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## School in and Linked to Rural Territory: Teaching Practices in Connection with the Context from an Ethnographic Study

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### Abstract

In contexts where social, political, and educational decisions are driven by globalisation, the sustainability and maintenance of rural communities are put at risk. Schools located in rural territories, through their educational practices in connection with the social and cultural context, can promote rootedness and favour sustainability. In this sense, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the knowledge about the role played by schools located in rural areas. Specifically, the aim of the study is to identify which educational practices take place based on the relationship with the context. This paper presents findings from an ongoing in-depth ethnographic study carried out in three small rural schools in the Aragón region of Spain. The study is conducted through semi-structured interviews that are complemented with informal conversations. The results show, on the one hand, that practices in relation to the environment are presented as a naturally occurring resource that facilitate the inclusion of values, traditions, and cultures within the curriculum. Additionally, on the other hand, that through these practices the value of place goes beyond the word 'place', encompassing within itself, the relationships and interactions established within the community. Thus, this study highlights the need for educational policies that make it possible to address the particularities of schools, through a flexible and open curriculum based on community opportunities and context-based learning.

**Keywords:** *small rural school, place-based learning, community, ethnography, teaching practices*

### Introduction and Research Significance

At the present time, major transformations are taking place that have to do with a new political, economic, and social landscape and order. There is a context of globalisation, technological development, and geographic mobility (Gu, 2021). Moreover, we are at a time of extreme concern for economic development. Competitiveness, performance evaluation, and decentralisation have been described as a means to improve inclusion, quality, and efficiency by providing a good service at a lower cost (Beach, 2017). The education system, and therefore schools, do not escape the influence of economic development (Bourdieu, 1986; Massey, 2012). Indeed, schools often suffer the consequences of the implementation of global policies, which see schools as market objects subject to economic profitability (Beach & Öhrn, 2019; Beach & Vigo-Arazola, 2020).

Rural communities across Europe are currently facing major economic and social challenges because of the implementation of globalist policies. The space where community evolves at different levels—social, economic and cultural—is referred to as territory (Massey, 2012). The decisions taken by the governments, national and local, jeopardise the sustainability the rural territories by promoting an exodus to urban areas (Lethonen, 2021) indirectly causing the closure of schools, which is an international trend (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Villa & Knutas, 2020) and a factor for depopulation (Lethonen, 2021). School closure often includes discussions and debates about the function of the school, the meaning of the school, and the future of the local community (Villa & Knutas, 2020) and forces local communities throughout Europe to fight for their schools (Amcoff, 2012).

In Spain, school closure has been part of our history since 1970 when the National Government rebuilt the educational system forcing the creation of school groups, which meant the closure of the smallest village schools with fewest pupils (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). This had a direct impact on depopulation, roots, and the maintenance of local culture (Gristy et al., 2020). On the other hand, we are currently at a time of concern on the part of the political classes about depopulation and school closures, which, in many cases, is an electoral strategy (Abós Olivares, 2020). There is a strong movement in favour of ‘Empty Spain’, a term coined in 2018 to refer to those regions that suffered massive emigrations in the 1950s and 1960s and are depopulated or in the process of depopulated. However, there is no coherence between the policies implemented and the political, social, and educational discourses in favour of the rural territory. In the educational field, there is beginning to be recognition of the pedagogical value of rural schools, which in many cases is a ‘pull effect’ for families seeking a new pedagogical option for their children in rural areas (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020).

In view of the context presented, the role played by the school in the maintenance of the village and the rural territory is emphasised (Tieken, 2014). Schools located in rural areas can be the backbone (everything depends on them) of the territory, but rural schools cannot be approached from a discursive mantra in which rural schools are the heart (everything is connected to them) of the community (Bagley & Hillard, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009). This fact leads us to propose a study that values the particularity of each context, freeing us from this generalised and reductionist idea. We focus on the study of teaching practices, away from the performativity, that enhance the relationship with the environment with the aim of developing a sense of belonging in the fight against depopulation. Thus, in this article, I explore how these teaching practices take place and how local and school culture is valued and reproduced through them; considering and valuing the voices of the participants, families, teachers, and students, as well as political and administrative representatives.

### **Rural Schools: Policies and Discourses**

Numerous studies have highlighted the pedagogical value of schools located in rural areas, as they are identified as schools where social capital and local culture is rebuilt and reproduced through collaboration, participation, and cooperation between the community and the school (Reading et al., 2019). In this sense, school closure is understood as a threat, not only to the school, but also to the community and the locality (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). This leads us to highlight different policies that influence rural schools and explain how these policies are based on a mercantilist and metrocentric approach, framed by a discourse that contrasts the rural to the urban.

People who live in rural areas are affected by a huge number of policies such as education, health, transport, justice, welfare, housing, agriculture, among others (Villa & Knutas,

2020). In Spain, there is a national right that is recognised to guarantee equal opportunities and equity. Despite this, depopulation and the difficult consolidation of basic public services are a general trend and a reality. Analysing Spanish rural areas from Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory, demonstrates the influence that the economy has. In rural areas the economic development is lower and employment opportunities are fewer than in urban areas, causing population movements from rural to urban areas (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). Rural schools are often impacted by market decisions, particularly in today's world where there are several arguments that highlight the non-viability of small schools, which are viewed in terms of cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and public spending (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). In this context, principles such as equality of opportunity and equity remain in the background. In other words, their maintenance and sustainability depend on a market perspective (Beach, 2017; Gill, 2017).

Linked to this argument, local administrations give greater support to schools located in urban environments. This trend has been going on since industrialisation when governments promoted urban development and encouraged the closure of rural schools, a situation which, as we have seen, is still taking place today (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). A clear example of the invisibility of rural schools in Spain is that there is no reference in the legislation to rural schools, which means that the particularities and idiosyncrasies of these territories and the schools located in them, are not considered (Abós Olivares, 2020).

In this context, the policies seem to ignore important features of the social and cultural situation of the population, or more specifically, the relationship between socio-spatial location, its representation, and the formation of differentiated identities (Öhrn, 2012). Thus, the curriculum promoted is not flexible and does not allow it to be adapted to each of the educational realities (Solstad & Karlberg-Granlund, 2020; Villa et al., 2021).

This metrocentric vision has an influence on how rural schools are defined and understood (Gristy et al., 2020). Traditionally, they have been not only defined, but also organised, from an urban perspective through the creation of 'clusters' or 'grouped schools' – organisational systems that allow for the extrapolation of urban organisation to the rural environment (Hargreaves, 2017; Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020). In several countries in the study carried out by Hargreaves et al. (2009), it can be observed that there is a persistent political bias towards rural schools, due to a predominantly restrictive and centrist perspective, that causes education to be defined and categorised depending on its territorial location and from the classic characteristics and formats derived from the school with students organised into grades based on age or level (Uttech, 2001).

To this, we must add that the rural context is seen in many cases as a backward and marginal place, as opposed to the urban which is presented as a source of innovation and economic dynamism (Shucksmith, 2019). In this context, the rural school has traditionally been presented as a problematic school, with few resources and poor educational results (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020) defined as a fourth-rate school (denigrated as having low educational quality) and from the stigmatization categorising small rural schools as being of 'special difficulty' in the case of Spain (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2020).

### **The Role Played: Theoretical Framework**

The role of the school in the rural territory is approached in this study from a theoretical framework based on Massey's (2012) theory of spaces and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital.

Massey (2012) interprets space as a social product, in permanent construction and formed from the relationships and interrelationships of the agents that intervene in it and from the experiences lived (Gristy et al., 2020; Massey, 2012). The school from this approach is, therefore, conceived as a space and a social product in which barriers between the 'inside' and the 'outside' are broken down promoting the maintenance of social capital (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Bagley & Hillyard, 2011) and where participation, cooperation, and the reconstruction of local culture and history take place (Villa & Knutas, 2020). In this sense, the school not only plays an educational role, but also plays a role as an enhancer of social and cultural capital, responding to local needs. The actions developed by educational agents in the social context of the locality foster a sense of belonging, rootedness, and identity resulting from the close relationship with the space and among the educational community (Massey, 2012).

Correspondingly, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital reinforces the idea that space is shaped by a dialectical relationship in which the sense of identity is constructed; local culture, sharing, and valuing is at the same time different and heterogeneous. The only way, therefore, to produce social capital is through community action; "*capital is the product of interaction in the community, and cannot be produced by an individual, nor can it be produced by the community itself*" (Bolívar, 2006, p.39). Social capital is, therefore, related to the capacity to establish networks of social relations in and with the environment, which is the focus of this study.

### **Research Aims**

The rural school linked to the social and cultural context is interpreted in this study as a naturally occurring resource that is closely related to the teaching practices that take place in these schools and to the meanings of the development of these practices. These are related to three main aspects: the origin of the teaching practices linked to the context, the different types of practices that take place, and finally, the social relations that are established in the rural school that make up the social and cultural capital and help the knowledge and maintenance of the same. Thus, the objective of the study is to discover what teaching practices take place in rural schools linked to their contexts. In the study, I worked from the premise that the development of teaching practices linked to the context can offer new opportunities for the development of local culture and contribute to the maintenance of the rural school. Our research questions were:

*What are the context-linked teaching practices carried out in different rural schools?*

*What has been the origin of these practices? Do they respond to a need?*

This paper reports on a study, conducted in three small rural schools, which examines the role played by small rural schools and teaching practices which value social and cultural capital to promote links with the context (social and cultural). The aims were (1) to identify which teaching practises based on the relationship with the context take place and how these could contribute to the sustainability of the territory and the local culture, (2) to understand the origins of the place-based learning, and (3) to understand the experience and perception of participants (families, students, and teachers) about these practices.

### **Research Methods**

The study presented here is part of a two-phase in-depth ethnographic research project on rural schools that addresses creative teaching practices linked to the context through digital media. From the methodological point of view, the first phase of the ethnographic method was the exploratory collection and analysis of information in small rural schools. In this phase, it was of interest to investigate the rural school, its policies, and discourses, to

arrive at its meanings, as well as its relationship with the cultural and social context. The second phase of the ethnographic method was an ethnographic study of some of three of the schools involved in the first phase.

In line with the proposal and aims presented, the study was developed within the framework of qualitative research and specifically from the use of ethnography. Ethnography was selected due to my interest in understanding the participants' experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). In addition, my study focused on social reality, and this enabled me to look for the meaning of the action that took place in this reality. More specifically, the study was carried out through critical ethnography because the critical perspective emphasizes the possibility of mutual transformation through dialogue and the research process (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021). This created a space of power for those being researched, which implies a co-learning, as well as an opportunity to generate reflexivity and develop a process of rethinking the practices carried out (Maisuria & Beach, 2017).

Considering the importance of place, as addressed in the theoretical framework (Massey, 2012), the study was multi-sited which meant that the educational analysis was well attuned to the nuances of place. In an educational context that is defined by a metrocentric approach the sense of space from a methodological point of view can be lost. Metrocentrism 'traps' rural places, their agents, and their identities in broader structural narratives that do not always fully fit the rural context (Corbett, 2015). Thus, this multi-sited study emphasises the importance of space and place in analysing each educational reality from a contextual perspective.

With the aim of knowing which place-based practices occur in schools located in the rural territory, I used qualitative research techniques that allowed me to understand events, listen to the participants, ask questions, and collect documents from schools. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rethinking of the use of global networking and technologies as part of the ethnographic approach (Westman & McDougall, 2019) and encouraged me to consider the online and offline context. Semi-structured interviews, in virtual and face-to-face contexts, were complemented by informal conversations and document review. The interviews and informal conversations were recorded, transcribed, and checked by the participants (families and teachers). I took this action to boost an active role for participants, giving them voice (Denzin, 2018) and promoting a deep process of reflexivity (Maisuria & Beach, 2017) which was dealt with in different meetings between the schools and researchers.

## Research Scenario

### Context

The context of this study was rural schools in the Aragón region, in northern Spain. Aragón is an autonomous community made up of three provinces, where 97% of the total territory is rural and the capital city, Zaragoza, has 51% of the total population (Instituto Aragonés de Estadística, IAEST). The findings reported here are from three of those schools.

In relation to education, it is significant that 45% of primary schools in the region of Aragón are in rural areas, a total of 136 rural schools of different types (Abós Olivares, 2020). Specifically, there are 74 grouped schools, 53 schools with less than nine units<sup>1</sup>, and nine unitary schools. A unitary school is a school which one multi-grade group of students with

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<sup>1</sup> Schools with less than 9 units are those which have less than 9 multi-grade groups, are unique in the locality and embrace the full diversity of the population (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014).

just one teacher. The territory in this region is predominantly rural, although there is a strong urban movement and rural depopulation. For this reason, it is a “*fragile and unstructured rural area*” (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020, p. 177).

Moreover, there is the situation of migratory mobility that is having a great impact on the rural context. A large number of migrants have seen the rural territory as an opportunity for work, social and life opportunities. This has led to a high percentage of immigrants in the population, a situation that has an impact on schools, presenting the rural territory with a diversity of origins and cultures (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2020).

### ***Selection and Access to the Field***

From the data provided about the rural territory, it is possible to see that rural schools are a reality of our educational system. The selection of the schools was carried out through a non-probabilistic technique of the accidental type, specifically a ‘snowball type’ (Taylor & Bodgan, 1994). Access to the field is a delicate process where respect for the participants is a priority and even more so in times when COVID-19 is part of the reality. For this reason, access to the field was by mutual consensus, guaranteeing the health measures determined by each centre. An informed consent form was also provided to the participants with the objective of guaranteeing anonymity and ethical treatment of the data provided.

Access was first made through email and telephone calls that later allowed a first meeting to be held online through various platforms. Once this meeting was held, another meeting was offered at the centre where families and teachers were informed of the research process, thus ensuring ethical aspects of access and data collection.

The selection of participants was also guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were drawn from the literature review on rural schools. Given the invisibility to which small, rural schools are subjected and the lack of research in these contexts, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were chosen:

- *Being a rural school of less than 9 units (inclusion criteria).*
- *Not being a grouped rural school or a cluster (exclusion criteria).*

Considering the purpose and the specific objective of the study, the knowledge of practices in relation to the social, cultural, and natural context was key. This determined the establishment of another criterion for inclusion and exclusion:

- *Developing active pedagogies (inclusion criteria).*
- *Consideration of the local population and families (inclusion criteria).*
- *Pedagogy primarily based on textbooks (exclusion criteria).*
- *Not considering social and community participation (exclusion criteria).*

*Small Rural School I* was a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the province of Zaragoza, and very close to the capital. The population of the locality showed great heterogeneity, there was a high percentage of immigrant population, around 40% (Instituto Aragonés de Estadística, IAEST), and this was also reflected in the school. There were 39 pupils organized in three classrooms: two in primary education and one in infant education. There was a total of four teachers and only two of them are permanent. The rest of the staff changed every school year, which was one of the biggest difficulties faced by the school. The school’s education plan considered families and the local population as the backbone of its teaching practices. Other areas of interest in its practices were information and communication technologies, the natural environment, and coexistence among equals. Although the rural areas have been represented in Spain as

troubled, this school had not only been awarded several prizes by the education authorities for the educational innovation of its teaching practices, but it had also been recognised nationally as a Changemaker School, aspiring to create a world where all children are empathetic leaders, within the national agency of education.

*Small Rural School II* was a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the province of Huesca in the Pyrenees mountains. The town was the result of a repopulation movement that began in 2015 and the creation of the school was due to the desire of the families to give their children an education rooted in the village. The village had 49 inhabitants and the school had 31 students organized in two multi-grade groups. There were three teachers; two of them lived in the village and the third was a peripatetic teacher who was in charge of teaching specific areas such as English and Physical Education. The school defined itself as a rural learning community and focused its practices on the relationship with the environment, experimentation, and community relations.

*Rural school III* was also a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the Pyrenees in the province of Huesca. It was a school that was opened in 1940 due to the construction of the railway line. At the time of this project, it was immersed in a process of depopulation; there were only four inhabited houses with only one of them providing students to the school, specifically only one student is local out of a total of 16. The rest of the students come from villages repopulated between 2015 and 2020. The families of these villages had seen in this school an educational opportunity for their children as the pedagogical focus of the school is the participation of families, the rhythms of learning, the free expression of the students, and the natural and social environment. The pupils were distributed in two multi-grade classrooms, one for infant education and the other for primary education. There were two teachers, one for each of the groups. In addition, there was another teacher who oversaw other areas. It should be noted that this teacher taught the local language, which was in the process of being re-established.

Table 1 defines the three schools participating in the study: location, number of pupils, school typology, and defining characteristics.

**Table 1: Participating Schools**

School	Localization	Number of Students	Characteristics
Small Rural School I	Village closed to Zaragoza capital city	39 (three classes)	Cultural diversity 30% foreign immigrants: Morocco Low socio-economic level Special need students
Small Rural School II	Village in the mountains	31 (two classes)	Local population New school created by families Educative community
Small Rural School III	Village in the mountains	16 students (two class)	Local population Medium socio-economic level Special need student

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As a multi-site ethnographic study, this enabled the analysis of the information through different aspects of different realities (Massey, 2012). The ethnographic data collection reported in this paper took place over a period of the first six months of a planned ten

months, and was organised according to the theoretical framework and the review of previous studies. The data was collected by semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Specifically, to complete empirical data collection, face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight families and 12 teachers, of which two were head teachers, and two government (one local and one regional) representatives. They were asked about the situation of the rural school in the community, how they understood the rural school, and the teaching practices in these contexts. These interviews were conducted as informal conversations during our stay in the field, including being held in classrooms for parents at the school to make the interviewees feel comfortable. In the interviews, I was open to asking additional questions related to the subject as well as following an interview guide.

**Table 2: Semi-structured Interviews**

Participants	Number of participants	Semi-structured Interviews
Families	8	9
Teachers	12	16
Government representatives	2	6
Total	22	31

There were also, informal conversations that took place throughout these months through sporadic visits to schools with teachers, families, and students. A total of 11 visits were made to the different schools. These informal conversations were focused on gaining in-depth knowledge about the practices and the environment. These were recorded in a field diary, where the perceptions of the participants and the researcher were also recorded.

The main areas of interest that emerged were directly related to the study objective. The reading of the data collected through the field diary, interviews and informal conversations, as well as the subsequent rereading of the same, allowed the emergence of categories. These categories were also defined based on the review of the previous research and studies that allowed the organisation and regrouping of aspects within these categories, establishing a relationship between them. This categorisation process was based on the practices are carried out in these schools, in connection with the context and how the participants felt about these practices. This inductive analysis of the data was carried out through the formation of categories as part of the ethnographic method. My intention was to find out what teaching practices take place in small rural schools as well as why and how they take place. This included a review of how these practices were experienced by the participants. Furthermore, I aimed for an in-depth and critically reflexive analysis to reach the critical perspective within the ethnographic method.

As the review of the theoretical framework has shown, space and context do not only imply something on a physical level, but social relations and culture play a major role in shaping the context. In this sense, the following aspects were extracted as aspects of interest: the natural context, the cultural context, and the social context which are complemented with indicators that were the result of the entries and exits to the schools and of a deep process of reflection and shared work with the participants.

For this, the information was returned to the participants through informal conversations and reports. Feedback, from this process, about the information collected was then incorporated into the data analysis process itself, as recommended by Cerletti (2013). The exchange of information between the researcher and participants fostered a process of

reflection for both. Such benefits have also been observed by other researchers (Maisuria & Beach, 2017). The participants reflected on their own practices and the researcher was critical of the information collected. This process, in addition to being a fundamental element of the collection and analysis of data, is also a way of validating the data collected (Arrazola, 2019).

To summarise, the information gathered during the six months of fieldwork was cross-checked from different approaches. Firstly, by comparing the information provided by the participants and by contrasting this information with previous studies. Secondly, the information was fed back to the participants, analysing whether the information obtained corresponds to reality and their perceptions. Such an approach is recommended by Walford (2009). Thus, the information gathered through the stay in the field and the relationships with the participants, as well as the review of existing research, reinforced a process of triangulation which is fundamental to generate verification and validity to the research.

Table 3 shows the core areas of interest and the items that guided the analysis of the information.

**Table 3: Data Analysis**

Valuing rural schools		
Families	Place where they live	Transmission of local culture
		Development of social capital
Teachers		Bonding
		Participation and engagement
Teaching Practices related to the context		
	Cultural context	Social context
	Local culture	Participation
	Creating school culture	Families' involvement
	Cultural aspects in the curriculum	Community engagement

### Ethnography Findings and Discussion

The context described and the collection of information led to investigation of what pedagogical practices occur in small rural schools, with the aim of fostering a sense of rootedness, belonging and identity, considering the particularity of the contexts and schools. Specifically, the study focused on pedagogical practices that move away from performativity, valuing practices that are based on the needs of each context. Here the results are presented with discussion to offer a global and reflexive vision of the aspects studied.

#### **The Rural School as a hub in the Locality**

Rural schools are more likely to be vital to the social and economic network and sustainability of their local community (Barley & Beesley, 2007). However, “the idea that small schools, especially rural, are the ‘hub’ of the community with a readymade bounty of social capital is contextual and contestable” (Hargreaves, 2009, p.123). A critical point is that it cannot be assumed that the rural school in general is the backbone of the territory or the heart of the community. In this multi-site study, in which the identity of each school and its idiosyncrasies are understood, it would be a mistake to fall into generalizations. As Bagley

and Hillyard (2011) indicate, it is important to consider the particularity of space and contexts.

It is therefore not possible to generalize, either in terms of the structure of the territory or in terms of family-community relations. However, in certain social contexts, as in the case of Rural School II, where local schooling seemed to reinforce identification with a community, “*informal conversations between teachers and with families can be a form of network and bond building*” (Woods, 2006, p.587). In this school, the sense of belonging was very visible among families and students. These showed the important relationship of inclusion that existed between members of the locality linked to their space and the living conditions they experience (Massey, 2012). So, this school building can facilitate the introduction of local culture and social capital within the school in a natural and consensual way with the community.

*Teachers are also members of our community; they are also families of the school. This indirectly makes the community and our sense of belonging, even of responsibility for what has been created, part of the school and present in the pupils (Father, Small Rural School III).*

In other contexts, as in the case of Small Rural School III, the situation was very different. The fact that the pupils attending the school were from different communities and the teachers were also from different communities made it difficult for the school to foster a sense of community and belonging (Solanilla & Arrazola, 2020). “*This may be one of the great limitations we have. That it is very difficult for students to feel part of the centre and, therefore, their families*” (Teacher, Small Rural School III).

However, as the Headteacher pointed out:

*There is a feeling of belonging to each of the villages, especially in the repopulated villages, as these are projects that have been motivated and led by the families themselves, who pass on their own history and experiences to their children (Headteacher, Small Rural School III).*

In the case of Small Rural School I, the fact that the pupils came from different origins and cultures, with a high percentage of immigrant population, was a challenge and at the same time an opportunity, as the Headteacher of the school pointed out.

*We always talk about the local population and immigrant population, but many of the pupils are local, they were born and raised here, although their culture is different. Their cultures enrich our culture, not only that of the village but also that of the school. It gives us the opportunity to come up with teaching practices based on their interests and we listen to what they want to study. Often these are things that are specific to each culture, and that is always a richness for us (Headteacher, Small Rural School I).*

However, despite the school’s efforts, community building and the development of a sense of identity was more diffuse. “*We do not achieve community togetherness outside the school*” (Headteacher, Small Rural School I). In many cases, the participation of families, listening to their voices, and the inclusion of local culture in the school curriculum does not always guarantee a sense of belonging (Hargreaves, 2009). However, it does promote a feeling of recognition towards the school (Solanilla & Arrazola, 2020).

School and territorial organisation were themes that emerged in the data collection and the data analysis. These appeared in the research and literature review and were confirmed by the participants. However, when it was addressed, it was mainly related to school closures. The relationship between the members of the community and the school was strengthened when the maintenance of the school was under threat. In a globalised market context,

school closure is a fact of life and is emphasized when talking about small rural schools (Hargreaves, 2009; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020).

*We understand that the rural school has to be a backbone and develop identity in order to avoid closure. To do this, it is important that we count on the community and families because if families want to close a school, the school will close (Family, Small Rural School II).*

However, analysis showed the great value of the school for families, the community, and the teachers themselves. This value of the rural school, and of each of the schools by their communities, was an aspect repeatedly recorded and addressed both in the informal conversations and in the semi-structured interviews. In the case of Small Rural School I, the value of the school was recognised not only by the families, but also by the governing bodies of the municipality, which emphasized how the pedagogical development has influenced the visibility of the school. “*The school has done a lot to put the village on the map*” (Government representative, Small Rural School I). Rural School III was a particular example, as the families had been the driving force behind the school. The school was created based on the needs of the pupils and their families.

Both Small Rural Schools I and II have one aspect in common that was highlighted throughout the information gathering process, and that was that teaching staff were part of the locality and lived there. This aspect seemed to have a direct influence on the knowledge of local culture for reflection and transmission in the school, which relates to Massey's (2012) ‘sense’. There, the value of the locality and the relationships generated with the school enabled the development of social capital through the creation of cooperation and collaboration mechanisms (Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020).

In the case of the Small Rural School III, the voices of the families valued the school for its pedagogical sense, but not in relation to the territory. It should be remembered that this school attracted pupils from other localities, some of them repopulated. The families recognised the pedagogical values of this school because of the teaching practices used and reported trying to propose activities to promote knowledge of the cultures of each of the localities.

*The reason why we have pupils from different localities is because the families have seen in our centre a pedagogical model that is in line with their beliefs about how they want to educate their children (Teacher, Small Rural School III).*

Throughout the research, it was seen that the schools appeared to be part of a complex social reality that was interactively influenced through social and media representations. It is noteworthy that, at the same time as schools are seen as an essential aspect of the locality, they are also recognised as different and, in some cases, as disadvantaged due to their location in the territory. This view tends to reinforce exclusion (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2019). Thus, the idea of the fourth-rate school referred to at the beginning of the paper continues to form part of the social imaginary.

### **Teaching Practices Related to the Context**

In the study, I had to start from the particularities of the contexts and places; not all schools are the same, so the way in which they develop their practices will not be the same either (Massey, 2012). In this sense, the results are shown in relation to practices but considering the idiosyncrasies of each locality, community, and school.

The study found that the establishment of educational practices was based on promoting knowledge of local culture that motivated pupils and families. These practices also allowed the school to open itself to the voices of families and the community, favouring the inclusion of culture and weaving networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

One finding of the study was the influence that the place of residence had on the development of cultural teaching practices. This study reinforces the contributions that Matías Solanilla and Vigo-Arrazola (2020) made in their study on participation and rural schools. The fact that teachers or families did not live in the locality where the school was located may make it difficult in some contexts to transmit the local culture. Small Rural School III made use of its environment but did not manage to develop a sense of belonging or local transmission. It was the families who, through their practices, transmitted the culture of each of the localities. The teacher, however, emphasized the value of family participation, which is a vital element in developing school culture.

*A few days ago, a mother came to me and suggested that, as the pupils come from different villages, we could organize days in each of the villages and prepare activities in which each locality would talk about the legends and myths of the area (Teacher, Small Rural School III).*

The voices of pupils and families were valued at school and were listened to because they are the source of cultural transmission, which coincides with the contributions observed by Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste-Gracia (2019).

In the case of the Small Rural School I, although the families did not live in different localities, there was a great cultural heterogeneity. This cultural diversity, although not integrated outside the school, did occur within the school. In this sense, the school acted as the heart of the village, as a place of meeting and understanding. *“We have a great diversity of cultures in the school, but this diversity enriches us and allows us to build our own school culture” (Teacher, Small Rural School I).*

In those schools where teachers lived in the same locality, the value of relationships and interactions indicated a clear inclusive relationship between all of them. This reinforces the results found by Bagley and Hillyard (2011). This had an impact on the practices they carried out and the way they opened the school to the community, as also observed by Hargreaves (2017). Small Rural School II did not have the aspects of cultural diversity, nor did it have those aspects of discontinuity between the place of residence and the school. It valued the transmission of local history and culture by developing practices in partnership with the community. They were agreed by all (families and villagers) in assembly and planned by the teachers.

*This school specifically values the people's own history. The expropriation of the land for the construction of a reservoir, the depopulation and repopulation of the village are the focus of conversations with the families and with the pupils. The pupils are fully aware of their history (Notes Field Diary).*

Thus, there was an appreciation on the part of teachers of the space, context, and history. Teachers emphasized their way of doing and used markers such as culture, language, race, religion or ethnicity. This reinforces similar previous findings (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2019). Additionally, they focused on investigating and discovering the values, beliefs, and customs of families inside and outside the school, thus beyond institutional boundaries. Teachers were found to be particularly engaged in trying to learn about families and their values, situating themselves within the local social context.

*A few years ago, when we saw that there was a large percentage of new students in the school, we decided to start a project for families. The aim was to try to make families from different cultures part of the life of the school. Among some of the activities we proposed to investigate the names of the pupils in order to be able to link them with each of the cultures (Headteacher, Small Rural School I).*

These practices reinforced not only the idea of introducing culture into the curriculum and school dynamics, but also the value that teachers placed on families, as all three schools make constant reference to the need to know their students' families, understand them, and listen to their voices. "If I can't understand the families, how can I make them part of the community" (Small Rural School I)?

Each child's culture also shaped the school culture and was heard through teaching practices that were linked to their immediate environment and that allow for free choice and free expression. "We start from the experiences of the pupils and then approach the elaboration of texts from an approach of freedom" (Teacher, Small Rural School III).

### Conclusion

There is a policy of differentiation between rural schools and urban schools, which favours a metrocentric context that values the urban over the rural, reforming the categorisation and overlapping of some population groups over others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the case of rural schools, it is important to recognise that a metrocentric and negative perception of rural schools is deeply rooted in institutions and in social, political, and educational structures (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2018). Thus, this study highlights the need for educational policies that make it possible to address the particularities of schools, as identified by Massey (2012), through a flexible and open curriculum based on community opportunities and context-based learning. The voices of families, students, and teachers in the rural schools in this study underline the value of the local space, not necessarily from the point of view of territorial structuring, but rather in recognition of its pedagogical value in relation to cultural transmission and social capital.

Finally, it is important to highlight the limitations and implications of this study for the participants themselves. In this sense, a limitation of the study, and at the same time an opportunity for the future, is the need to propose an ethnographic study in which the time spent in the field is reinforced through participant observation (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), which represents the second phase of the study, being carried out over a period of 10 months.

Moreover, the study presents implications for both researchers and participants. Maisuria and Beach (2017) have previously identified that this type of ethnographic research, staying in the field, has implications for both the realities investigated and the researchers themselves. Through my study, it has been possible to see how a process of reflexivity has been opened, not only about their practices, but also about the transmission of culture and social capital, generating a change in teaching practices through a process of rethinking and reconstructing them (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Garcia, 2020). Ethnography is understood here beyond the method itself as holding the potential for transformation (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021).

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