

**The Spanish rural school from the New Rural paradigm. Evolution and challenges for the future**

La escuela en el medio rural español desde el paradigma de la nueva ruralidad. Evolución y retos para el futuro

## **THE SPANISH RURAL SCHOOL FROM THE NEW RURAL PARADIGM. EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE<sup>1</sup>**

La escuela en el medio rural español desde el paradigma de la nueva ruralidad. Evolución y retos para el futuro

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the Spanish research exploring the role of schools in rural areas from the prospect of the New Rurality. It seeks to reflect on the context in which these schools are located and emphasise knowledge thereof. **Method:** Based on both, qualitative and quantitative methodology, 225 Spanish schools were interviewed and two surveys were applied (personal and online) to teachers, parents and head teachers. **Results:** The data reflect the reality of schools in rural environments in terms of educational policies, traditional aspects such as transport and resources, needs, advantages and disadvantages and their possible evolution in the future. **Conclusions:** This paper contributes to the presentation of a current overview of rural schools exempt from stereotypes and focused on educational policies, their schools' needs and the demystification of false beliefs, while describing defining elements such as the more symbolic than real value, its excessive dependence on teachers working in them or their bureaucratic higher profile versus their urban counterparts.


**Keywords:** Rural Areas; Education; Rural Education; Spain.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo se centra en el caso español para explorar el papel de la escuela en zonas rurales desde la perspectiva de la Nueva Ruralidad. Busca reflexionar sobre el contexto donde están situadas estas escuelas y profundizar en su conocimiento. **Método:** el artículo se basa en una combinación de metodología

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<sup>1</sup> El artículo parte de las inquietudes encontradas en el desarrollo de la tesis doctoral *La escuela en el medio rural de Castilla y León. Aspectos condicionantes y contribución como organización* (2009) y emplea algunos datos obtenidos en un proyecto de investigación *Innovaciones y mejoras en el proyecto tutoría entre compañeros* (código ID2015/0137) de la convocatoria nacional del Ministerio de Educación y Cultura (2015-2016).

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cuantitativa y cualitativa aplicada en 225 escuelas españolas, donde fueron realizadas entrevistas personales a profesorado, padres/madres y directores, así como dos encuestas (presencial y online). **Resultados:** Los datos orientan sobre la realidad de las escuelas en entornos rurales en cuanto a políticas educativas, aspectos tradicionales como debates sobre transporte y recursos, necesidades, ventajas y desventajas, y su posible evolución en el futuro. **Conclusiones:** se orienta sobre la panorámica actual de las escuelas rurales exenta de estereotipos y centrada en aspectos como las políticas educativas, sus necesidades y la desmitificación de falsas creencias, al tiempo que se describen elementos definitorios como el valor más simbólico que real que se les asigna, su excesiva dependencia de los maestros que trabajan en ellas o su mayor perfil burocrático frente a sus homólogas urbanas.

**Palabras clave:** áreas rurales; educación; educación rural; España

## Introduction

Rural areas in Spain are among the most aged populations in Europe. Ageing is due to both natural population dynamics and migration. (Camarero, & Del Pino, 2013). The effects are the loss of young people and the aging of the population. The dramatic increase in average life expectancy and the fall in fertility, features of the second demographic transition, and the migration of young generations show a rural population with demographic imbalances such as masculinization (Camarero, 2009).

Rural schools in Spain will be analysed from a sociological point of view. As Morales noticed, many studies from the viewpoint of pedagogy have been made about rural schools –especially in the eighties– but not sociological ones. The demographic change and the exodus from rural to urban spaces promoted a new picture about these educational resources. Moreover, some areas in Spain show large geographical dispersion and small population size and density (Morales Romo, 2013a).

The key in our research was not pointed at the main problems of rural schools linked to the traditional perception of rural areas in developing countries, but whether be able to understand rural schools from the point of view of New Rurality.

A need to break the traditional vision of rural areas in developing countries is commonly accepted by most authors studying rural contexts. We suggest New Rurality as a useful concept to better understand the stakeholders interacting in rural schools.

The available literature identifies at least two ways to understand the New Rurality: one, mainly as a response to not only neoliberal precepts but also the phenomenon of globalization (De Grammont, 2004; Kay, 2005). The other, particularly as a new Rural Development proposal

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closely linked to a particular understanding of the territory (Arias, 2005; InterAmerican Institute for Agricultural Cooperation [IICA], Swedish International Development Agency [ASDI], & Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Development [CIDER], 2001; Pérez, & Caballero, 2003).

The World Bank (2003) within the paradigm of New Rurality, raised a territorial development strategy based on the following elements: The concept of region, sustainable development that promotes character, the underrated resource capital, gender perspective, land reform by the market, strengthening of the institutions in the context of State reform, democratic participation of citizens in rural areas and self-community management. Most of these elements are taken into consideration in our work.

We hope that our empirical study of rural schools in Spain can serve as an initial step to help better understand the inner workings of schools not only in this context but in other international rural contexts (despite the territorial and cultural differences).

#### **Rural areas**

Gómez Limón, Vera-Toscano, and Garrido-Fernández, according to the Institute for Advanced Social Studies [IESA] & the Superior Council for Scientific Research [CSIC] (2006), considered four different types of countries depending on its sociodemographic and geographic features: Deep rural Mountainous areas, Traditional Mediterranean rural, Light rural and Simply Rural (Gómez Limón, Vera-Toscano, & Garrido-Fernández, 2014).

OECD (2009) proposed a classification based on the percentage of population living in rural communities, while Eurostat establishes different population ratios.

In Spain, the Law 45/2007 for Sustainable Rural Development (LDSMR) of December 13<sup>th</sup> defines three types of rural areas: Rural areas that need to be revitalized; they are isolated, uninhabited, are predominantly agricultural and with low-income levels. Intermediate rural areas with low or medium population density, diversified employment, low or medium levels of income, and far from cities. Finally, Peri-urban rural areas, which are more populated, have a majority of workers in the tertiary sector, medium or high levels of income and are located near cities.

In short, rural areas in the world and within countries, show large variations in terms of demography, socio-economic and culture. It is especially important to examine the heterogeneity in rural areas in Spain in order to understand their schools.

Rural change in Spain has not followed the same direction in all places. While in some rural areas there are rural schools located in small and isolated villages where most people work in agriculture and livestock, other are located close to the cities, and their ways of life are typically urban. Most of them are located in an intermediate environment between these two divergent poles. Del Barrio Aliste (2013) argues there are no separate rural and urban areas, but territories whose viability depends on cooperation between institutions and the synergy between social and economic groups.

The traditional paradigm through rural areas in Spain has been considered and it has been decided that it should be reconfigured. New demographic trends, migration flows, the Information Society, visibility of women, ICT, new uses of rural spaces or the improvement of communication systems are some of the elements that determine a heterogeneous and different reality (Jiménez, 2009).

According to Berlanga “It is not possible to give a universal and permanent definition valid for rural or urban context, but to have an overview in order to avoid falling into a simplistic dichotomy because both are continuously changing” (Berlanga, 2003, p. 27).

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. (Morales, 2013b, p. 6)

Most research on rural communities considered age as an important aspect. Some authors observed relationship between size of a municipality and degree of ageing (Camarero, 2009; Del Barrio Aliste, 2013). For instance, in rural areas in America, emphasis on age, among other demographic categories, frames rurality as an independent variable that has major social consequences for what concerns the future of the nation, including healthcare, education, infrastructure and culture (Brown, & Schafft, 2001).

Demographic tendencies do not evolve in the same way. While in some small villages there are significant demographic imbalances, the population is older and is decreasing quickly, in other (usually bigger) new inhabitants appear, people who return back home, retirees or immigrants

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(Sanz, 2003; Camarero, 2009). The report of Fundación Encuentro (2007) showed how Spanish rural areas have begun to recover from the demographic deficit of past decades.

The transformation of rural areas during the last four decades is especially relevant in certain regions, such as the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León.

During the last two decades, rural areas in Spain have been funded by the European Programs (LEADER<sup>2</sup> and PRODER<sup>3</sup>) promoting new initiatives to keep and increase local populations. Other regions in Europe such as South Italy have benefited from this. A work carried out by Trabalzi and De Rosa (2012) about local strategies in rural areas in Italy (model supported with funds from the European Community) and Iowa (with a market model), shows that the efficiency of the two strategies is wearing out and their long-term sustainability is in question. The authors identify the causes: Clientelism and corporatism of local powerful members in Italy, and differences in Iowa between the Shareholders interested in preserving the identity of the territory and other interested in the corporation's dividends. Perhaps it can be useful taking it in count for not repeat these problems in other rural areas.

The traditional rural concept cannot be maintained to define a context for a permanent change process. So that the “extended rurality” that cited twenty years ago. In example, in some Spanish areas rural restructuring has showed a new productive and demographic context that evidences this new reality.

For recent works in environmental sociology and ecology (Batie, 2009; Bell, 2012; Wynne, 1996), rural and urban schools are different due to environment rather than to the school itself. So that, teachers working in small rural schools need to adapt to the context in which they work and consequently to the needs of their students –often different from the urban ones.

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<sup>2</sup> LEADER (Links between the Rural Economic and Development Actions). EU Initiative for sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> PRODER (Operative Program for the Economic Development and Diversification of Rural Areas), co-funded by the EU with Structural Funds to boost development in rural areas (Gómez Limón, Vera-Toscano, & Garrido-Fernández, 2014).

Many studies have identified some of the differences between rural and urban schools over the world (Owens & Waxman, 1996; Reeves & Bylund, 2005). In addition, different experiences showed that it is possible to reduce these inequalities (Liao, Chang, Wang, & Horng, 2013).

One of the most important differences between rural and urban schools is the context. Isolation and scattered areas are important problems for providing resources in rural villages in Spain, especially in the small ones. Sparse population and decreased access to resources such as transportation, education, health care, and other social and cultural services, characterize rural areas over the world. Several American studies (Allard, 2008; Vernon-Feagans, Gallagher, & Kanz, 2010) and European ones (Demoussis, & Giannakopoulos, 2006; Vicente, & López, 2006) referred to it.

### **Features of rural school**

The Spanish Laws do not discriminate a typology of rural schools, although consider the grouped small schools, which include several schools from several municipalities with one shared head teacher and common organizational structure (the CRA). The ultimate goal of a Grouped Rural School is to provide students with a quality education, minimising negative effects on their achievement based on a number of key principles such as participation, decentralization, representation, subsidiarity and the evolution of the system itself (Bartomeu Lupiáñez, 2002).

During years, the rural school has suffered institutional and legislative neglect, and has had to face neoliberal policies that did not help it (Recio, 2016). However, Luna (2012) assured that during the last 40 years the rural school have not had inferior quality to schools in general.

In the *Report on the state and situation of the Education System in Spain*, (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura [MEC], 2007) educational administrations are urged to adequately attend to the teachers in this field, emphasising continuing education to provide quality educational services in rural areas. Several authors (Bernal, 2009; Tomás, 2004) have demanded legislation that takes into account the specificity of the rural school.

Despite important differences in the rural contexts in Spain, there is limited research considering variation. Most of authors identified the next characteristics for rural schools in Spain (Bernal Agudo, 2009; De León Elizondo, Santa María, & Sáinz, 2000):

1. Diversity, depending on the demographic, physical, cultural, economic, communication, etc.

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2. The low population density and its distribution across the territory. This situation affects other characteristics of the rural school, such as the management of schools, the ratio of students per unit or even the need of some services (such as transportation and dining rooms).

3. Teachers with inadequate training to meet the conditions presented by the rural school and different teaching-learning processes to be performed. In addition, there are high rates of provisional status of rural teachers, who often consider the rural school as a temporary destination.

4. Heterogeneous students. In addition to their social, economic or personal context, one should note the coexistence of pupils in different ages.

5. Isolation in some areas by the lack of communication.

6. The student-teacher ratio is low, and consequently the cost of these schools is higher. On the other hand, the student-teacher and student-student relationships are closer and more intense.

7. Infrastructure and resources (human and materials) are two of its most important problems.

8. Participation and partnership of families are less frequent than in urban schools although the relationships with families are closer.

9. Its organization is different, based on Grouped rural centres with itinerant teachers, classrooms scattered in different towns, multilevel classes.

With the results of this research, we want to check if these elements are common to all or most of the rural schools, and if they remained at the beginning of this century.

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 students in Castilla y León are rural transport service users. Nowadays complaints are more determined by the greatest difficulties of the rural students to access urban resources (Morales Romo, 2013b, p. 9).

Schools have been changing over time. These changes have been more intense in the less populated areas, where many schools have disappeared because of the insufficient number of pupils. Research developed in the 70's and 80's about Spanish rural schools focused on school levels, transport problems, closure and quality of schools. More recently, aspects such as human resources or educational inequalities have been the focus in recent years (Aguilar Criado, 2010; Camarero, 2009; Rebollar & Girard, 2012).

We will discuss these and other aspects in detail through the result obtained in our research.

## Methods

The empirical research took place in Spain, although the autonomous region of Castilla y León in Northwest Spain was subject to further investigation because of their particular demographic conditions and, consequently, the role of the rural school. This region which has a surface area of 94.2 million square kilometres and a population of 2.5 million inhabitants, accounting for 18.6 percent of Spanish territory (is the largest region in Spain) and only 5.4 percent of its population.

The methodological approach combined quantitative and qualitative methods. This convergent methodology was carried out on more than two hundred schools in Spain with different educational stakeholders (head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils). Four methods were used simultaneously: participant observation, teachers and head teacher interviews, surveys, and case studies. SPSS was used for statistical analysis and the alignment of the qualitative data was performed by the programs Jukebox and Wave lab.

Data obtained by analysis of surveys and interviews revolve around the following topics: economic and demographic context of rural education, specificity of rural schools, policies and programs benefiting rural education, needs, advantage and disadvantages, complementary services, rural teachers and the future of rural education in Spain. This allows us to handle the objectives of this paper with a broad perspective.

Two surveys were applied by personal and online questionnaires. The main purpose of the survey 1 was to collect data regarding the past, present and future of the rural schools in Spain in general, and the survey 2 was applied in those rural schools located in Castilla y León in particular.

Personal Survey (survey 1): 100 Spanish schools were selected from different communities: Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, San Sebastián, Cádiz, Valladolid and so on. They were both rural (20%) and urban (80%). Questionnaires were directed to the head teacher and four teachers in each school. So that, we applied 100 surveys in rural schools and 400 surveys in urban ones.

Online Survey (survey 2): 125 rural schools of Castilla y León region participated (from a total of 600 in this area). Because of the large dispersion of the population in this area, the online way was an efficient method of survey distribution.

In this regard, we selected 10 rural schools in Spain with different characteristics and from 10 regions (public and private, big and intermediate size of population, CRA, Preschool and Primary school and Secondary schools). They constituted the case studies and several educational



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stakeholders were interviewed –teachers, parents, pupils and head teachers–, and the main academic documents were examined. 44 personal and semi-structured interviews took place in these rural schools.

Once the data of the interviews and the two surveys were collected, they were triangulated using different categories. The results section, lists the five most representative, although more data were obtained referring to the relationships of the schools with their environment, assessments about the head teacher, the role of the teacher and so on. The triangulation was used to decrease the deficiencies of a single strategy and offer a wide way to interpret the findings. First we analysed the survey 1 for the 100 schools and later we discrimated between rural and urban schools. Secondly, we analysed the survey 2 in order to emphasise the reality of a certain region: Castilla y León. At the same time, we cross-analysed interview responses looking for consensus patterns or not among the participants. Finally, we defined ten categories of analysis from which we have selected the five most representative for this article.

## **Results**

### **Spanish public policies benefiting rural education**

Educational laws in Spain have hardly ever attended to the special needs owed to isolation of teachers and students in rural areas. Most of the teachers, parents and head-teachers interviewed thought that rural schools in Spain have not received adequate attention according to their characteristics and their qualitative and quantitative importance, because educational laws since the second half of the nineteenth century have not taken in account the inequalities derived from the place of residence.

Rural schools have always been the most neglected by politicians and laws, and this includes their teachers and students. [I33. Head teacher CRA. February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016]

I feel this school belongs to “the second class”. The first class is for urban schools. We have more difficulties to attend to a theatre or organizing extracurricular activities. [I4. Mother CRA. December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015]

The old concept of rural school has to be changed because the rural environment has changed too. The CRA involved a great improvement, but there are still many problems specific of these schools that have not found response in the education laws. [I16. Head teacher. Primary and Secondary rural school. October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015].

Over the last several decades, the closure of rural schools have been a common practice in many areas because during last years the autonomous communities have been raising the ratio of students necessary to maintain schools open. This aspect was found to be a substantial concern for the teachers interviewed.

**The traditional debate on transport and resources**

Based on the conducted surveys, teachers have different opinions about the distance from the school to their place of living. For half of them, the transport is not a problem, 36 per cent think it is a minor problem, and for the 16 per cent is a problematic question. Aspects such as transport conditions, distance to schools, levels of satisfaction with the school and level of communication with colleagues among others, have influenced displacement answers. Meanwhile itinerant teachers (those who work in several schools from a grouped school), and those teachers who make a daily trip from home to school, showed high levels of dissatisfaction. The interviews revealed the same idea.

Data collected from head teachers of rural school showed that the infrastructure is still an issue to improve in rural areas but, on the other side, there are great differences between answers. Interviews revealed an important number of rural schools with adequate infrastructures and even some teachers proclaimed some urban schools had worse equipment than other rural schools.

**Table 1.**

*Comparison of the satisfaction of rural and urban teachers with infrastructures*

	<b>Rural N = 100</b>	<b>Urban N = 400</b>
	<b>Valid %</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
<b>Very unsatisfied</b>	6.7	6.1
<b>Fairly dissatisfied</b>	13.3	10.5
<b>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</b>	31.1	25.4
<b>Fairly satisfied</b>	33.3	39
<b>Very satisfied</b>	15.6	19
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 1. Rural and urban teachers.

**Table 2.**

*Comparison of equipment and teaching material.*

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	Rural N = 100	Urban N =400
	Valid %	Valid %
Very suitable	9.1	15.9
Suitable	54.5	68.2
Not suitable	36.4	15.9
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 1. Rural and urban teachers

When comparing satisfaction related to infrastructure, the reduction of past differences between rural and urban schools can be observed (Table 1). 20 per cent of respondents in rural schools were fairly or very unsatisfied with infrastructure, while these items represented 17 per cent in urban ones. There was found a little difference in the equipment and teaching materials (see Table 2); rural teachers expressed a lower level of satisfaction related to it.

Our results demonstrate that the old debate about poor equipment and problems with transport in rural schools perhaps have to be overcome, as well as other stereotypes. Rural areas have changed their schools too, so that new needs have to be tackled.

#### Advantages and disadvantages of rural schools

Small rural schools have several features, which provide them an identity and specific characteristics.

Personal interviews indicated some of these advantages and disadvantages, showing that they are often interrelated, and many disadvantages can be overcome by taking advantage of them.

Conversely, from insisting on the lists that indicate strengths and weaknesses, our work seeks to identify not only the problems but to indicate lines of action to overcome them.

According to Aguado, Gil-Jaurena & Mata (2005) we include these elements in three groups:

#### *Classification and grouping*

The teachers interviewed have differentiated between the consequence of the number of students as a reason for closing the schools, from low number of pupils and the academic aspects. Interviews revealed advantages, which we believe should be highlighted: More cooperation between pupils and children with more self-esteem and autonomy.

Interviews evidenced that despite important difficulties of multilevel classes; this heterogeneity allows methodologies that are more flexible, promotes educational innovation and generates a comprehensive education with better educational outcomes.

There was found to be a substantial difference in the satisfaction with teachers between the parents that showed a great perception of teachers, and those who were clearly dissatisfied. The results of interviews indicated that there was greater dependence on teachers in small schools because the number of them is lower.

In a school with many teachers if some of them is bad professional does not influence as much as here where we are only two teachers [I6. Head teacher CRA. 26/05/2016].

**Table 3.**

*Satisfaction with colleague relationships*

	Frequency	Valid %
High	56	44.8
Medium	56	44.8
Low	13	10.4
Total	125	100.0

Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools in Castilla y León.

**Table 4.**

*Personal relationship with colleagues.*

	Frequency	Valid %
First order problem	29	23.2
Secondary problem	25	20.0
It is no problem	67	53.6
No reply	4	3.2
Total	125	100.0

Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools in Castilla y León

On the other hand, while Table 3 revealed higher values of satisfaction with colleague relationships, in the Table 4 there is evidence that for 43.2 per cent of the rural head teachers of Castilla y León, the personal relationship with their colleagues involves a problem. This is probably because in the CRA (quite common in Castilla y León), there are several scholar units in different villages, and their teachers hardly ever see each other.

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It is important to mention that the data collected in the survey 1 for rural schools in Spain were quite similar to those collected in Castilla y León. However, interviews showed some differences between different regions in terms of closure of schools or needs.

#### *Discipline and coexistence*

Table 5 shows the results of the analysis about satisfaction with the relationship with students for rural and urban teachers.

**Table 5.**

*Comparison of the satisfaction of rural and urban teachers with student relationships.*

	<b>Rural N = 100</b>	<b>Urban N = 400</b>
	<b>Valid %</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
High	64.8	37.1
Medium	34.4	49.6
Low	0.8	11.3
Null		0.3
No reply		1.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 1. Rural and urban teachers.

The data confirmed that rural teachers are more satisfied with student relationships than urban ones.

#### *Participation of social stakeholders*

The rural context seems to enhance relationships between all educational actors. Two points of view can be deduced from the interviews.

**Table 6.**

*Fathers and Mothers Association (AMPA)*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
It represents the genuine participation of families and the environment in the management of a public service	6	4.8
It is quite representative of parents and addresses their concerns and interests	48	38.4
It is not very representative of the parents, directed by a little group with free time and very worried about their children	51	40.8
It does not exist	17	13.6
No reply	3	2.4
Total	125	100.0

Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools in Castilla y León.

While in some rural schools 100 per cent of the families are involved in the Fathers and Mothers Association, there are other rural schools without these associations (13.6%) in Castilla y León. When they exist, 38.4 per cent of the respondents felt a good appreciation and 40.8 per cent of teachers did not. Data in Spain (survey 1) suggested a more optimistic view of the parents' associations, while case studies showed differences related to the size of the population in which schools were located. It was found a positive correlation between larger populations and stronger and more effective associations.

The interviews of educational stakeholders suggested that mutual understanding in rural schools had a strong influence on participation or non-participation of parents and on the relationships between teachers and parents. In short, the communication between pupils and teachers is more fluid, while that produced between teachers and parents depends on whether the school is located in the municipality of residence of the family or not.

**Table 7.**

*Lack of support from families*

	Frequency	Valid %
First order problem	64	51.2
Secondary problem	30	24.0
It is not a problem	30	24.0
No reply	1	0.8
Total	125	100.0

Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools in Castilla y León.

However, Table 7 offers unexpected data. For more than one-half of surveyed head-teachers in Castilla y León, the lack of support from families constitutes a first order problem. Perhaps in small schools the relationship between parents and teachers is closer, but that does not necessarily mean that from a scholar point of view there was coordination between them.

**Needs in rural schools**

Despite the optimistic and fighting tendency found in the interviews, the rural schools in Spain still have many unmet needs.

The traditional image of rural schools is associated with poor infrastructure and lack of resources. In the survey, of head teachers in rural schools, they were asked about the main trouble at schools. Table 8 summarises the main problems identified at schools regarding the indicators considered in the analysis.

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**Table 8.**

*Main problem at school*

		Frequency	Valid %
<b>Resources</b>	Infrastructure	10	8
	Material	6	4.8
	Human	5	4
	Financial	5	4
<b>Families</b>	Low communication	4	3.2
	Low participation	3	2.4
<b>Students</b>	Low number	11	8.8
	Low motivation	10	8
	Few students at the same level	3	2.4
	Immigrants	3	2.4
<b>Teachers</b>	Socialization	2	1.6
	Absent of comradeship	7	5.6
	Absent of interest	5	4
	Instability of teachers team	5	4
	Transport	4	3.2
<b>Rural characteristics</b>	Isolation	3	2.4
	Neglect of Rural Schools	7	5.6
	Distance from urban areas and access to resources	7	5.6
	Multilevel	7	5.6
	Geographical dispersion/ depopulation	7	5.6
	School transport	1	0.8
	Poor innovation	1	0.8
	Treatment of publishing house to rural areas	1	0.8
	Extracurricular activities	1	0.8
	Relationship with council	1	0.8
<b>No reply</b>		6	4.8
<b>Total</b>		125	100.0

Source: Survey 2. Head teachers of rural schools in Castilla y León.

The main problem in rural schools in Castilla y León would be due to rural characteristics. The head teachers identified many problems, especially infrastructures, small number of students and their low motivation. The traditional complaint about poor resources does not have the same role as years ago. It is important to note that Castilla y León was a very significant region for movements of parents and teachers mobilized in the 1980s against student transportation. This situation seems to have been overcome.

Moreover, the results of the interviews showed other needs to be tackled in Spanish rural schools:

1. Greater attention during the stage of 0-3 years old, the most overlooked in rural areas in the view of many of the teachers interviewed.
2. Teacher stability. Some head teachers mentioned two or three teachers per academic year in some schools.
3. Support for the management teams, especially in the CRAs, where there are more tasks distributed in several municipalities.
4. University education appropriate to the characteristics of rural schools, often the first destination for new teachers
5. Increasing the supply of cultural and extracurricular activities for students in smaller schools

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Some of the smaller villages in Spain are in danger of disappearing, their schools too. Qualitative and quantitative data confirm this estimation.

The main problem is the number of pupils. Without pupils, the schools will closure. Some of the son of the inhabitants of the village go to schools in the city or in bigger villages. [I40 Teacher CRA. May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016]

**Table 9.**

*Number of students in the last five years*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
Increase of more than 1/3	6	6.0
Increase of less than 1/3	4	4.0
Constant	26	26.0
Decrease of more than 1/3	17	17.0
Decrease of less than 1/3	42	42.0
No reply	5	5.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Survey 1. Rural schools

Table 9 shows differences based on the type of school: while CRAs continue losing students, the tendency in secondary schools was considered evolutionary stable. Interviews verified these two realities:

In our school, we maintain the number of pupils but it is true than in some CRA placed in nearby villages, the teachers are worried about that. [I12. Head teacher Secondary rural school. October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015].

**Table 10.**

*Agreement with school closing*



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	Frequency	Valid %
Yes	3	3,0
No	93	93,0
No reply	4	4,0
Total	100	100,0

Source: Survey 1. Rural schools

Thus, 93 per cent of the respondents were opposed to closing the school where they worked, against a small percentage of 3 per cent in favour of closing it (Table 10). The four head teachers favourable to the closure of their schools worked in CRA or in unitary schools.

**Table 11.**

*The future of rural schools in ten years.*

	Frequency	Valid %
<b>Similar to the current situation</b>	29	29,0
<b>Manny CRAs will disappear</b>	53	53,0
<b>Maybe new initiative such as the internet connection will allow new educational practices</b>	14	14,0
<b>No reply</b>	4	4,0
<b>Total</b>	100	100,0

Source: Survey 1. Rural schools

Analysis of the question related to the future of rural schools within 10 years showed that the 53 per cent thought that many CRAs would disappear, while 29 per cent believed that the situation would be similar and only 14 per cent trusted in new initiatives such as telematic projects.

However, the teachers interviewed see new technologies as a mechanism for reducing differences between rural and urban schools. Generally speaking, innovation using ICT was seen such a good way to overcome some limitations of rural schools.

## Conclusions

This article presents the evolution that schools have followed in rural areas in Spain. This overview allows demystification of some false beliefs about rural schools that no longer exists because of evolution and other features and challenges. More specifically, some assertions can be identified.

The changes of rural schools in Spain in the past few years provide a strong reason to review the original concept of the rural school. The concept of New Rurality provides appropriate parameters to understand rural areas of the XXI century. There are heterogeneous realities depending on the degree of incorporation of the elements that have changed the rural reality. We observed a significant relation between teacher's satisfaction and size of the village. This variable has also been considered as influential in aspects such as academic and job expectations (Lacruz, Cebrián & Fernández, 2017).

In recent years, the demographic, social and economic changes produced affect the rural communities, especially the schools. Therefore, it is necessary to replace the conventional way in which they are considered. Distance between rural and urban schools in terms of equipment and educational quality (some of the main problems pointed by studies decades ago) have decreased.

Rural education in Spain has been significantly improved in the recent years (Barajas, Boix, & Silvestre, 2007). According to Boix (2004) there are still clear needs to be tackled but the decentralization of the educational system has allowed to regional governments to developed educational structures and services adjusted to the needs of their rural schools. Despite these significant improvements, we have founded that the rural schools in Spain still have needs to be covered, although many of them are different from those described in the literature of few decades ago.

Several authors are interested in knowing the advantages and disadvantages of schools in rural areas (Boix, 2004; Feu Gelis, 2003; Llevot & Garreta, 2008; Jaime, 1998). This paper has founded other aspects not explored such as the value associated with these schools or their bureaucratization. Schools in small villages have a greater symbolic value than a real one, probably because their inhabitants have internalized the need of mobility. However, qualitative information derived from parents in rural areas showed high levels of satisfaction.

Moreover, the small rural schools are more bureaucratic than the urban ones, and that gives greater power to the teachers. This implies a greater risk because the quality of the schools is overly dependent on the quality of their teachers.

Two great challenges arise from this study. On the one hand, improvement is needed in the training of new didactic approaches, the use of ICT in the classroom and dealing with diversity. On the other hand, rural schools often are temporary destinations because many teachers prefer urban schools, which are closer to their place of residence. The second has to do with the need of

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rural schools to be re-thought as embedded within the actual society and its features to ensure equal opportunities between rural and urban citizens. Despite these significant improvements, we founded that the rural schools in Spain still needs to be highlighted.

Some limitations inherent in rural schools can be turned into advantages. The low number of pupils, often considered as a problem (Llevot & Garreta, 2008) allow a personalized education. However, the study of Olivares and Tomás (2017) revealed that in Spanish rural schools studied, despite the lower number of students a daily assessment is favourable; it does not always have the character of formative assessment. In fact, it is usually more focused on the results than in the process. This is a clear example of not taking advantage of the characteristics of small rural schools.

As Garcia Cantó, Peñalver Rojo, Rodríguez Castells, De Juan Cebollada & Navalpotro Pérez (2008) argued it is possible to affirm, according to interviews, that rural schools have fewer discipline problems than urban ones. On the other hand, the coexistence of different ages and levels promotes flexible working groups, as pointed Feu Gelis (2003). This methodology benefits valued strategies in today's knowledge society.

The access to services and resources, and less possibilities of working in-group with colleagues are still aspects to improve. ICT tools can be a good opportunity for bridging the gap between rural and urban schools (Frossard, Trifonova, Geis, Moya I Altisent, & Barajas, 2010). The School 2.0 Program has been important in terms of resources and infrastructures, but better technical assistance and maintenance of equipment is still needed (Del Moral Pérez, Villalustre Martínez, & Neira Piñeiro, 2014a).

Recent empirical researches have shown that rural communities endowed with a rich stock of social capital, are in a stronger position to implement successful development projects (Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas, 2009; Lopolito, Nardone, & Sisto, 2011; Trigilia, 2001; Woodhouse, 2006).

Hence, despite the changes showed, school in rural areas continue having specific limitations (although they have changed over the years) and being forgotten by administrations. Therefore, it is still necessary that for the different social actors involved in them, to continue to work towards

effective equality of opportunities between rural and urban schools. This is the final purpose of this article.

## **Discussion**

In order to improve some of the needs described, new strategies are needed. Some educative actors pointed to the need to increase communication (personal and virtual), and project these schools toward the exterior, but the question is: Are all educational stakeholders willing to make the necessary efforts?

This paper show the deep evolution of rural schools in Spain, linked to the changes of rural populations. According to Holling (2001), the panarchy could be a good system to combine the social and ecological systems, in a sustainable development for rural areas.

Moreover, we have encompassed all the dimensions and sub dimensions of rural schools and we have identified strategies for improving the weaknesses found to incorporate them all, making possible a rural school of the XXI century. We also attempt in this article to understand factors affecting the formation in rural areas. We have applied interviews and surveys to teachers, parents and head teachers to assess their contribution to this type of schools and, subsequently, identify which socioeconomic, social, formative and structural factors are determinants to reduce the difficulties faced by rural areas in education.

Therefore, it is necessary to minimise the limitations mentioned in the article directed to get a rural inclusive school. Several studies showed virtual communities as the key to the problems described (Frossard, Trifonova, & Barajas, 2010), but will it be enough?

Recent works related to that (Del Moral Pérez, Villalustre Martínez, & Neira Piñeiro, 2014b; Álvarez-Álvarez, & Vejo-Sainz, 2017) considered the innovation based on ICT a good strategy to mitigate the isolation in rural schools. Our data confirm this hypothesis although we have found great differences between rural schools.

All in all, the rural schools of the last century have disappeared. The deep educational development in Spanish has blurred many features that have pigeonholed rural schools for years. Looming future seems to point to greater equality between rural and urban schools.

Rural schools took over the job of promoting equal opportunities for rural inhabitants. Some of its main characteristics have changed (transportation problems, resources), others are still a

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reality (low number of students, isolation) while others emerge (value more symbolic than real in the community, its bureaucracy). Despite the changes mentioned above, in essence, the rural schools still have important social and educational functions to cover.

We believe this research significantly contributes to the otherwise empirical literature from the sociological point of view, since it aids in constructing a more comprehensive rural school that takes into account the multidimensional, and contextual features linked to it proposed by the New Rurality.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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