which are not government personnel) but financed by the government, so the students have not to pay for.

⁶ A total of 44 interviews were done in this schools: 3 Grouped rural schools (CRA), 2 Infant and Primary public schools (CEIP), 1 Infant, Primary and Secondary Concluded School, 2 High Schools (IES) and 2 Compulsory High School (IESO).

Economic and demographic context of rural education

Rural areas cover 91.3 % of the Spanish territory and about 20% of the population lives in these areas. Globally speaking, about 50% of the total surface area of Spain is utilized as agricultural land (25.2 million ha).

Stopping rural depopulation is one of the biggest challenge for Spain, given that a large area of the territory suffers from problems of depopulation. Usually it is said that the primary sector (agriculture, hunting and forestry) constitutes the main source for maintaining population and employment in the smallest rural areas, but nowadays the rural economy is different from years ago.

“The new rural community”. Rural areas in Spain changed in terms of demography, economy, politics, education, job opportunities and so on. Agrarian activities are not the main economic support in rural areas any more. New employments such as environmental activities and tourism, hold an important position within the rural economy [1]; [2]; [3]; [4].

Demographical tendencies do not direct towards the same direction. While in some small villages the population is older and older and has decreased quickly, new inhabitants, people who turn back home, retired or previous immigrants appear in other (usually bigger) villages [5].

The transformation that rural areas have undergone during the last 30-40 years constitutes a very important phenomenon in Spain, but it is especially relevant in certain regions such as the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León. The constant process of depopulation, which a great number of villages of that region are suffering, primarily caused by the continuous transfer of labour force from agriculture activities to the industrial sector and, more recently, towards the service sector of urban areas, is provoking the progressive demographic and economic decadence of rural areas.

The rural vision as it has usually been known during the last decades cannot be maintained to define a context in a permanent change process. So that “extended ruralise” is a better way to define this new reality [6].

2 PAST

Schools have been changing over time. In rural areas changes have been more dramatic in the less populated areas where there have been several restructurings, and where many schools have disappeared due to insufficient numbers of pupils. In the 70s and 80s the educational debate in the rural context focused on school levels. Subsequently attention was dispersed and headed on the size, closing and quality of schools. Aspects such as the resources (human, material and infrastructural) or educational inequalities have been the focus in recent decades.

The review of educational laws since the second half of the nineteenth century to the present, shows how each reform has been closely linked to the political situation in Spain: every change of government has been accompanied by an educational reform. But the laws and reforms established for rural areas had something in common: they have not addressed the inequalities derived from the place of residence with the specificity that would have been necessary and that has been demanded for years.

Nowadays rural teachers are quite different from their colleagues in the 70s and 80s. Most of them do not live in the same village where they work and very often change the school. The heroic age of the rural teachers is part of the past and teachers have lost the prestige they had.

3 PRESENT

3.1 Location and characteristics of rural schools in Spain

Isolation and demographical dispersion are important problems in most of the rural communities in Spain, especially in the small ones. Due to its structure, Spain implements the rural development policy through rural development programmes (RDP) established basically at regional level by the Autonomous Communities.

This situation implies the existence of small rural schools. The Spanish law doesn't differentiate a specific typology of rural schools. However, it considers the grouped small schools in the territory. Grouped rural schools (Colegios Rurales Agrupados – CRA -) are made up of several schools from various municipalities with one shared head teacher. According to the isolation of the territory, it can be schools of one or two units.

The isolation of rural communities creates special needs for teachers and students in rural schools but educational laws in Spain hardly ever attended this situation.

It is recognized that rural communities are one of the disadvantaged groups in Europe due to their physical distance and isolation from other communities. Rural schools and teachers, as part of such groups, encounter difficulties in accessing services and resources for working with peers. Although internet access is changing the landscape of the rural teacher, the possibility of working with colleagues in professional development tasks is not completely provided. New opportunities for bridging the gap between rural and urban schools could emerge through the use of ICT tools [7].

In June 2012, Castilla La Mancha announced the closure of some 60 rural schools. These are not the only instances; there have also been school closures in Galicia and Valencia, among other areas. This is because in recent years the autonomous communities have been raising the ratio of students necessary to maintain an open center. A spokesman for Castilla La Mancha said the closures are based on quality and not on money, but he has not revealed any reports or studies to support his thesis that education was of a better quality in large schools in cities than in small rural schools. In Castilla y León four pupils are needed to maintain a school open.

It seems that the debate about small or big schools in rural areas is exceeded. The disappearance of many of these schools and the demographic trend of small village with geographical dispersion and many scattered villages, involves that the disappearance or not of these schools is a matter of time.

3.2 Policies and programs benefiting rural education

Rural education in Spain has been given special attention and significantly improved in the recent years. With the political and administrative decentralization of the educational system, each autonomous regional government has developed educational structures and services adapted to the needs of rural schools.

Several studies establish that the quality of rural education in Spain improved in the recent years [8]. With the political and administrative decentralisation of the educational system, each autonomous regional government has created school structures, educational and support services for the rural school adapted to the needs of each region. However, there are still clear needs to be tackled [9].

3.3 Needs in rural schools

When we asked rural schools heads about the main trouble at schools these were their answers (see table 2 and 3):

Table 2: Main problem at school (recoded) (Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools)

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Resources	26	20,8	20,8	20,8
Families	7	5,6	5,6	26,4
Students	29	23,2	23,2	49,6
Teachers	24	19,2	19,2	68,8
Rural characteristics	33	26,4	26,4	95,2
NS/NC	6	4,8	4,8	100,0
Total	125	100,0	100,0	

Table 3: Main problem at school (Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools)

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Resources	Infrastructure	10	8	8	8
	Material	6	4,8	4,8	12,8
	Human	5	4	4	16,8
	Financial	5	4	4	20,8
Families	Low communication	4	3,2	3,2	24,0
	Low participation	3	2,4	2,4	26,4
Students	Low number	11	8,8	8,8	35,2
	Low motivation	10	8	8	43,2
	Few students at the same level	3	2,4	2,4	45,6
	Immigrants	3	2,4	2,4	48,0
	Socialization	2	1,6	1,6	49,6
Teachers	Absent of comradeship	7	5,6	5,6	55,2
	Absent of interest	5	4	4	59,2
	Instability of teachers team	5	4	4	63,2
	Transport	4	3,2	3,2	66,4
	Isolation	3	2,4	2,4	68,8
Rural characteristics	Neglect of Rural Schools	7	5,6	5,6	74,4
	Distance from urban areas and Access to resources	7	5,6	5,6	80,0
	Multilevel	7	5,6	5,6	85,6
	Geographical dispersion/ depopulation	7	5,6	5,6	91,2
	School transport	1	0,8	0,8	92,0
	Poor innovation	1	0,8	0,8	92,8
	Treatment of publishing	1	0,8	0,8	93,6

	house to rural areas				
	Extracurricular activities	1	0,8	0,8	94,4
	Relationship with council	1	0,8	0,8	95,2
NS/NC		6	4,8	4,8	100,0
Total		125	100,0	100,0	

The main problem is related to rural characteristics. Table 3 details which are these reasons.

The traditional complaint about the poor infrastructure of rural schools does not keep in the same level. The head teachers identified many problems and they are distributed in many items. Head teachers in rural schools are especially worried about infrastructures, low number of students and their low motivation.

Frossard et al. [7] were also interested in needs of Spanish rural schools. They identified the following:

- A. Need for communication with other rural communities.
- B. Need for support, guidance and familiarization to ICT tools.
- C. Need for language learning.
- D. Need for sharing teaching methodologies.
- E. Need for a better visibility of rural schools
- F. Need for common goal-driven educational scenarios.

3.4 Equipment, transport and dining services

Traditionally many studies about rural areas have focused on transport problems of both students and teachers. The fieldwork suggests that complaints about that have given way to a normalized view of the need to use transport services. In fact only 10% of the students in Castilla y Leon are rural transport service users. Nowadays complaints are more determined by the greatest difficulties of the rural students to access urban resources.

For teachers there are different positions about the disadvantage or not of the distance from the school to their towns. For half of the respondents transport is not a problem, for a 36% it is a minor problem and 16% say it is a major problem. Variables such as distance to schools, transport conditions, satisfaction with the school and colleagues relationship among others, influence the determination of displacement as a problematic issue. However, itinerant teachers who have to perform continuous displacements (sometimes by terrible roads and in adverse weather conditions) and those teachers who have to travel longer distances daily show high levels of dissatisfaction. In Castilla y León from 22,558 students who used school buses, 17,493 were dining service users.

We can explain the difference of 5,000 students less because of the schools where students come back home for lunch.

Table 4 shows the satisfaction with equipment in rural schools.

Table 4: Satisfaction with infrastructure (Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools)

	Frequency	Porcentaje	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Much	13	10,4	10,4	10,4
Quite	59	47,2	47,2	57,6
Little	49	39,2	39,2	96,8
Nothing	4	3,2	3,2	100,0
Total	125	100,0	100,0	

Infrastructure is still a question to improve in rural areas but data show great differences between answers. Interviews reveal that there are rural schools where infrastructures are not a problem and even some teachers assert that some urban schools have worse equipment than other rural ones.

Table 5: Satisfaction with infrastructure: rural and urban schools (Source: Survey 1. Teachers and head teachers of rural and urban schools)

	Valid Percentage rural schools	Valid Percentage urban schools
Very dissatisfied	6,7	6,1
Fairly dissatisfied	13,3	10,5
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	31,1	25,4
Quite satisfied	33,3	39
Very satisfied	15,6	19
Total	100,0	100,0

When comparing satisfaction related to infrastructure in rural and urban schools (see Table 5), we can observe that the great differences of the past have been reduced. However, both rural and urban teachers would like to achieve some more goals.

Table 5 shows how differences between rural and urban schools related to infrastructure are not as big as years ago any more.

Recalling literature that spoke about poor rural school facilities, we believe that equipment in many rural schools has improved and currently the school in rural areas has other needs to be tackled, beyond the stereotypes that have accompanied them for many, too many years.

4 THE FUTURE OF RURAL EDUCATION IN SPAIN

In the the coming years the disappearance of some of the schools that are on the threshold of permanence or closing will be a fact, with the exception of villages close to the cities. The population pyramids and interviews confirm this prediction.

Table 6: Number of students in the last five years (Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools)

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Increase of more than 1/3	6	4,8	4,8	4,8
Increase of less than 1/3	5	4,0	4,0	8,8
Constant	40	32,0	32,0	40,8
Decrease of more than 1/3	21	16,8	16,8	57,6
Decrease of less than 1/3	48	38,4	38,4	96
NS/NC	5	4,0	4,0	100,0
Total	125	100,0	100,0	

16.8% of respondents said that the centre has lost more than one third of the students in the last five years. In 38.4% of the participating schools, the decline would have been less than a third. Consequently, more than 50 % of the schools surveyed would have suffered a decline in students in the last five years. The rest is divided between 32 % of the schools with a constant number of students and only 8.8% where the numbers of students have increased in the last ten years.

Differences are based on the type of school: while CRAs lose students progressively, secondary schools show a more stable tendency. Interviews confirm these two points of view.

One of the questions in our questionnaire referred to the future of rural schools within 10 years. The most frequent answer was the predictable closing of many CRAs (45%). 32.8% believe that there will be significant changes and only 12% include new initiatives such as telematic projects (see table below).

Table 7: The future of rural schools in ten years (Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools)

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Similar to the current situation	41	32,8	32,8	32,8
Manny CRA will disappear	57	45,6	45,6	78,4
Maybe new initiative such as the internet connection will allow new educational practices	15	12,0	12,0	90,4
NS/NC	12	9,6	9,6	100,0
Total	125	100,0	100,0	

New technologies seem to have an increasingly importance among rural teachers. Interviews show how technologies are seen as a mechanism for reducing differences between education in rural and urban areas.

The heterogeneity of rural schools and their uncertain future in some areas make it difficult to predict the future of these schools. Educational policies supported on teachers experience, and the insertion of new technologies will be a key to the evolution.

The fighting spirit of student parents in the 70s against the scholar transport has disappeared. Thus, studies about rural schools in Spain have been reduced in the last years. Actually the rural school of the early twentieth century does no longer exist, the educational development in rural areas has been so deep that many elements that have characterized rural schools for years have disappeared today.

Differences between rural and urban schools are due to environment rather than to the school itself. Law regulations, teaching hours, curriculum, courses, tutorials, etc. are the same in theory. In practice, teachers working in small schools have to make adaptations to cover the needs of their students.

All in all the dynamics in the future seems to draw an equal tendency between rural and urban schools.

5 CONCLUSIONS

1. Rural schools changed dramatically within the last decades. Differences between rural and urban schools have been reduced in terms of equipment and quality of education (some of the main problems mentioned by studies in the 70s and 80s).
2. In opposition to what the popular imaginary could consider, the schools in small villages have a more symbolic than real value because the need of the mobility has been internalized in the last years by the inhabitants of the rural areas and this include parents of pupils.
3. According to the data, the small schools are more bureaucratic, and that results in a great power of the teachers in opposition to parents, head teachers and the School Board.
4. There is a lack of continuous training for rural school teachers aiming to keep pace with new didactical approaches, with the use of ICT in the classroom, with dealing with diversity, and for professional development.
5. Rural schools need to be re-thought as embedded within the actual society and its features. In this objective, communication among rural schools featured by the same contexts and needs seem crucial in order to break the limitations implied by their isolation, project them toward the exterior, as well as enable them to share knowledge, experience, and thus create meaningful learning.

As a final conclusion, this paper shows the evolution of rural schools in Spain. Nowadays goals are directed to build an inclusive school which can exceed the isolation, access to resources, the low number of students, geographical dispersion and other subjects. Recent studies show virtual communities based on internet connection as the key, but will be enough?

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