# Myths and Realities of Rural Schools. The Voice of Families and Teachers

*Mitos y realidades de las escuelas rurales. La voz de las familias y el profesorado*

*Mitos e realidades das escolas rurais. A voz das famílias e dos professores*

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**Abstract:**

**Introduction.** By invoking Shakespeare's famous query, 'to be or not to be, that is the question,' this study examines rural schools by exploring the beliefs and myths surrounding them and contrasting these perceptions with the realities of daily life in 6 unitary rural schools located in the northwest of Spain. **Aims.** This study aims to listen to and shed light on the perspectives and feelings of families and teachers in rural schools with multi-grade classrooms. **Method.** Using a multiple case study design and triangulating qualitative instruments (photovoice, incomplete sentence prompts, and observation), we analyzed the evaluations and experiences of 76 families and 18 teachers concerning the context, the educational practice, and the internal sphere of rural schools. The data were processed through content analysis using ATLAS.ti 22 software, resulting in the identification of 8 categories and 3 dimensions: space and resources, coexistence, teaching and learning in rural schools. **Results.** The findings reveal several myths and idealizations held by teachers and families regarding the following aspects: the natural rural environment; facilities, infrastructures, resources, and services; coexistence; individualisation, multi-grade classrooms, and academic performance in rural schools. **Conclusions.** The study concluded that some of these myths do not align with the actual conditions of the studied environment. Rural schools can offer authentic, high-quality learning experiences on equal terms with other educational institutions, dependent on the mediation of the teaching teams that work in them. The study allows for reflection and provides information not only to visibility of rural schools and empower them but also to make decisions enable their educational improvement.

**Keywords:** Family; grouped rural schools; multigrade classrooms; rural areas; rural schools.
**SDG:** SDG 4; early childhood education; elementary education.

**Resumen:**

**Introducción**. Ser o no ser, esa es la cuestión. Invocando a Shakespeare, nos adentramos en el estudio de la escuela rural, para confrontar las creencias y mitos sobre ella con la realidad del día a día de 6 escuelas unitarias rurales situadas en el noroeste de España. **Objetivo.** Escuchar y visibilizar las opiniones y sentimientos de familias y docentes sobre la escuela rural con aulas multigrado. **Metodología.** A través de un estudio de caso múltiple con triangulación de instrumentos cualitativos (foto voz, frases incompletas y observación), se analizan las valoraciones y experiencias de 76 familias y 18 docentes sobre el contexto, la práctica educativa y el ámbito interno de la escuela rural. Con los datos obtenidos, se realizó un análisis de contenido utilizando el software ATLAS.ti 22, del que emergieron 8 categorías y 3 dimensiones: espacio y recursos, convivencia, enseñanza y aprendizaje en la escuela rural. **Resultados.** Los resultados muestran una serie de idealizaciones y mitos del profesorado y las familias relacionados con: el medio natural rural; los equipamientos, infraestructuras, recursos y servicios; la convivencia; la individualización, las aulas multigrado y el rendimiento en la escuela rural. **Conclusión.** Se concluye que algunos de estos mitos no se corresponden con la realidad del entorno estudiado. Las escuelas rurales pueden ofrecer experiencias de aprendizaje auténticas y de calidad en igualdad de condiciones que otras instituciones educativas, condicionadas por la mediación de los equipos docentes que trabajan en ellas. El estudio permite reflexionar y disponer de información no solo para visibilizar y empoderar a la escuela rural sino también para tomar decisiones que permitan su mejora educativa.

**Palabras claves:** Familia; escuela rural agrupada; aula multigrado; zona rural; escuela rural.
**ODS:** ODS 4; educación infantil; educación primaria.

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**Resumo:**

**Introdução.** Ser ou não ser, eis a questão. Invocando Shakespeare, este estudo mergulha na análise da escolas rurais, confrontando as crenças e os mitos sobre elas com a realidade vivida no cotidiano de 6 escolas unitárias rurais situadas no noroeste de Espanha. **Objetivo.** Dar voz e visibilidade às opiniões e aos sentimentos das famílias e dos professores sobre as escolas rurais com turmas multisseriadas. **Metodologia.** Foi realizado um estudo de casos múltiplos, utilizando uma triangulação de instrumentos qualitativos (voz fotográfica, frases incompletas e observação). O estudo envolveu a participação de 76 famílias e 18 professores, cujas avaliações e experiências sobre o contexto, a prática educativa e o ambiente interno das escolas rurais foram analisadas. Realizou-se uma análise de conteúdo dos dados utilizando o software ATLAS.ti 22, da qual emergiram 8 categorias e 3 dimensões: espaço e recursos, convivência, ensino e aprendizagem nas escolas rurais. **Resultados.** Os resultados revelam a existência de uma série de mitos e idealizações, tanto por parte dos professores quanto das famílias, relacionados ao ambiente natural rural, as instalações, infraestruturas, aos recursos e serviços, à convivência, à individualização, às turmas multisseriadas e ao desempenho nas escolas rurais. **Conclusão.** Conclui-se que alguns desses mitos não correspondem à realidade do meio estudado. As escolas rurais podem oferecer experiências de aprendizagem autênticas e de qualidade em condições de igualdade com outras instituições educativas, condicionadas pela mediação das equipes docentes que nelas trabalham. O estudo possibilita a reflexão e fornece informações não apenas para tornar as escolas rurais mais visíveis e capacitadas, mas também para embasar decisões que contribuam para a sua melhoria educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Família; escola rural agrupada; sala de aula multisseriada; zona rural; escola rural.
**ODS:** ODS 4; educação pré-escolar; ensino fundamental.

## Introduction

Educational institutions in rural environments have traditionally been seen as pedagogically deficient centres aimed at the most socially stigmatised students in the area and those that society with purchasing power avoided (González Rodríguez et al., 2021). This situation is compounded by the fact that notions of rurality and rural education tend to be uniform, abstract and rather simplistic (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014). The idea of rurality as a fixed and rigid reality should be overcome and rurality should be understood as a more flexible category, since we are witnessing the emergence of a new rural society in which the traditional primary sector is combined with the emergence of the secondary and tertiary sectors, all made possible and enhanced by technological developments (Quílez Serrano & Vázquez Recio, 2012).

Research is beginning to address the phenomena of *neo-rurality* and *resignification of the rural* (Peirano et al., 2015) and to delve deeper into the characteristics of rural schools, with their idiosyncrasies and each one in its specific context. The clear asymmetries that have always existed in relation to rural schools are also beginning to be considered and need to be addressed and corrected by educational research (Beach et al., 2019). One of the most important, has to do with the imbalance between research on rural and urban education and the majority adoption of an urban-centric view in research on rural education, which makes it extremely difficult to analyse its specificity (Galván Mora, 2020).

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The scarcity of specific research on education in rural environments (Smit et al., 2015), the processes of re-signification of the rural and the urban-centric view of education have been reinforcing certain myths about rural schools that need to be addressed (Hamodi, 2014). These myths are fundamentally based on four aspects:

1. Teaching quality and student achievement: it is believed that in rural schools both the quality of teaching and student achievement is lower than in schools in urban settings according to the Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa [INEE] (2019). However, the study conducted by Buscà Donet et al. (2018) concludes that their students have more opportunities to acquire metacognitive competences through the development of communicative skills because they are in multi-grade classrooms. Research such as that of Abós Olivares et al. (2017) points out that in their analysis in rural settings, the specificities of both the school context (multi-grade classrooms); and the socio-educational context (rural context), which are different from schools in urban contexts, must be considered (Abós Olivares, 2020).

2. Expectations regarding the continuity of studies: there is a *rural-urban* gap in terms of educational expectations, with students from rural environments having lower expectations of achieving a university degree than students from urban environments (INEE, 2019). Studies such as the one by Lorenzo La Cruz et al. (2017) about expectations and beliefs held by rural students about their professional and academic future conclude that the number of inhabitants influences students' belief in themselves.

3. Attention to students and coexistence: it is believed that in rural schools, due to the lower student-teacher ratio, attention to children is better, more individualised (INEE, 2019). This smaller community also leads to the belief that coexistence is better in rural schools than in urban schools (INEE, 2013). Research by Doval et al. (2013) evidence that children prefer to learn in the company of their peers in groups and in heterogeneous groups of different ages and levels, rejecting groups similar in age. This predilection highlights the importance of participation based on being able to learn.

4. Multi-Grade classroom: it is understood as a privileged space in the rural context where children of different ages and levels share the same space and learn together (Hargreaves, 2001). Compared to graded classrooms where students are grouped according to their age, multigrade or multi-level classrooms enable the use of didactic strategies more in line with meaningful learning (Abós et al., 2014). Whether this type of classroom is a challenge and an opportunity for innovation and pedagogical quality will largely depend on whether the choice is pedagogical or administrative (small student body, geographical dispersion…) and on the teaching strategies used by teachers (Smit et al., 2015).

In Spain, rural schools differ from one Autonomous Community to another encompassing both unitary classrooms and county or Grouped Rural Schools (hereafter referred to by their Spanish acronym, CRAs), the latter being the name given to them in the Autonomous Community of Galicia. CRAs, according to Segovia Largo and Maceiras García (2018), are groupings of unitary schools in rural areas of one or more municipalities which are constituted as a single public school. In Galician CRAs, incomplete graded classrooms are common and pupils can be enrolled up to the first cycle of primary education (under 8 years).

The present study is part of a financed project in a competitive call *Making the invisible visible: a study on rural cluster schools in the province of Ourense* (INOU21-05A). Its purpose is to analyse the CRAs of the province, for their value as schools that promote an educational model based on the rural school and a unitary organisation of students in multi-grade classrooms.

To show that the rural school can offer authentic and quality learning experiences on equal terms with other educational institutions, the general objective of this work is to make known the voice of families and teachers about their perceptions and points of view, sensations and emotions linked to their experiences in it. Specific objectives emerge as follows:

- To make visible the assessment that teachers and families make about the context, the educational practice and the internal sphere of their schools.

- To explore the myths or idealizations that the participants have about the rural school.

## Method

This work explores the archetype of the rural school that, from a multi-vocal point of view. The claim to investigate rural schools implies that the multiple case of study is the relevant methodology to carry out an intensive analysis of the CRAs and to reach a collective interpretation (Stake, 2013).

### Cases and participants

In this research the cases are analysed in depth, scrutinising their contexts, educational activities, organisation and communication. They are suitable for the research because they have the following peculiarities:

- They make up the entire sample.

- The context of the centres is in a geographically scattered population.

- Those schools with few students enrolled opt for an organisation of the student body based on multi-grade classrooms.

- Both CRAs express interest in participating and motivation to be studied in the research.

The two cases analysed (Table 1) are the two clustered rural centres existing in a Spanish province, with six unitary schools, three schools in each of the CRAs.

The assessments and experiences of 76 families and 18 teachers directly linked to the two cases under study are analysed. These voices are complemented by the observations and records collected in the researchers' field diaries.

**Table 1:** Summary of cases

|  | Case 1 | Case 2 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Nature of the centre | Semi-rural | Rural |
| School population | Students: 67. Families: 46. Teachers: 10 | Students: 34. Families: 33. Teachers: 8 |
| Composition | 3 unitary schools | 3 unitary schools |
| Pupils organisation | Multi-grade classroom 1: 4th Infant Education (3-4 years) and 5th Infant Education (4-5 years). Multi-grade classroom 2: 6th Infant Education (5-6 years), 1st Primary Education (6-7 years) and 2nd Primary Education (7-8 years) | Multi-grade classroom 1: 4th Infant Education (3-4 years) and 5th Infant Education (4-5 years). Multi-grade classroom 2: 6th Infant Education (5-6 years), 1st Primary Education (6-7 years) and 2nd Primary Education (7-8 years) |

**Note:** Own elaboration.

### Fieldwork

The research carried out through the case study consists of four phases (Martínez Bonafé, 1988):

1. *Pre-active phase: Negotiating*. A first contact and negotiation of the participation of the CRAs in the case study. After agreeing on the conditions of participation, the key informants, the necessary resources and the timing of the study were defined. For ethical reasons, this phase ends with the signing of the informed consent form.

2. *Interactive phase*: *Observing*. The researchers were fully immersed in the schools. Participant observation is used in each unitary school and its context.

3. *Interactive phase*: *Going deeper*. In order to collect multiple perceptions of families and teachers about the rural school and to clarify the meanings given by teachers, the techniques of Photovoice and Incomplete sentences were chosen.

4. *Post-active phase*: *Reporting*. After the analysis of the information by the researchers, the results obtained are shared with the schools so that they can be disseminated among the educational community.

### Data gathering

The primary techniques used with families are incomplete sentences and with teachers are photovoice and incomplete sentences (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Dimensions in unfinished sentences

| Object of study | Dimensions | Items raised by collectives | | Examples of incomplete sentences | Data produced |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Families | Teachers | | |
| Internal and external strategic analysis | Strengths, barriers, threats and opportunities | 4 | 10 | The main strengths that I see in this school are… The biggest difficulties in leading a rural school are… | 76 Families X 16 items = 1216 unfinished sentences  5 teachers x 11 items = 55 unfinished sentences |
| | Expectations and needs | 3 | 1 | The main reason why I chose this centre was… The conditions of teachers in rural schools… | |
| Educational practice | Methodologies, organisation and resources | 4 | 5 | I believe that learning experiences at this school are… Times and spaces in rural schools… | |
| Relationships and coexistence | Inter-family, peer-to-peer, with teachers. | 4 | 1 | I believe that the relationships between families… Collaboration between teachers and families in rural schools… | |
| Participation | | 1 | 1 | Student involvement and participation in rural schools… | |

**Note:** Own elaboration.

Finally, Photovoice is also used with teachers as a technique for collecting information (Doval et al., 2013). In order to allow participants to express themselves through a combination of visual and narrative language, four research topics are proposed in relation to rural schools. As shown in Table 3, the participating groups are invited to reflect on the strengths, weaknesses and improvements of their school.

**Table 3:** Photovoice Research Topics

| Object of study | Dimensions | Research topics | Data produced |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internal strategic analysis | Strengths and barriers | What I like the most about my rural school… | 15 people x 4 topics = 60 voices, 48 textualised photos |
| | | What I like the least about my rural school… | |
| | Expectations and needs | What I would change about my rural school… | |
| | | What I would keep from my rural school… | |

**Note:** Own elaboration.

### Data analysis

The responses obtained through the different strategies were entered into the ATLAS.ti 22 programme for analysis using the content analysis method.

Data coding is carried out inductively and interpretively, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2002), using the categories that emerge from the data and being consistent with the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework used as a reference. We identified 8 categories grouped into 3 dimensions:

- Spaces and resources: this dimension collects information related both to the specific places where activities are carried out and to the means and materials that support training. The emerging categories are: natural environment and the resources it offers (n=84), resources and services (n=39), facilities and infrastructure (n=47) and technological resources (n=7).

- Coexistence: includes the references made by the participants to the relationships established between the family, the school and their socio-educational environment (n=72)

- Teaching and learning in rural schools: groups together elements directly related to the teaching and learning processes developed, such as multi-level classrooms (n=59), individual and personalised work (n=66) and diverse methodologies (n=42).

### Discussed results

The voices of teachers and families have identified a number of myths and idealisations of the rural school that allude to contextual, relational and academic issues.

#### Myths and realities about the rural natural environment

Teaching teams and families identify the geographical location of rural schools as one of their greatest strengths. The environment and the resources offered by the location of the schools, mainly because it allows access to privileged natural environments and facilitates teaching-learning methods based on nature and the use of nearby natural resources, is an issue that emerges recurrently in the discourse of teachers both through photovoice (Figure 1) and in incomplete sentences where they indicate that learning in rural schools *can be of great wealth if the resources of the environment are taken advantage of* (TCHR. 1) or where they link *the resources that the environment offers us* (TCHR. 5) with the greatest potential of this school.

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**Figure 1:** Extract from photovoice responses linked to the natural environment



What I like the most about my rural school is being able to be and educate in contact with nature, having the opportunity to teach my students with the resources that we find around us. (TCHR. CRA-2)

What I like the most about my rural school is the resources that the environment offers us. (TCHR. CRA-2)

**Note:** Images are part of the research files.

The families alluding in their responses to the possibility of being able to *enjoy nature* (CRA-2 Fam.) being *in contact with the rural environment* (CRA-2 Fam.). They also understand that there is a predisposition towards active methodologies favoured by the environment itself: *learning by projects and surrounded by nature, in a classroom with children of different ages* (Fam. CRA-1).

As we have seen, the environment of the schools that make up the CRAs is perceived as one of their great strengths, but at the same time, the geographical location of each of them is seen as a barrier for the teachers, mainly due to the lack of time to travel between them: *I don't like having to carry bags from one school to another* (TCHR. CRA-1); the distance between the different areas of the population: *the distance between the school and the community, social and cultural services is quite long, we always need school transport to get around* (TCHR. CRA-1); or the location of resources only in the central headquarters of the CRAs.

In this respect, the families were pleased with the geographical location of the CRA schools. 36 out of 76 families point to the proximity between the school and the family home as the reason for choosing the aforementioned school.

There is no doubt that the natural environment is part of the identity of rural schools. The Antequera Declaration (Cardenal Salazar et al., 2019) as a Decalogue with measures to support rural schools, highlights that this type of school benefits from the cultural and social environment in which it is immersed, fostering direct knowledge of the natural environment and, therefore, favouring involvement in caring for the environment and against climate change. It has the capacity to take advantage of every event in the environment as a pedagogical element and a learning opportunity (Cardenal Salazar et al., 2019).

In fact, nature itself is already a school where learning is sensorial and manipulative (García Matiaci, 2019). The study by Hamodi (2014) has shown how enriching the rural environment is, as there is the possibility of being in contact with nature and being part of the customs and traditions of rural culture. Hernández Escorcia et al. (2020) also point out the potential for learning in non-conventional spaces and environments in rural schools, highlighting the importance of natural environments for the development of skills and knowledge through contact with the natural environment.

### Myths and realities about facilities, infrastructure, resources and services

Teachers' discourse reflects on several occasions the lack of space or resources as one of their main threats (Figure 2), even going so far as to wish for the opening of schools that have closed over the years.

Figure 2: Extract from photovoice responses related to teachers' perceived threats
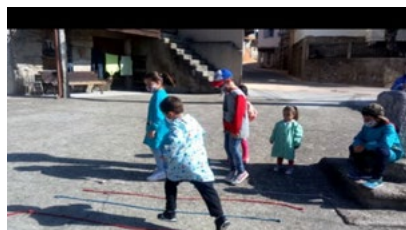


The location of the recreational space, because as you can see in the picture, it is a village square where everything is concrete and cars are parked; it limits the children's leisure time a lot. Playtime takes place there because there is no other suitable space near the school, it is a pity for our children (TCHR. CRA-2).

To have the resources available at the school's headquarters in my classroom (printer, laminator), since as there are several schools, the electronic resources are only available at the headquarters (TCHR. CRA-1)

If we could, go back to being the five schools that we were at the beginning and closed down(TCHR. CRA-2)

**Note:** Images are part of the research files.

Other colleagues insist on the deficiencies of the architectural spaces: *there are no adequate spaces for physical education* (TCHR. 2). Although they demand more infrastructures and resources, one of the teachers' voices also points to the idea that *rural schools have fewer resources*, which is a constructed myth (TCHR. 5).

On their part, families demand more space for their children, especially for bad weather: *a large covered play area for winter days* (Fam. CRA-2), *a covered playground for outdoor activities* (Fam. CRA-2). And they underline the lack of services that contribute to

family reconciliation, such as the canteen, the early bird plan (a complementary service, framed within the lines of family support and work-life balance) extracurricular activities or transport: *there is no school transport to the centre and there is no early bird service to be able to reconcile work and family life* (Fam. CRA-1).

The provision of technological resources is the item with which the teaching staff show the highest degree of dissatisfaction, with a score of 2.4 out of 5, much lower than the rest of the questions referring to organisation and relations. In terms of technological resources, the teaching staff report that *technological development is good. [Although] the problem sometimes is computer networks and equipment. We have obsolete equipment* (TCHR. 2). They indicate that they are in a *deficient situation ... because the computer equipment we have is obsolete and the internet signal is still irregular* (TCHR. 4). In this respect, only 3 families expressed their opinion, pointing it out as a limitation of the school *it does not have enough digital resources* (Fam. CRA-2) or claiming it as a necessity: *more computer resources* (Fam. CRA-2).

Rural schools are an institution laden with myths that often damage or undervalue them. The research carried out by Bernal Agudo (2009) points to a weakness or poor state of infrastructure, mainly due to the lack of economic investment in this type of centre. The study by Quílez Serrano and Vázquez Recio (2012) mentions the following material deficiencies in many rural schools: the state of the buildings, the lack of space, the teaching facilities and the lack of Internet or a very poor connection. Although these deficiencies are not a determining factor in quality, they do condition it and determine the perception of it. González Rodríguez et al. (2021) also identify insufficient and/or inadequate provision, together with a shortage of material resources, as a recurrent weakness. However, the research by Smit et al. (2015), points out that these schools are generally well equipped.

Specifically, with regard to technological resources, the research carried out in Spain (del Moral Pérez et al., 2014), while noting the increase in technological equipment in rural schools also points to the demand for greater investment of resources and support in the technical maintenance of technological equipment and devices.

### Myths and realities about coexistence in rural schools

The environment and the small size of the schools, in turn, is presented as an element that allows for a very positive family-environment-school relationship. The teachers point out that this facilitates interaction with families and the environment in a much closer way (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Extract from the responses through photovoice of the family-school-environment relationship



The relationships that take place with all the members of the educational community. The involvement, the motivation, the emotion and satisfaction that these relationships produce", "feeling that we are in a very small school, but at the same time, we feel very big (TCHR. CRA-1).

Relationships with the whole educational community, especially with families, who are actively involved in the school's activities. Relations of trust, mutual respect and admiration (TCHR. CRA 1)

**Note:** Images are part of the research files.

Among the families we find a majority who point to coexistence as a value of the rural school, including in the descriptions of the relationships established words such as: *personal, close proximity, accessible, human quality, close and direct treatment, with a lot of communication and information, family treatment*. They point out that the involvement in the school's activities *makes us create a great bond between pupils, parents and teachers* (Fam. CRA-2). However, there is also a critical voice with respect to the ideal coexistence that would be expected of the educational community in a rural school, with few pupils and families. These voices state that relations *could be improved, they could meet with parents more often*, they are *scarce, not fluid* and *there is no transparency* or, they also point out, the existence of a *lack of communication from teachers to parents* (Fam. CRA-1).

The study by González Rodríguez et al. (2021), from the point of view of the management teams, confirms the relationship between family and rural school as a strength, mainly due to the involvement of families and frequent and fluid communication. However, it is noted that this relationship is sometimes deficient or even excessive, and it is seen as a negative element. Moreover, these authors highlight the importance of investigating these issues, since school climate and coexistence have been scarcely addressed in recent literature on rural schools.

## Myths and realities about teaching and learning in rural schools: individualisation, multi-grade classrooms and performance

In relation to student attention, one of the myths that accompanies rural schools is that they are presented as much more individualised, mainly due to the small size of the groups. Teachers' perceptions also point to the fact that rural schools allow for much more individual and personalised work, while facilitating participatory methodologies (Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** Extract from photovoice responses related to multi-level classrooms and individualised and personalised work



The feeling of a small school that comes from sharing spaces and activities with groups of different ages that help and support each other (TCHR. CRA-2)

It's that desire to learn and experiment together; we have a great time in the common activities! (TCHR. CRA-2)

The participatory methodology with students and the use of local resources to promote meaningful learning (TCHR. CRA-2)

When we carry out joint activities in the three classrooms we can establish direct social relations between all the pupils of the CRA; sharing experiences, reunions and above all illusion (TCHR. CRA-2)

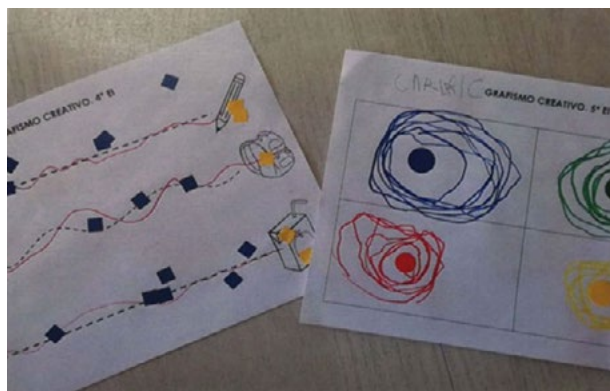**Note:** Images are part of the research files.

Most of the families also point to individualisation as a key characteristic of rural schools. The voices of families speak of more individualised teaching, personalised attention or personalised education. *As there are fewer pupils* [teaching] *is more individualised* (Fam. CRA-2). In some cases this expected personalised attention has been the reason for choosing the centre *the possibility that the children would have more individualised attention than in other centres, thinking that it could better meet their individual needs* (Fam. CRA-1).

Multigrade classrooms are perceived by teachers with contradictory feelings, on the one hand, those who see them as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation, on the other hand, those who see them as a difficulty because they are an imposed structural issue. Among the former, we find statements such as: *what I like the most about my rural school are the multilevel classrooms* (TCHR. CRA-1) or *what I like the most is to live experiences all together, to see how children from different schools share games and laughter* (TCHR. CRA-2). The responses obtained point to the fact that teaching in rural schools *is different, in that you have different ages in the same group, it enriches the children and makes teachers look for other ways of working* (TCHR. 2).

Among the latter, voices point to the complexity of having pupils of different ages and educational levels in the same space. *It is more difficult at the beginning, because of having several levels in one classroom* (TCHR. 3), *more teachers* [support] *would be needed in the classroom* (TCHR. CRA-1). This forces them, as they understand it, to come up with didactic proposals for four groups in one (Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Extract from photovoice responses linked to multilevel classrooms



What I like the least about my rural school is having to divide the activities for the different age groups 2, 3, 4 and 5 years old (TCHR. CRA 1).

Multi-level classrooms can sometimes be complicated (TCHR. CRA 1).

**Note:** Images are part of the research files.

The observations made confirm what was expressed by the teachers in the second group. Classroom practices involve the creation of age groups where each group receives homework appropriate to their grade. Mainly through worksheets, for the youngest children, and textbooks for 1st and 2nd grade (Field Notes, CRA-1).

Among families, there is a unanimous view of multi-grade classrooms as a privileged space in which to develop caring skills, companionship and empathy, as well as an opportunity to access *higher* content than that which corresponds to the age of the children. *The older and younger children learn and help each other* (Fam. CRA-2), *by having children of different ages in the same class, they learn from each other and without realising it they are attending an education that is often superior* (Fam. CRA 1).

Furthermore, families express a very positive view of the methodology used in rural schools. They consider that most of the work is carried out using active and constructivist methodologies. *They don't just learn from books… they learn by experimenting* (Fam. CRA-2); *Lessons are very active, they are interactive, they go outside, they play games and they don't sit in front of a card all morning* (Fam. CRA-1).

In this regard, research by Cornish (2006) points out that many multi-grade classroom teachers continue to use traditional teaching practices extensively catering separately for each grade. This is illustrated in the first quote in Figure 5. Often, there is hardly any classroom activity that involves situations that integrate the different ages (Cornish, 2006; Smit et al., 2015). In this sense, one might even question whether we are dealing with multi-grade classrooms, and what they imply (Cornish, 2006; Domingo Peñafiel & Boix Tomás, 2018), or simply classrooms in which students of different ages coexist, and therefore, with varied curricular demands.

Nevertheless, there are many benefits about these classrooms. The study by Buscà Donet et al. (2018) points out that multi-grade classrooms, when they function as such, are associated with more participative, active students with greater communication skills. In addition, cooperative work is basic, since learning from an older student benefit both the one who receives and the one who has to make an effort to explain to the younger classmate (García Mitiaci, 2019); both need each other, and this need encourages individual responsibility of all members of the group, as well as positive exchange relationships in the learning process (Hamodi, 2014).

The families' view of the potential of low ratios and multi-grade classrooms disagrees with another of the myths associated with rural schools: lower performance and lower quality of teaching. Issues highlighted by teachers as a response to the myths that are built around rural schools: *there is going to be worse quality, because there is a mix of levels* (Prof. 3), or *learning is lower* (TCHR. 5). In the face of these myths, families raise their voices and understand that *as there are fewer students, they learn better and are well cared for* (Fam. CRA-1) or *the fact that children of different ages share space helps them to evolve, as they achieve higher levels when they see their older classmates* (Fam. CRA-1).

The lower quality of education in rural schools is mainly associated with geographical isolation, a lack of teachers or a scarce supply of education, issues that are reinforced by the results obtained in the PISA 2015 report, which confirm the limited supply of education or resources in rural areas (INEE, 2019). However, research in Europe on this school suggests that differences in performance are related to differences in cultural and social capital (Smit et al., 2015), indicating that the multigrade classroom has no effect on performance (Hattie, 2008).

## Conclusions

This work has offered a portrait of the rural school from the voice of the teaching teams and families. It has taken the point of view of the educational community of these CRAs, revealing experiences, myths and beliefs that families and teachers have been building around their context. Three dimensions stand out in the analysis of this reality: spaces and resources, coexistence and teaching-learning in rural schools. Each of these dimensions is approached from the perspective of the experiences and beliefs of families and teachers.

1) With regard to spaces, the report revolves around two axes: the lack of infrastructures and resources and the use of the natural environment of the rural school. Both teachers and families demand more and better spaces for the daily activity of the school, as is the case in other research on the subject, such as that of Morales Romo (2016) who

points out the concern of the directors especially about the infrastructure and the low number of students and their motivation; or that of del Moral Pérez et al. (2014), Morales Romo (2019); who point to an improvement in the provision of technological resources, but a lack of support for their maintenance and new investment. As for the natural environment of the CRAs, the voices of families and teachers warned of its great environmental and pedagogical value. In this respect, Hernández Escorcia et al. (2020) find that the natural environment of the rural school is a resource that facilitates significant learning. Understanding it as a space with opportunities for situated and practical learning, opening the walls of the school to the immediate context. The portrait made in this article points to the belief in the great potential of this natural environment, which is far from some educational practices that do not show a great use of it.

2) Both families and teachers highlight a good coexistence, generally identified with a positive school climate. Research in the field also highlights this as one of the great strengths of rural schools (González Rodríguez et al., 2021). The educational community of these schools, as Álvarez Álvarez et al. (2020) point out, is characterised by identifying itself as different from the urban one, but it is gradually losing these traits towards greater homogeneity.

3) Finally, the dimension of teaching and learning in rural schools is approached from three perspectives: individualisation, multi-grade classrooms and methodology. Families and teachers point to the high educational quality of these schools, precisely because of the possibility of having few pupils, which means a low ratio that favours individualisation, forcing the creation of mixed-age classrooms. This causes, on the one hand, a contradictory feeling among teachers due to its pedagogical potential and the methodological complexity associated with it. On the other hand, the belief that these characteristics imply a teaching practice based on active methodologies. In general, research suggests that classrooms that mix students of different ages are beneficial environments, although the quality of teaching depends largely on teaching strategies (Domingo Peñafiel & Boix Tomás, 2018; Smit et al., 2015).

Both teachers and families have insisted on demystifying the lack of quality and poor performance in rural schools. In this regard, Quílez Serrano and Vázquez Recio (2012) state that the rural school is not a second-class school and that one of the great educational advantages of rural schools, and therefore multigrade classrooms, is their immersion in the environment in which they are located (Quílez Serrano & Vázquez Recio, 2012). From here we defend the specific characteristics, individualities and idiosyncrasies of rural contexts. We think that, in certain cases, urban schools could be *ruralised* a little, in the sense of contextualising them, with the possibility of making spaces and organisations more flexible and promoting a more personalised education (Quílez Serrano & Vázquez Recio, 2012, p.11), instead of continuing with the traditional *urbanisation* of rural contexts. It is time to overcome the rural/urban dichotomy, taking urbanised models of action as a reference … to continue working on a definition of rurality without previous schemes, with an open mind to embrace the heterogeneity of the rural world (Galván Mora, 2020).

Lastly, we consider it fundamental in agreement with Hamodi (2014), that this type of research allows us to give a voice to the educational community of rural schools, to approach their perceptions about the system of operation and needs of these institutions, in order to subsequently reflect and be able to make decisions that allow not only changes and modifications aimed at improvement, but also to make the rural school visible and empowering.

Undoubtedly, giving a voice to the educational community of rural schools is of great value, although the main limitation of this study is that we only have two CRAs belonging to the same territory, made up of 6 schools and their educational communities (76 families and 18 teachers) which is a very particular reality linked to a specific rural context. However, it should be noted that this is the totality of the school population existing in this environment. This choice has allowed us to analyse this specific *rurality*, taking into account both the common characteristics of rural schools and the idiosyncrasies of this territory.

## Contribuciones

Las personas autoras declaran que han contribuido en los siguientes roles: **M. R. R.** contribuyó con la escritura del artículo; la gestión del proceso investigativo; la obtención de fondos; recursos y apoyo tecnológico y el desarrollo de la investigación. **S. S. M.** contribuyó con la escritura del artículo; la gestión del proceso investigativo; la obtención de fondos; recursos y apoyo tecnológico y el desarrollo de la investigación. **A. A. F.** contribuyó con la escritura del artículo; la gestión del proceso investigativo; la obtención de fondos; recursos y apoyo tecnológico y el desarrollo de la investigación. **O. G. F.** contribuyó con la escritura del artículo; la gestión del proceso investigativo; la obtención de fondos; recursos y apoyo tecnológico y el desarrollo de la investigación. **M. A. Z. C**. contribuyó con la escritura del artículo; la gestión del proceso investigativo; la obtención de fondos; recursos y apoyo tecnológico y el desarrollo de la investigación.

## Datos y material complementario

Este artículo tiene disponible material complementario:

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