Local Knowledge Integrated in Learning Experiences: The Case of Schools and Communities from Rural Border Regions of the Mainland Portugal

Sofia Marques da Silva
University of Porto, Portugal
sofiamsilva@fpce.up.pt

Abstract

Development, smartness, and equity are often defined through cosmopolitan perspectives. Schools and communities from rural regions in Portugal must develop additional measures to compensate for structural disadvantages. These measures often serve to achieve urban models and standards with which comparisons are made. This article explores rural schools and community leaders' strategies to integrate place-sensitive knowledge into their students' educational experiences. These place-based approaches are developed against the erosion of local knowledge and may contribute to broadening a perspective on development, keeping schooling still accountable to local contexts. This contribution grounds on a national-level study on young people growing up in border regions, their schools, and communities' resilient approaches, and draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with schools' head teachers (N=38) and policymakers from municipalities (N=36). The study took place in all 38 municipalities of Mainland Portugal that border Spain. Findings indicate that the majority of schools and municipalities cooperate to promote the best conditions for students' school success, developing strategies that acknowledge communities as a resource and as curriculum, while meeting national-level demands and students and families' expectations for high performance on national-level standardise exams. Other strategies include the incorporation of local knowledge into various learning experiences, in which students are co-creators and active participants and local-based subjects focus on local sustainability and development, environmental challenges, preserving traditions, heritages, and patrimony. These topics are often explored in the context of citizenship education, non-formal education activities promoted by schools or the community, or in purposeful and structured projects. Although schools from rural border regions recognise the national policy of curriculum flexibility as an opportunity to incorporate local knowledge they do not fully benefit from this opportunity.

Keywords: *rural schools and communities; place-based education; local knowledge; curricular flexibility*

Introduction

In Portugal, there is a saying that "*when a school closes, a village dies*". Schools are a resource for the broader community and the territory, and they are a strategic context to discuss and solve social problems, acting as civic and cultural spaces with implications for local development, community purpose, and sense of belonging (Amiguinho, 2005; Budge, 2010; Schafft, 2016). Although rural schools have been shown to add social, cultural and economic value, and their disappearance may contribute to the decline of regions, a narrative of the role of education as a response to global needs has implications for the expectations of young people and families, and for educational practices that focus on preparation for standardised tests and devalue the role of schools in community development and well-being (Schafft, 2016). In this process, schools came

to be understood as detached from place, which Schafft describes as *"an educational system that is not only less 'accountable' to local places but, in many instances, one that further spurs rural youth out-migration"* (p. 138).

The devaluation of place is part of the contemporary narrative, especially of education policy, which usually refers to the needs of the global economy and the characteristics of the workforce to meet those needs, i.e., to be mobile, and which limits the purpose of schools to the preparation of a global workforce detached from place (Budge, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Peters, 2012). In this scenario, schools are understood as contexts in which students and families are treated as consumers, and a centralised curriculum serves the purpose of producing the most appropriate human capital (Schafft, 2016). The discussion about the value of integrating local/community-based knowledge, in this case very much related to rural knowledge, into the curriculum is relevant when schooling often focuses on academic skills where this knowledge and place sensitivity are undervalued (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009).

The use of the terms place and space deserves comment. In this paper we assume, as others have before us, that place matters (Massey, 1994). Given the debate about space and place, we assume that *"space without human actions and attachments has no significant meaning"* (Timalsina, 2021, p.178). We will use the concept of place as the result of lived experience, the interaction between people and space, cultures and practices impregnated with human meaning and significance (Tuan, 1975). Based on this understanding of place, we will discuss the value of place-based education that considers that place influences individuals' interpretations and worldviews (Timalsina, 2021; Campbell, 2018).

This article examines rural schools and community leaders' strategies to integrate local knowledge into their students' educational experiences, teaching and learning practices, and curricula. This study involved semi-structured interviews with school leaders and policymakers from all 38 municipalities in mainland Portugal that border Spain. We want to address two objectives: first, how local knowledge is used for educational purposes; second, what kind of local knowledge is integrated into educational experiences and curricula. This analysis considers that since 2018 Portuguese schools have had the autonomy to develop up to 25% of the curriculum. This can be an opportunity to promote place-based education and knowledge that connects students to their communities and values their role as responsible citizens. We believe that these regions place additional demands on educational leaders who must be prepared to respond to the specificities of the context and the expectations of educational quality (Halsey & Drummond, 2014). If school and community leaders are conscious of place, they will be more sensitive in deliver policies and practices that address inequalities and promote quality education and youth development.

Curricular Flexibility and Integration: The Portuguese Regional Context

As part of a process of decentralisation of education, Portuguese schools and school clusters are granted autonomy to develop and implement 25% of curricula in the form of local and school-based curricula through Ordinance No 181/2019 of 11 July 2009, regulated by the Decree-Law No. 55/2018 Curricular Flexibility and Autonomy. While this differs from some other countries, such as Finland, where a local curriculum is designed around the national curriculum, which serves as a framework (Autti & Bæck, 2021; Vitikka et al., 2012), this education policy opens the possibility of integrating local knowledge into the core curriculum and achieving its goals and learning outcomes. These measures aim to add another layer of meaning to learning by fostering students' connection to their living ecosystem and local specificities while learning. These goals have been the subject of debate among scholars who see these policies as promoting an inclusive school that can contextualise the standardised curriculum with schools' priorities and redefine the role of the school as a place of decision-making (Leite & Fernandes, 2012). This instrument gives schools the opportunity to develop a project in which they can incorporate local

and site-specific content involving relevant stakeholders such as families, local associations, and municipalities. Schools and communities have the responsibility to independently design part of the curriculum, which is in line with the concept of curricular contextualisation:

> [T]he use of curricular contextualisation is advocated together with the need to adapt curricular contents considering different practices, the development of teaching and learning strategies based on or developed from local, social, cultural, or individual aspects. (Fernandes et al., 2013, p. 422)

Through this consideration of context in the teaching and learning of both the standardised and local curriculum, children and young people are expected to develop high-level competencies that benefit from contextualising knowledge. The development of these competencies considers the social, cultural and economic context in which schools and students are involved.

Although the implicit aim is to strengthen the autonomy of the school community—students, teachers and school leaders—the conditions for managing change and this new level of autonomy are different. Decentralising decision-making to schools can be difficult to manage if some conditions are not guaranteed. For example, the alignment between local priorities and national policy guidelines. A literature review by Jane Preston and colleagues (2014) on the common challenges rural school leaders face explored the difficulties of developing curricula and meeting the needs of the local community. Aware of the challenges of this education reform, the official programme at the State level offered special training for school leaders to provide them with strategies for designing and implementing the project and engaging various stakeholders, such as municipalities. Policymakers were aware of the crucial role of school leaders, a position that is consistent with the OECD (2018) report on the implementation of this policy in Portugal. The report highlights that "*the success of this initiative may depend on a strong and efficient investment in teacher and leadership skills*" (p. 22). Furthermore, if "*schools will need to be designed so that changing is considered an ordinary activity*" (Leithwood et al., 2003, p. 26), school leaders and teachers are key actors in planning future scenarios.

There are several challenges associated with this policy: Aligning examinations at the national level to the "*development of new pedagogies and forms of assessment that promote active learning*" (OECD, 2018, p. 33); negotiating and developing strategies for networking with the community and regional schools; and redesigning the school project and engaging different people from the school and the community for a common goal. In addition to these challenges, schools in vulnerable areas such as border regions and rural areas in mainland Portugal already face structural challenges. Less economically developed, more depopulated, with fewer educational, employment and recreational resources and opportunities, school leaders have several contextual factors in hand that are quickly channelled and felt in the school. Schools and their communities respond differently to these contextual factors. Implementing local curricula through the curricular flexibility agenda has been challenging because it requires changes at the management level of schools as well as knowledge about how to develop curricula to make learning experiences meaningful for students from diverse backgrounds and lifeworlds and to address local needs (Leite & Fernandes, 2012; Leite et al., 2018). Underlying the process of recontextualising and situating the curriculum allows schools and their teachers to take a leadership role. As considered by Leite and colleagues (2018, p. 437):

> Teachers can have an active role in educational change by assuming their part as curriculum makers, namely by designing curriculum processes that are more in line with the characteristics of the contexts in which they teach and of the students being taught.

In this context, research has explored resistance to this form of work on curriculum integration. In the Australian context, for example, authors have pointed out that it is important for teachers to "*reclaim their role as 'curriculum workers', beyond that of 'curriculum delivers'*" (Mockler, 2018, p. 130). Although there are clear limitations to curriculum integration and its recontextualisation

(Leite et al., 2018; Mockler, 2018), particularly because there is a tension between the benefits of this integration and the requirements associated with national examination performance, this is seen as beneficial to students' development as citizens. This tends to be more evident in schools that are necessarily responsive to local needs, such as schools in rural areas and could explain why we find several indicators of place-based education that are part of school and community practices and go beyond the curricular flexibility contained in the 25% of the curriculum. Schools and communities aware of students' disadvantages, schools and municipalities, given their role in rural areas, have long developed strategies, sometimes as compensatory measures, to integrate local knowledge into the educational experiences of their children and young people. Although schools and communities are active players in this process, their ability to integrate local knowledge into learning may depend more on the culture of the context and the way it shapes teachers' agency than on individual agency alone (Priestley et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Development, smartness, and equity are often defined through metrocentric perspectives (Beach et al., 2019). Typically, success is associated with indicators and competencies usually associated with an urban setting. Schools and communities from rural border regions in Portugal are often forced to develop additional measures to compensate for the structural disadvantages of these regions. In many cases, the measures serve to achieve urban models and standards with which comparisons are made. In this sense, schools in many contexts have lost connection with their local networks and constructed their relationship with valued knowledge (centralised curriculum) instead of local life and ecosystem (Corbett, 2007). In another paper, Corbett (2010) points out that the disconnect between the local and the global can lead to "*place-based tensions for rural students*" (p. 223).

The process of rural peripheralisation (Schafft, 2016) can lead to a devaluation of rural lifestyles and rural populations, and schools, as conscious or unconscious carriers of this message, can contribute to young people leaving rural areas and condemn these regions to greater depopulation. In addition, those who stay tend to be less educated and older, contributing to rural shrinkage (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Families willing to invest in their children's education may view local curricula based on local knowledge and learning with suspicion, as they do not prepare the young population for further education. Rural contexts are associated with places that one must eventually leave to pursue a better life, and leaving is not only an imperative but also a social distinction (Silva et al., 2021; Corbett, 2005, 2007, 2016; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). Although there were and are youth journeys influenced by this model (Corbett, 2007), there is evidence that schools and other local institutions value local knowledge and connections that equip young people with skills and place sensibilities that deserve attention. This is reflected in the willingness of young people to return after leaving school because of the quality of life in rural places (Silva et al., 2021).

Local knowledge (Ellen, 2002) refers to a collective, shared understanding that influences how individuals make interpretations and has been considered in community development and to inform grassroots intervention models (Wilson, 2015; Dawar & Farias Ferreiral, 2021). In this sense, integrating a local meaning into the curriculum or learning experiences, without exoticising it, can promote student engagement in school.

Schools, especially rural schools, and their communities are not placeless; they value local education and its role in the sense of belonging and seek to reconcile local and global aspects in learning practices by doing what Corbett (2016) calls "*challenging the hegemony of the placeless and abstracted neoliberal vision of education's aims in late modernity*" (p. 270). These strategies of resistance to the devaluation of the interior and rural life can help broaden the development perspective and ensure schooling as still accountable to local contexts (Schafft, 2016). Schafft believes that if schools are a vehicle to produce a workforce that can respond to the globalised

and placeless market, then the education system is "*less 'accountable' to local places*" (p. 138) and contributes to young people not considering staying or returning. Similarly, the late choreography around rurality and digital nomadism seems to be another refreshment of neoliberal trends that capitalise on nostalgic views of rural regions and enhance the value of these regions by adding value through a globalised view and trendy cosmopolitan marketing of lifestyles.

By giving centrality to place, schools, especially rural schools, are less contexts that function as "*factories producing human capital for export*" (Schafft, 2016) and more contexts that are sensitive to local communities and local educational priorities while having to deal with a specific centralised mandate (Preston et al., 2014). As Hass and Nachtigal (1998) wrote in the late 1990s, "*When schools are disconnected from specific places and life in communities, they cease to be public institutions, serving the public good*" (p. 13). Moreover, schools that are place-conscious (Somerville, 2010) favour a portrayal of students not as passive recipients but as relevant actors in the development of their regions, which is in some ways a controversial assumption, as it places the responsibility for the survival of the region on those who stay or return.

The recognition that there is added value in cultivating permeability between schools and their local environments is not new, and we can go back as far as The School and Society by Dewey. In the late 1980s and 1990s, interest in the importance of place in education was evident in several contributions (Hass & Nachtigal, 1998; Nachtigal, 1997; Sobel, 1997). They were usually accompanied by a critique of an increasing neoliberal trend towards the standardisation of education, in general, and of the curriculum which heralded the danger of a disconnection between schools and their contexts.

Evidence of a growing interest in connecting education to place, locality and community, and the interest in connecting learning to the ecology of students, fundamental since the contributions of Paulo Freire (2004, 2014), has gained renewed attention during school closures due to the pandemic (Yemini et al., 2023). In the last two decades, the development of an approach to education that focuses on place has been referred to by some as place-based education (Smith, 2000; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 1997, 2005, 2014). Others speak of a critical pedagogy of place-based education that corrects a romantic view of place and community (Gruenewald, 2003a; McInerney et al., 2011). This view results from a convergence of critical pedagogy and place-based education. Other contributions along the same lines refer to critical place-based pedagogy to address, for example, indigenous knowledge and place-based literacy (Somerville, 2007, 2010) or refer to community-based schooling (Smyth et al., 2008; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Common to all these perspectives is the value given to place, which translates into experiential, contextual and community-based learning (Yemini et al., 2023)

Authors such as Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b), Gruenewald and Smith (2008a), Hawkins (2014), Somerville (2010) and Soja (2000) have proposed a theoretical framework for place-based education and discussed how place-based education could keep pace with the global age by suggesting that more attention be paid to the relationship between schools and communities and the value of the local as a central factor in learning. Other literature has highlighted the value of community-based knowledge within a community-as-curriculum philosophy (Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, 2012; Sharkey et al., 2016). Although there are also criticisms of local curricula, for example, when they fail to link place-based education to global issues, a discussion is taking place that highlights the paradoxical problem of a strong sense of locality amid global challenges (McInerney et al., 2011). As Margaret Somerville (2010, p. 331) suggests: "*Place also functions as a bridge between the local and the global. Without an intimate knowledge of local places that we love there is no beginning point. Without a concept of the local, action is not possible.*"

This perspective does not disregard the curriculum at the national level but understands the contexts in which the school, the students and their families are situated as funds of knowledge.

In this sense, place can be a framework for an integrated curriculum (Somerville, 2010). To include local knowledge as a resource of the curriculum in learning is to purposefully develop situated learning and provide an alternative to educational processes that are regularly *"isolated from the immediate context of community life"* (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008b, p. xiv). In this context, the concept of place-based knowledge (Corbett, 2007) seems useful to better understand how schools reconnect with place and foster an appreciation of experiences that are part of students' lives. Their knowledge can be the basis on which it is possible to build a meaningful relationship with the content of the standardised curriculum.

In close connection with place-based knowledge, place-based pedagogy has been discussed as the one better suited to connect local knowledge into a more meaningful curriculum (Sharkey et al., 2016; Smith, 2000; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2005). Learning cultures anchored in local contexts avoid standardisation of learning and knowledge, raising awareness among students to local phenomena and strengthening a sense of community and responsibility rather than abstract learning. Integrating local and rural knowledge into learning gives students the indication that there are connections between what they are learning and their lives and ecologies. Place, in this respect, is seen as a mediator of meaning-making, as Margaret Hawkins (2014) argues in her theory of ontologies of place in education. She explains that students' understanding of global connections is shaped by place and their situated experiences.

The Study

This article reports specifically on strategies for integrating local knowledge into students' educational experiences developed by schools and communities in thirty-eight rural border regions to address place-based inequalities. This study is part of a larger funded research project developed at the national level using a mixed methods research design (2018-2022): *"GROW:UP – Grow Up in Border Regions in Portugal: Young People, Educational Pathways and Agendas"*. The study was conducted in all Portuguese municipalities bordering Spain (n=38; Figure 1), mainly known for their economic, social, and educational constraints. The project's focus was to study the resilience of schools and communities to support young people and to study the sense of belonging to the school and community (Silva & Silva, 2022, Silva et al., 2022). Methodologically, the project included a survey of 3968 9th-12th grade young people growing up in border regions; interviews with school and community leaders (N=76) of those schools and municipalities covering all border regions contexts; case studies (n=5) with biographical interviews with youth (N=50); development of projects for their communities through participatory methods; focus group discussions with young people (N=10) and youth associations (N=5); and interviews with significant adults indicated by young people (N=5).

The approval to conduct the research was obtained by MIME (School Context Inquiry Monitoring - 0566300001) of the Ministry of Education.

Figure 1: *Map of Portugal Indicating the Contexts of the Study (prepared by author)*
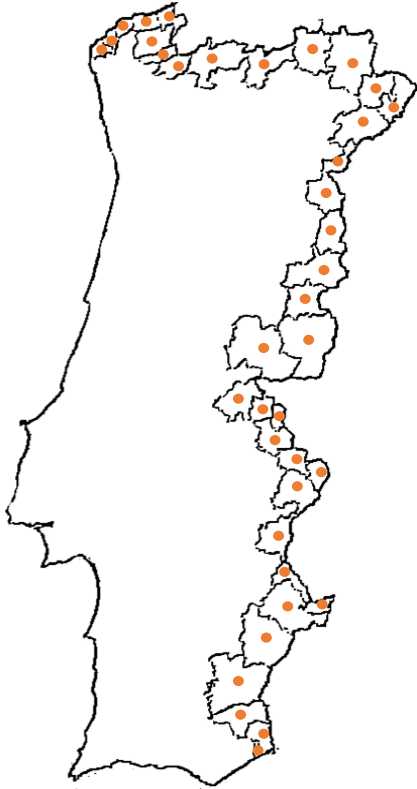
The data presented and discussed in this article come from semi-structured interviews conducted with school leaders (N=38) and municipality leaders (N=37) who are responsible for education and youth policy at the municipality level. Thirty-eight school clusters were selected, one per municipality on the border with Spain, and all the head teachers were interviewed. As for the municipality leaders, we selected one policy maker (either for education or youth) per municipality and interviewed thirty- seven out of thirty-eight.

The interviews were conducted on site. This type of interview was used to gain better access to the knowledge, values, experiences, and respective meanings of the participants. Questions aimed to explore school and community leaders' perspectives on young people and educational pathways, youth cultures, policies and practices, and networking strategies between schools and communities for youth development. The analysis of the qualitative data was mainly thematic and supported by a software and involved the identification of emerging themes. The key themes facilitated the coding process. We specifically focused on one key theme: cooperation strategies among schools and communities to enhance education quality and, specifically, on two sub-themes (i) the integration of local-based knowledge into the curriculum and learning experience; (ii) local collaborative strategies for developing place-based education. Findings are based on the interpretation of this emergent sub-themes.

Findings

Community as a Resource: Cooperative Learning Experiences

Schools, especially in rural areas, are not detached from place. Although we are wary of defining rural areas as deviant through metronormative framing (Roberts & Downes, 2019), many problems and challenges are geographical, such as depopulation, population ageing, out-migration and the associated social and economic structural inequalities (Silva & Silva, 2018). In this context, municipalities and schools are central actors in the education system and are understood as cooperative actors, especially in rural areas with less infrastructure and public services. Understanding the community as a resource enhances teaching and learning practises

by incorporating new educational experiences developed in the community. The following case, which could be criticised for not being fully planned, is an example of how the boundaries between inner and outer school are challenged by the integration and awareness of out-of-school learning experiences in the curriculum.

Today we are going to participate in an activity that has to do with citizenship education. A few years ago, I would have said to a teacher: look, on Thursday, you must go with your class to the Cross-border auditorium because they will participate in an activity organised by the municipality. The teacher would normally say, "I cannot. I have a curriculum to follow. I have a curricular programme to follow. Today we say, "Listen, can you take your class?" and the answer is, "Okay, okay. How is it? Is it citizenship? All right, it's good to prepare it". The teacher I spoke to is a philosophy teacher, and she will incorporate what they will learn outside school into the philosophy curriculum. There is already flexibility in the teachers' way of thinking. Education is not just about the formal curriculum and already has a much wider scope. (School, South)

When schools purposefully promote community-oriented practices, i.e., with intended learning goals, they encourage academic experiences that can contribute to school success. Indeed, schools and communities in general are aware of the need to provide students with the best possible and most diverse educational experiences they can. At the same time, they strive to meet the requirements and outcomes. Schools seek to meet the expectations of students and their families for high performance on nationally standardised tests while incorporating local knowledge into diverse educational practices. An example of such practices are the strategies that schools develop with municipalities to create bonds with the region by developing place-based programmes. By doing this, they are shifting from an approach that ignores local knowledge to meet national and global educational mandates, that would negatively impact their regions, to place-based pedagogies that could contribute to local viability, development, and sustainability in the medium and long term. The following quote is an example of strategic investment by municipalities in different types of educational provision linked to place:

We [the municipality] make our activities plan together with the school and the vocational school where the children participate in activities that are organised and paid for by us, and we try to make sure that they are all related to our territory. There are activities with Casa das Artes [House of Arts] in the municipal library, different activities that we help them with. (Municipality, North)

We have a vocational school in the field of agriculture. It is a very well-equipped school, the Rural Development Vocational School. It is a school that has a number of students, not only from the municipality. Because of the potential that the Alqueva Dam brought for agricultural development, this school has benefited from this project. (Municipality, South)

These strategies are based on an awareness of place and an understanding that challenges and opportunities are spatially distributed and influence students' educational pathways. In contrast to the belief that schools in these places often contribute to a narrative that disconnects young people from their regions, we found efforts that encourage young people to study in other regions while fostering community ties that resist to rootlessness (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008a). The literature suggests that investing in place-based education and connecting learning to local experiences and knowledge brings benefits to students and communities (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Corbett, 2010; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008a).

Here, in the school, we organise Cultural Days every year. Now it's about the community bringing cultural activities to the school. In the beginning, we did the activities ourselves. Now we are at a moment where we want the community to bring activities to the school. (School, South)

Schools are aware of the benefits of investing in the development of place-based education, not only in terms of social and cultural competencies and psychological benefits and community engagement (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009) but also because they connect more positively to learning in school. Moreover, experiencing community as curriculum (Sharkey et al., 2016) enhance students understanding about how to approach real-life problems. The following excerpt shows students participating in community-based fieldwork to learn a specific topic:

> In general, they are students who like the practical part a lot. So they are the ones who develop the projects. At the moment, for example, we are creating a model about fountains. They have chosen the theme of water and have researched fountains in parishes. And they have looked at how to build a mini water pump to make a closed circuit. So, they are the ones who will look for it. And because they do that, they manage to get into physics and chemistry classes and explain perfectly what was done and how it was done. And without realising it, they have learned exactly what the teacher wanted them to learn. That is the intention. *(School, North)*

By conducting small-scale research in their communities and by developing a practical project, teachers and students engage with the content of the curriculum by using local knowledge. Students are "*intellectual resources for their community*" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008b, p. xvii) and contribute to curriculum development. This type of journey gives students the opportunity to change their relationships with their schools and their communities, but also places them in the role of knowledge producers and problem-solvers rather than just as consumers. Furthermore, this pedagogical strategy promotes critical thinking and autonomy and develops appreciation and recognition of their context.

Previous research has highlighted place-based education as a model that "*integrates young people's existing knowledge of place while promoting traditional academic skills*" (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009, p. 3). Developing projects around community-based interests that incorporate local knowledge activates learning skills that enable students to relate differently to the national curriculum content. The following case refers to a project in which students learn about normal curriculum topics and how they are relevant to their living environment.

> We have another project called "Sharing with Energy", a project in partnership with EDP (Energies of Portugal company). We have here the Miranda do Douro dam. So, these projects deal with other issues, such as health, the environment and sustainability. *(School, North)*

These examples show how schools may create learning opportunities through deep, place-based projects using what is available in their ecosystem. Through a close connection to their local places, they learn about global challenges, but most importantly, students practise skills such as critical and analytical thinking in community-based projects:

> We also have some environmental associations here, namely APEGA [Association for the Study and Protection of the Asinine Cattle] and the Aldeia (Village) Association, where we work on some environmental protection concepts... on the importance of the environment and environmental education and I think in that context we are to be congratulated. We have had some good contacts and partnerships here because the children are also receptive to this dynamic of partners not outside the school. For us, they are part of the school community *(School, North)*

Building partnerships with organisations interested in the region is another factor to consider in place-based education (Cohen & Rønning, 2022; Yemini et al., 2023). This strategy of developing links with community actors is beneficial for schools, students and local organisations. These can be recognised as co-educators and help integrate local knowledge into academically embedded

learning. Some of this work is developed with the help of local partners involved in initiatives that address local issues or promote rural life.

> *The associative structure is very important because it teaches the children how agricultural culture used to be, the work, the traditions, the dances, the songs, which I think is being lost nowadays. (Municipality, North)*

This kind of experience is, in some ways, a discontinuity with traditional approaches to teaching and learning and the stable roles about who has the knowledge, how it is distributed and by whom. For this reason, teachers are preparing to change their position. On the other hand, as Yemini and colleagues (2023) see it, "*the surrounding community, including businesses and public institutions, should also see itself as a partner in the learning process*" (p. 4).

> *There are some activities, namely the local rural market, where the children and young people of the school make a description of the market of the last century, where they bring some local products from the vegetable garden, eggs, honey and prepare the space there with the support of the municipality and sell their products. They also have here the idea of local economy and the importance of local products. This activity is done with young people from the school, but it brings the young people into the community. (Municipality, South)*

In contrast to what is described in the literature where schools implicitly devalue rural life and risk being an instrument of rural outmigration (Schafft, 2016), the majority of schools included in this study strategically promote a vision of the local as a place of knowledge and multiple resources. In this orientation, some schools do not seem to hesitate to use their position as vital organisations to promote local community development, either by involving their students in educational projects relevant to their communities or by investing in collaborative approaches with local partners.

Place-based Education Through Learning Cultural Commons

Cultural commons are legacies that result from cultural practices of daily life that have been renewed over generations that have benefited from them as non-monetised exchanges (Dentith & Root, 2012). These legacies include accumulated knowledge and information that are fundamental to community life and can relate to nature and agriculture, arts and crafts, language and health. Communities are repositories for this kind of local knowledge and its preservation is a matter of citizenship. Place-based education emphasises the importance of cultural commons (Yemini et al., 2023), which means that local communities are seen as custodians of cultural heritage, local memory and tradition, competencies, and skills.

> *We now also have cante alentejano [traditional singing], an activity we introduced this school year as part of the extracurricular areas, where we work with a choir group that goes into the schools to give lessons in this traditional singing. In addition, we have a project that has been running in the schools for the last ten years that has raised awareness of the cante among young people. A few years ago, young people had no interest in cante, it was an older people's thing; they were not attracted to this cultural expression, and today that has changed. We feel that this project has contributed to this change, so much so that we even have some young people who, after their experience, seek out the choral groups to join them (Municipality, South)*

In this sense, the local is a mediator of meaning (Hawkins, 2014) and provides the context for engagement in significant learning but can also help to increase young people's participation. Some of these cases are based on intergenerational knowledge, which Bowers (2006) sees as a way of revitalising commons, be it nature or culture, that are shared and free from monetisation. Schools, through this valorisation of common local culture, are working against the "*enclosure*" of local knowledge. Active schools and communities, particularly municipalities, are crucial in exploring opportunities to integrate local knowledge (Autti & Bæck, 2021). In these contexts,

education and learning seem to be consistently associated with social practices and the culture of the local community that influence many decisions in the school context.

> *For example, we have a project that is about culture and society, and they are dealing with issues of our heritage; they are not going to deal with the heritage of Porto or Lisbon, are they? The fact that they have these projects makes them aware of our region. (School, North)*

Valuing local knowledge can have an even wider impact, as these experiences can be a subsite of the overall learning experience (Budge, 2010). In this last case, engaging students in learning opportunities that promote the local can also have an impact on the preservation of traditions and cultural assets by mobilising cultural commons for educational experiences where students learn from their surroundings. Moreover, this has impact in strengthening school and local communities' ties.

> *They (the students) adhere very much to local traditions. In fact, there is a tradition, the parade of "comadres and compadres", which would have been completely lost without the involvement of the secondary school because most of the people you see are the young people of the secondary school. (Municipality, South)*

Place-based learning strengthens young people's agency and promotes stronger community ties. Appreciating place can foster in young people a sense of responsibility towards their community rather than viewing it from a pejorative perspective. Encouraging young people to became aware of diversity of wisdoms and shared cultures contribute to a pedagogical understanding about differences.

As these schools are in border regions, there are often examples of place-based learning related to this proximity and common traditions and history. For example, topics related to Spain or life near the border are explored through joint projects with Spanish schools or are included in the curricula, as in the case of the Spanish language.

> *It is a healthy coexistence with Spain. We have a project called "Ponte nas Ondas" [Bridge over the Waves] that bridges the other side, with the schools on the other side of the Minho River. The border, as you know, does not exist. The crossing is practically automatic, and so there is a healthy coexistence, a sharing of many projects, namely this one, where the pupils pass on the oral heritage, the songs, the poems. So, it's about the intangible and the tangible heritage. If the school does not involve our students in passing on this heritage, it will end up dying. Therefore, I think it is one of our missions is to involve our students in passing on this rich heritage. (School, North)*

Schools can indeed be "*sites of change*" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 27), connecting students to the reality in which they live in through educational projects that foster their critical perspectives regarding dominant narratives as rooted patterns of thinking (Dentith & Root, 2012). In this type of pedagogy, teacher preparation seems to be essential to "*connect their classrooms to the students' worlds outside of schools*" (Sharkey & Clavijo Olarte, 2012). Most of these examples show the relevance of teachers having local knowledge that facilitates the integration of place-based content. Teachers are at the privileged position of being experts on the contexts in which they work, and their willingness to understand school contexts enables them to contribute to social change and care for community culture.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to contribute to research on rural schools and how they respond, together with communities, to the specific educational challenges that arise in rural areas. We specifically focused on *collaborative strategies to promote the integration of local knowledge* into the curriculum and educational practices in general. A main strategy is based on communities as a

resource and unfolds in different sub-strategies: exploring the curricular relevance of cultural and educational programs or activities developed by local organisations, either selectively or systematically; developing purposefully community-based practices aimed at connecting students to place and linking learning to local experiences. Students may be involved in projects with the community that address local and global challenges. In this case, collaborative approaches and partnership building with a variety of local organisations serve as resources and co-educators to provide students with additional educational opportunities. Another type of strategy relates to the appreciation of cultural commons through a variety of place-based educational approaches: Promoting opportunities for students to learn about the various expressions and wisdoms of communities; incorporating local knowledge into school-based projects, namely cross-border ones, aimed at enhancing heritage and cultural assets.

The findings point to the development of place-based and community-based education. These are often integrated into citizenship education, non-formal education activities promoted by schools or the community (such as municipalities and associations), or in the form of targeted and structured projects, such as cross-border projects. Although schools from rural border regions recognise the national policy of curriculum flexibility as an opportunity to promote local knowledge and the relevance of linking learning to students' experiences and lifeworlds, they do not fully benefit from this opportunity. The consideration of local knowledge and place-based approaches seems to run parallel to national framework curricula and test-based accountability measures. Nonetheless, there are examples of pedagogies of place that facilitate students' appropriation of the national curriculum. The development and implementation of place-based curricula benefit from teachers and school leaders' deep understanding of school context to better integrate local topics into the national curriculum.

The findings suggest that place-based education is developed and delivered through the participation of teachers, students, and other stakeholders in the co-creation of knowledge, demonstrating that education is a larger community effort (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008a). This pedagogic approach fosters networks between organisations for educational purposes and creates community-level commitment. In addition, most of these collective initiatives involve collaboration between different types of professionals, such as civil servants and teachers, which is an important feature, particularly in teachers' professional development (Desimone, 2009).

Rural schools are not detached from place (Corbett, 2007; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009) and have developed practices to integrate local knowledge or develop place-based learning even before this became an education policy. School and community leaders are aware that situated approaches can be more successful compared to standardised approaches. However, local knowledge is heterogeneous, and each context has its specificities that need to be considered.

The National Core Curriculum plays an important role in ensuring access to educational opportunities by providing a common body of knowledge to students from diverse backgrounds, but contextualising the curriculum is fundamental for students growing up in rural areas. Places are profoundly pedagogical (Budge, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b). They are not only a context in which experiences take place but also a mediator of those experiences (Smyth et al., 2008). In this sense, we can assume that these efforts to develop place-based educational opportunities and value local knowledge are forms of what some authors call pragmatic resistance (Mette et al., 2019).

Educating children and young people for a global world does not mean disconnecting from local contexts and local life. Linking local knowledge and the national curriculum poses many challenges for schools as they try to prepare their students for national standardised examinations while at the same time teaching them place-based meanings that give students different skills and competencies. While this is less measurable and less valuable for accessing higher education, it could benefit them in other ways by making connections to other areas of

knowledge and promoting ecological worldviews that better equip these young people to solve future problems.

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