

## Analysis of the Contribution of Rural Schools to the Territorial Dimension from the Teachers' Perspective

### Análisis de la contribución de la escuela rural a la dimensión territorial desde la perspectiva del profesorado

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#### Abstract

*Schools play a crucial role in rural areas in terms of promoting local development, dynamizing the territory and contributing to the rooting of its inhabitants, especially in municipalities undergoing depopulation. Taking all this into account, this paper reports the views of a large sample of 110 primary teachers working at rural schools in Catalonia. They have been gathered by means of an online questionnaire entitled "Rural School and the Territorial Dimension" regarding educational projects carried out in conjunction with local institutions with joint objectives to promote territorial development in order to face challenges and needs of rural areas. Their answers shed light on how teachers perceive their role in the promotion of development within the rural communities where they work and the actions carried out. The results highlight the possible influence of some aspects related to the rural school projects in collaboration with local institutions, and their perceptions about the role played by the agents of both institutions in the development of the territorial dimension through these shared projects. The conclusions refer to the importance of taking into account the participation of local agents in the development of the territorial dimension in school projects due to the importance of the school in promoting the sustainability of rural territories, as well as in encouraging actions that lead students to become rooted in the place and value it.*

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## Resumen

*Las escuelas juegan un papel crucial en las zonas rurales para promover el desarrollo local, dinamizar el territorio y contribuir al arraigo de sus habitantes, sobre todo en municipios que se encuentran en proceso de despoblación. Teniendo esto en cuenta, este artículo recoge las opiniones de una amplia muestra de 110 docentes de primaria que trabajan en escuelas rurales de Cataluña, gracias al cuestionario “La escuela rural y la dimensión territorial”, y sobre los proyectos educativos realizados en colaboración con instituciones locales para promover el desarrollo territorial y enfrentar los desafíos y necesidades de las zonas rurales. Las respuestas arrojan luz sobre cómo el profesorado valora el papel de las escuelas rurales en comunidades locales y las acciones realizadas. En concreto, los resultados destacaron la posible influencia de algunos aspectos relacionados con el contenido de los proyectos que la escuela rural realiza en colaboración con las instituciones y administraciones locales y su percepción sobre el rol desempeñado por las y los agentes de ambas instituciones en el desarrollo de la dimensión territorial a través de estos proyectos compartidos. Las conclusiones hacen referencia a la importancia de tener en cuenta la participación de agentes locales en el desarrollo de la dimensión territorial desde estos proyectos, sobre todo debido a la importancia de la escuela en la promoción de la sostenibilidad de los territorios rurales. También en promover acciones que lleven a las y los estudiantes a arraigarse al lugar y a valorarlo.*

*Palabras clave:* Escuela rural; educación rural; dimensión territorial; capital social; desarrollo rural

## Introduction and objectives

The current Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore issues bearing on education in rural areas such as the persistent digital divide between rural and urban schools and has pointed to the need for new practices in rural schools that will favour social cohesion and rootedness and therefore, albeit indirectly, also economic development in their catchment areas (Abós Olivares et al., 2021; Chen & Liu, 2013). The recent report *Demographic Challenge and Depopulation in Figures* (Gobierno de España, 2020) shows that in the last decade, the process of depopulation in rural Spain has intensified, leading to a situation of great social, educational and economic inequality between urban and rural communities. Furthermore, according to the guidelines for sustainable development proposed by UNESCO (2019), one of the most important missions of education systems in the 21st century will be to reduce inequalities and disadvantages among all countries or regions. In this context, schools cannot remain on the sidelines but instead must work hand in hand with government bodies to promote territorial development and social equity.

Taking into account that schools, especially in rural municipalities, are generators of social capital and therefore important social agents, they are in a good position to carry out actions in collaboration with the various other agents present in the rural

context which can both revitalise and foster cohesion in the community, establishing relationships with the context and the agents involved through classroom projects and educational practices (Abós Olivares, 2020; Champollion, 2018). Because they can play an important role in opening the local community to the broader global context, they can also be mobilised to promote development—particularly sustainable development—which entails the creation of networks between the school, the educational community, rural agents and other institutions in the territory, to facilitate cooperation (Mosneaguta, 2019). Rural schools perform a basic service in rural territories in creating conditions for equity in education thus constituting a driving force for the development and sustainability of rural municipalities. However, to fulfil these functions, the education that rural schools provide must necessarily be adapted to the characteristics of the local context to guarantee its relevance, which perforce implies the fostering of communication with and synergies among the various other institutions and social agents present in the territory (Beach et al., 2019).

### **Rural schools in the territorial dimension**

The rural school and the territory in which it is immersed exist in a symbiotic relationship (Domingo-Peñafiel, 2020). We cannot understand the rural school without the territory, nor the territory without the school, given the important role it plays as a driving force for local development, energising and generating social and cultural capital. Each rural school must therefore take into account the needs of the surrounding social environment and be cohesive with the territory, at a cultural and community level. It must be a participatory school that works hand in hand with the local community to face the challenges presented by a changing world (Champollion, 2018).

From the perspective of the territorial dimension, the school is an institution that has an impact on the interactions and structures that occur in the territory, acting as an active member of the territorial institutional system, as a receiver and transmitter of identities and emotions and as a shaper of rural social constructions (Boix & Bustos Jiménez, 2014). It cannot be isolated from what happens in the territory, nor can teachers remain on the sidelines of the local community's needs beyond their roles as part of an educational institution. As shown in the Fropomar project carried out in Europe (Boix & Buscà, 2020), teachers working in multigrade classrooms must develop competences to work with and contemplate the territorial dimension of the school considering its importance. From this point of view, the school as an actor in the rural territorial dimension must be regarded as socially alive and dynamic. Schools and teachers need to be aware of this fundamental role they play in the territory, face the challenges that may arise, and promote didactic projects and activities in conjunction with other actors in the local rural community as well as the larger territory in which it is embedded.

It is necessary to review the actions and educational projects carried out by schools that bear on the territory in which they are embedded because of the impact they have on development, continuity and change in rural areas (Champollion, 2010; 2018). This article aims to make an important contribution along these lines. It is also necessary to take into account the different studies and successful practices carried out in rural multigrade schools to demonstrate the importance of the interplay between the rural

community, the multigrade classroom and the territorial dimension, which favours aspects such as the attachment of the population to its territory, the creation of emotional and affective links between students and their rural context, which can help to arrest depopulation of the territories, the execution of joint projects that address shared needs, and the promotion of actions that show the school in the territorial dimension as a socially living element (Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021; Alpe & Barthes, 2013; Pagès & Santisteban, 2011). Teachers and the community must consider the role played by the school in rural areas from all perspectives, and already from initial training and didactics in rural schools (Bustos Jiménez, 2008), to build a new vision of what the school should be in rural areas in the 21st century. A school has a great responsibility, which cannot be viewed as something alien to what happens in the territory in which it is set.

### **Relevant research on good practices in rural schools**

Despite the relative shortage of research devoted to rural education and innovation in this setting (Abós Olivares, 2020; Abós Olivares et al. 2021; Barret et al., 2007; Coladarci, 2007) work in this area is gradually growing. Of particular note, the importance of the inclusion of context in educational practices is highlighted in a recent major systematic review of rural schools in Europe (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). Moreover, a separate analysis by Tomazzoli (2020) of fourteen rural schools located in different parts of Italy shows that the common element among them is their relationship with the surrounding territory and their commitment to the respective local communities, which perceive the rural school as an engine of local development. These findings bear witness to the potential of the school and the work it performs as a bridge between local culture and the broader community and highlight the importance of the relationship with the context (Barthes, Champollion & Alpe, 2018; Tomazzoli, 2020). Another study by Shafft (2016) examining the relationship between the rural school and the development of rural communities and their context sheds light on how educational practices in rural contexts can contribute to broader rural development policy in all respects.

Two further studies analyse the importance of the relationship between schools and the local community as well as the school's involvement in the creation of local networks to promote educational improvement in direct relation to the context. The strength of this relationship derives from good school practices that are firmly grounded in the context, pointing once more to the importance of the school's involvement with the community and the inclusion of the territorial dimension in the school's vision of education and educational practices (Grané & Arguelagués, 2018; Hernández de la Torre & Navarro Montaña, 2018).

Finally, a paper by Sánchez Giménez (2019) explores the use of digital technology to help tackle the depopulation of rural areas, by reducing isolation and the digital divide that pursues rural schools compared to urban schools (Carrete-Marín & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2021; 2023), thus helping to overcome. From this study, we can glimpse the opportunities offered by technologies and new online resources for networking and communication despite the distance. This aspect could even be related to the need for new proposals to connect teachers and students across different schools and with

the different agents of the community working together as well as with the idea that more resources that take into account the rural context are needed (Boix et al., 2015; Carrete-Marín & Domingo-Peñañiel, 2022). In addition, the use of technologies can help participation and collaboration in joint projects that help to strengthen the sense of belonging to the community, the rootedness to the territory and an identity linked to it (Del Moral & Villalustre, 2011) thus having an important impact on the rural territories (Rodríguez et al., 2023).

The aforementioned research notwithstanding, few quantitative studies focus on rural schools in the territorial dimension and their relationship with the rural context from a perspective that would enable us to reinforce any theoretical framework bearing on the subject.

### Context

The present study was carried out in Catalonia (Spain). According to the Catalan regional government's official data-gathering body IDESCAT,<sup>2</sup> Catalonia currently has a population of roughly 7.7 million. Catalonia has 947 municipalities but a relatively small rural population because over 95% of Catalans live in more than 300 cities and villages with over 2,000 inhabitants. It is possible to find schools that serve a single rural community, or what is known as 'rural school zones' (*Zones Escolars Rurals*), which are made up of from two to five schools in very small but neighbouring communities, which share resources such as specialised teachers of music or foreign languages. In preparing their educational projects, rural schools must fully understand their value as catalysts of progress and development in their communities and provide leadership in facing the challenges posed by the change society is undergoing in the digital era. This is not possible without a strong and active school involved and connected with its immediate social context.

This paper presents partial results of a huge descriptive study carried out as part of a larger publically project by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish Government entitled 'Rural Schools: a basic service for social justice and territorial equity in sparsely populated Spain'<sup>3</sup> (PID2020-115880RB-I00). The fundamental research question of the present study was the following: What sorts of educational projects are carried out by rural primary schools in Catalonia in collaboration with local administrations to develop the territorial dimension? Answering this question based on the perceptions of rural teachers will allow us to clarify the relationship between the school and its classroom activities on the one hand and the territory it serves on the other, as well as to analyse the relationship of the school with the other agents and entities of the local community.

The main objectives were: (1) to describe the main features of the participating teachers and the rural schools in which they were teaching; 2) to describe the educational projects in which Catalan rural schools were participating with local authorities, and

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2 Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya (Statistical Institute of Catalonia). <https://www.idescat.cat/>.

3 La escuela rural: un servicio básico para la justicia social y la equidad territorial en la España con baja densidad de población (PID2020-115880RB-I00), original title of the project in Spanish that the study presented in Catalonia includes.

3) to identify the factors which influenced the rural teachers' views about the rural schools' success in establishing meaningful networks with the agents of the territory and the local rural community to lead the development of the territorial dimension.

### Method

This study is descriptive in design, through a questionnaire survey of currently employed rural teachers, with the main settings as follows.

#### Sample Size

The representative sample of the general study was composed of 614 Spanish rural school teachers. Nevertheless, in the case of the study presented in this paper, the final sample of participants in this study was made up of 110 primary or early childhood teachers who are the ones who are currently working in Catalan rural communities. The self-reported gender of participating teachers was 94 women (85.5%) and 14 men (12.7%), with another two (1.1%) preferring not to answer the question. Means and standard deviation for age, years of teaching experience and years spent in a rural school are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Participant features, showing mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) (n = 110)*

	M	SD
Age	44.05	8.99
Years as a teacher	18.39	8.65
Years as a rural school teacher	10.84	8.13

#### Measurement Tool

The 110 participating teachers completed an online questionnaire entitled "Rural School and the Territorial Dimension" (RSTD),<sup>34</sup> which consisted of two parts.

The first was designed to gather respondents' data and information about the features and setting of the school where they were teaching. The second section gathered information about any educational projects that were being or had been undertaken in collaboration with the local administration and institutions. The second was in turn divided into two parts. The first part was intended to collect data about the number of projects at their school, the approach adopted therein, their implementation and the

<sup>4</sup> In the text, the title of the questionnaire has been translated into English. The original is Escuela Rural y Dimensión territorial (ERTA), in Spanish.

degree of satisfaction that the teacher felt about participating. The second part was focused on the contribution of these projects to the community and their territory. Much of this instrument consisted of multiple-choice or open-answer questions, and very few consisted of questions to be answered by rating on a Likert scale.

Before being completed by participants, the survey was subjected to a validation process performed by researchers with ample expertise in topics related to Rural Education Research and related. The validation process was carried out by a Likert Scale and data confirmed that the questionnaire content was highly reliable and consistent ( $\alpha=.93$ ). However, because of this validation process it was needed to adjust a few questions and answers. In this process participated experts ( $n=8$ ) in rural education research, teaching training programmes and schoolteachers with a huge experience in rural schools. The process begins a month before the final instrument was administered following the process described in the next section.

### **Procedure and Statistical Analysis**

The data-gathering process began with the sending of the online survey by email to each rural school's director (directors are also teachers, though exempted from a portion of the usual teaching load), who then distribute it to the school's teachers and also completed the questionnaire themselves. The deadline for completion of the questionnaire was set in July 2022, by which time the teachers would have finished their classroom teaching duties. This procedure was in line with the University of Barcelona's guidelines (2020) for ethical research practices.

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) with correlation tests and inferential statistics. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to assess whether the variables fulfilled the assumption of normality. Thus, considering the non-parametric data and the possible differences between the cases observed and expected, Spearman's Rho and Likelihood Ratio (*LR*) were calculated to find significant relationships between teachers' opinions about the educational projects and their opinions about the effect of these projects in the community.

All the statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS v27 software, with the level of significance being set at  $p < .05$ .

### **Results**

The results are presented according to our three research objectives set out above.

#### **Main features of teachers and schools**

General data gathered from questionnaires are summarized in Figure 1.

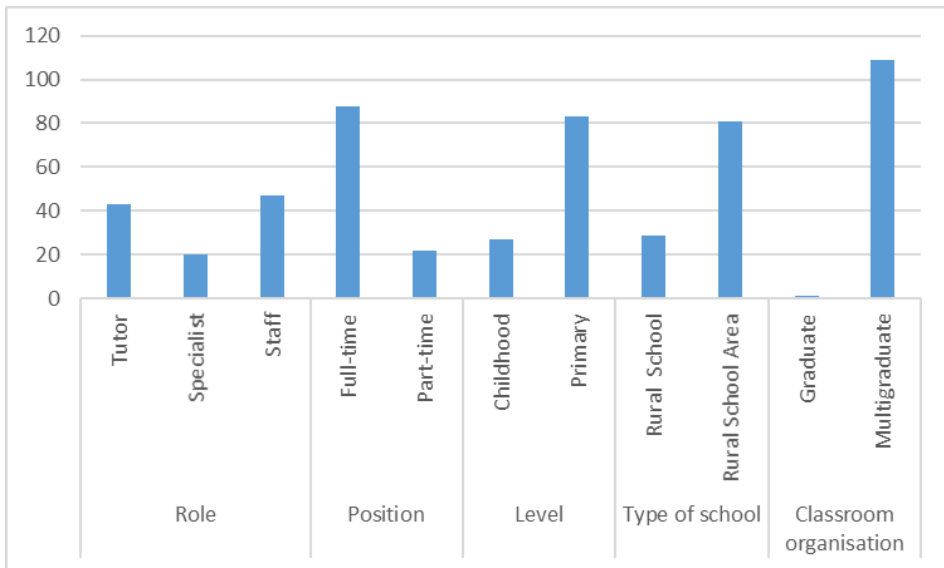


Figure 1. Features of participating teachers and the schools in which they are employed.

It will be seen that, of the 110 respondents, 47 (42.7%) were members of their school's management team, hence exempted from some teaching duties; 43 (39.1%) were *tutors*, with full teaching responsibilities; and 20 (18.2%) were specialists teaching specific subject areas such as physical education, music or a foreign language. In addition, 88 (80%) were full-time civil servants with permanent contracts, the remaining 22 having part-time contracts or working as temporary substitutes. A similar majority ( $n = 83$ , 75.5%) were teaching at the primary level, the remainder in this case ( $n = 27$ , 24.5%) working in the early childhood section of the school. All but one of the teachers were teaching in multigrade classrooms. Finally, regarding the sort of school, they were working in, 81 respondents (73.7%) were working in schools whose catchment area was a rural school district, while the remaining 29 were at schools that drew from a single community.

### Educational projects involving local institutions

With regard to educational projects carried out by schools in collaboration with local communities, figure 2 shows that 61 teachers (55.50%) identified "local authorities" as the main collaborator in the educational projects carried out at their rural schools. The rest of the participants in this study reported that their main rural school partners were locally based companies (15 individuals, 13.6%); Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (15 individuals, 13.6%); or cultural institutions (8 individuals, 7.3%). Finally, 11 teachers (10%) were unable to identify any collaborating partners in educational projects not knowing this aspect.



Regarding the role played by the school in these collaborative projects, while 48 of the 110 teachers (43.6%) perceived that their schools had played a “leading role” in carrying out the project, 33 (30%) felt that the school’s role was limited to being a “collaborator” and 14 (12.7%) described their school as being the “recipients” of projects already underway or led by other institutions. The remaining 15 teachers (13.7%) were unaware of their school’s role in any such projects.

In terms of the goals of these shared educational projects carried out from the rural schools, 91 (82.2%) respondents identified “addressing needs common to school and local area” as the main goal. The remaining participants in this study indicated, to much smaller degrees, goals such as “service-learning” (5 individuals, 4.5%), “promoting and preserving cultural patrimony” (3 individuals, 2.7%) or “promoting entrepreneurship” (1 individual, 0.9%). However, it is again necessary to point out that 10 teachers claimed to be unaware of the goals of the projects that their schools were involved in.

With regard to the goals of the educational projects carried out from the Rural School Zones in collaboration with the local communities, 76 (69.1%) respondents identified the main goal as “addressing needs common to school and local area” 8 (7.3%) identified goals related with service-learning; 3 (2.7%) referred to promoting and preserving the cultural patrimony and only one teacher (0.9%) identified the main goal as being related to promoting entrepreneurship in the area. In this case, notice that the number of individuals who did not know if their rural district schools were involved in shared projects or did not answer the question was higher (22 individuals, 20%) than those from schools serving one community.

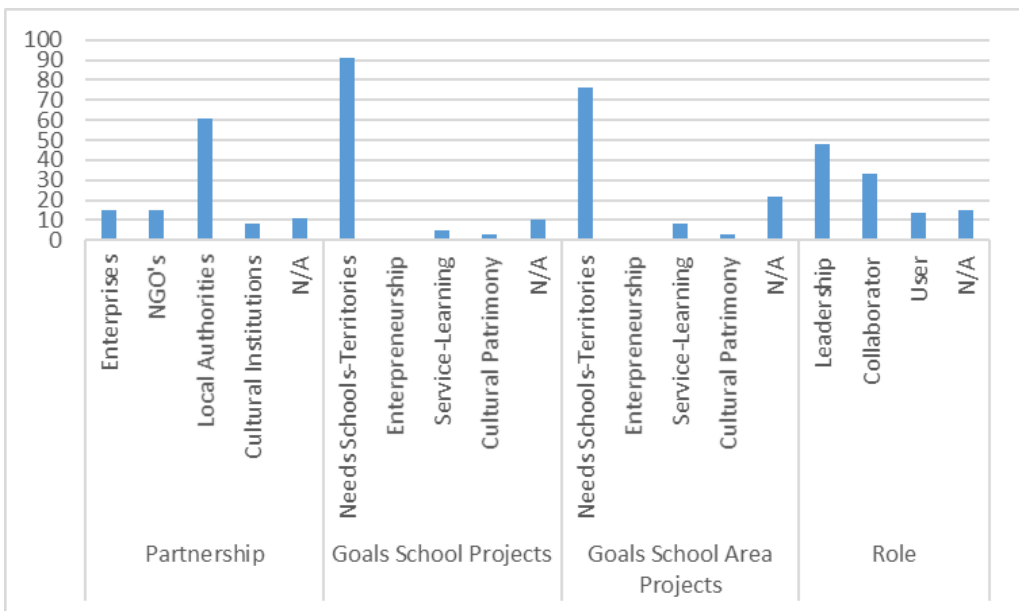


Figure 2. Partnership and shared projects characteristic

### Teacher satisfaction with shared projects

The previous section has described the main characteristics of the projects carried out jointly by rural schools and local entities. Nevertheless, these descriptive results must be complemented by other data which allow us to know how rural schoolteachers assessed these projects and the factors that might influence their assessment.

The data in Table 2 show that on average rural schoolteachers were satisfied with the educational projects that their schools were carrying out in conjunction with local institutions ( $M = 3.15$ ;  $SD = .638$ ). However, various factors related to either teachers' personal data or specific features of these projects could have conditioned teachers' assessments.

Considering the teachers' age and years of experience as a teacher and rural teacher table 2 shows: 1) a low inverse correlation between the factors "satisfaction with projects carried out jointly with local institutions" and "age" ( $Rho = -.075$ ,  $p = .438$ ) or "years of teaching experience" ( $Rho = -.033$ ,  $p = .734$ ); and 2) a low direct correlation index between satisfaction level and the factor "years teaching in a rural school" ( $Rho = .080$ ,  $p = .403$ ). However, note that none of these correlations was statistically significant.

Table 2.

*Shared projects: satisfaction level and factors related.*

Level of satisfaction	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
		110	3.15
<i>Factors related</i>	<i>LR</i>	<i>dl</i>	<i>p</i>
Rural schools' partnership with local administrations and entities	24.875	15	.052
Rural schools' zones partnership with local administrations and entities	18.784	15	.224
Goals shared projects (Rural Schools)	32.396	15	.006
Goals shared projects (Rural Schools Areas)	19.626	15	.187
Role perceived by local administrations	22.273	12	.035
Role perceived by scholar community	26.490	15	.033
Frequency of collaboration	22.208	6	.001
<i>Factors related</i>	<i>Correlation Index</i>		<i>p</i>
Teacher's age	-.045		>.05
Years of teaching experience	-.030		>.05
Years teaching in a rural school	.066		>.05

Table 2 also shows that rural schoolteachers' assessments of joint projects could be affected by various other factors. Firstly, the data allow us to suppose that the type of institution with which the rural schools or the rural district schools share their projects might influence the teachers' level of satisfaction with their participation in them. However, the data also show that this relationship has no significance in either the case of 'rural schools' partnership with local administrations and entities" ( $p = .052$ ) or the case of 'rural schools zones' partnership with local administrations and entities" ( $p = .224$ ).

Other factors to consider are teachers' awareness of the goals of these projects and their perceptions about how often rural schools work with the local administrations or institutions. In this regard, the data show: 1) a significant relationship with satisfaction when teachers are aware of the "goals of projects carried out jointly between rural schools and local institutions" ( $p = .006$ ); 2) no significant relationship with satisfaction even though teachers are aware of the "goals of projects carried out jointly between rural district schools and local institutions" ( $p = .187$ ), and 3) a significant relationship when rural teachers believe that the "frequency of collaboration" between rural schools and local administrations is high ( $p = .001$ ).

Finally, it is also possible that teachers' satisfaction with participating in shared projects with local administrations was influenced by their perceptions and ideas of how these local administrations viewed the role played by the school in the territory or the school community's views regarding the role played by the school when it carried out projects in the territory. In both cases, there was no significant influence ( $p > .05$ ).

### **Factors conditioning the leadership exercised by schools as network creators**

Table 3 shows some factors identified by the respondents as indicating that the school played a role as a promoter and leader in the creation of networks with other agents and members of the local and educational community of the territory. This information could be relevant when it comes to promoting projects that benefit rural territories and have an impact on them and their community, assuming that such projects are with schools.

Of the 110 teachers surveyed, 34 (39.9%) felt that the participation of the school in the promotion and creation of social and institutional connection networks in the territory was something that occurred only sporadically. On the other hand, while 32 (29.9%) opined that the school participation was "significant" in the territory 26 (23.6%) regarded the participation of the school as "very significant" in the creation of networks in the territory, considering the important role played by the school in the territory as a generator of social capital and promoter of local development.

In addition, it is worth asking whether there were any factors that might have affected rural teachers' opinions about this issue. In this particular case, the data show that there is no correlation with the teacher's age ( $Rho = .044$ ,  $p = .649$ ), years of overall teaching experience ( $Rho = .032$ ,  $p = .743$ ) or years teaching at a rural school ( $Rho = -.037$ ,  $p = .701$ ).

A final set of factors is related to how teachers think about how other local agents perceive the role and value of rural schools as network creators. Here the data show that teacher views might be influenced by the opinion of the school community ( $p =$

.05) or the local administration ( $p = .003$ ) regarding the role played by rural schools in involving and guiding the inhabitants of their territory to face shared problems and challenges in these rural contexts.

Table 3.

*Rural schools as a networker: evaluation and factors related.*

<b>How important a role did your school play in creating networks?</b>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Aggregate %</i>
No participation whatsoever	7	6.4	6.4
Very minor	34	39.9	37.3
Somewhat important	32	29.9	66.4
Very important	26	23.6	90.0
Other	4	3,6	93.6
N/A	7	6.4	100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100</b>	
<i>Factors related</i>	<i>LR</i>	<i>dl</i>	<i>p</i>
Role perceived by scholar community	49.752	35	.05
Role perceived by local administrations	48.823	25	.003
<i>Factors related</i>	<i>Correlation Index</i>		<i>p</i>
Teacher's age	.044		>.05
Years of teaching experience	.032		>.05
Years teaching in a rural school	-.037		>.05

## Discussion and conclusion

Using data from a sample of rural teachers' survey respondents in Catalonia, this study has offered a general picture of their perceptions regarding the types of educational projects and practices related to the territorial dimension carried out by rural schools or rural school zones in Catalonia; the role adopted by the schools in carrying out those projects; and the relationships established with administrations, entities and local agents during their execution and development. Our overarching goal has been to evaluate the role played by rural primary schools as dynamic actors in the territorial dimension and therefore also in the establishment of networks and communications within the educational community and local agents. The results obtained make it possible to respond to all the main objectives of the study proposed.

Firstly, one of the main findings is related to the purpose of the projects related to the territorial dimension in which rural schools in Catalonia are involved. As shown by the data collected and analysed, the main purpose of these projects usually corres-

ponds to the search for answers and solutions to needs shared by both the school and the local community. This may be related to the fact that schools play a central and important role in their territorial context as a revitalizing element and agent of local development, and therefore teachers must be prepared to address such projects and broaden their knowledge of the territory and its culture. This function is not only an exclusive characteristic of Catalan Rural Schools. Thus, it is possible to find out studies that demonstrate the important role played by rural teachers in keeping their singularity along several regions of Europe (Beach et al., 2019; Champollion, 2010, 2018; Fundació Món Rural, 2019; Nordholm et al., 2021). The school cannot remain on the sidelines of what happens in the territory, and this also has an impact on the work of the school and the life of the students, the school and its territorial context are in continuous symbiosis, not being able to be isolated (Domingo-Peñafiel, 2020; Abós Olivares et al., 2021).

Another aspect to be highlighted is related both to the institutions with which the schools usually carry out these shared projects and to the frequency with which this collaboration takes place. Firstly, it has been observed that these collaborations have mainly corresponded to local administrations, such as town councils, regional councils in the case of Catalonia and other institutions. This corresponds to certain experiences whereby rural schools maintain relations with local administrations and territorial entities to establish agreements and improve the equity and quality of services not only in schools but also in the territories as a whole in a joint manner. This highlights the importance that the promotion of educational projects related to the territorial dimension should be bidirectional and not exclusively top-down, initiated by the administrations themselves. It is, therefore, necessary that schools also have a voice and play an active role in local development, as their role is key and energising for the territories and their sustainability. This challenge has also been reflected in several studies placed in some rural areas that have to face stigmas and prejudices that underestimate the value of rural life (Beach et al., 2019; Corbet, 2016; Du Plessis, 2017; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Restrepo et al., 2023).

Secondly, it is necessary to consider the frequency with which organisations and schools relate to each other to carry out these projects jointly sharing interests. According to the results obtained, the frequency of collaboration is an important factor in improving the sustainability of shared projects and their continuity over time by carrying out development actions that have an impact on the territories and social capital. Therefore, according to the results obtained, no efforts were made to create networks, an aspect that is so necessary for rural territories to guarantee joint actions with the community and rural agents that lead to equity and equal opportunities. Fortunately, it is possible to find out evidence in the international context which demonstrates that rural school students who have been living in strong and close local communities, are able to achieve high academic outcomes (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; Grané & Argelagués, 2018) or key competences to face the challenges of the current digital society as good as urban students (Agger et al., 2021; Hernández de la Torre & Navarro, 2018).

In addition, the study reveals other key factors that condition the implementation of collaborative projects by rural primary schools. These are the quality of the networks established with institutions, entities and other agents in the local and educational

community, and the external view of the importance of the role of the school and the impact of the joint work carried out on the territory. These assessments are also influenced by the type of project and its purpose, which, according to the data presented here, focus on projects related to tackling issues that jointly affect the school and the community or territory.

The data analysed also shows that teachers are aware of the types of projects in which the school and/or the rural school zones to which they belong are involved. Although most of the teachers surveyed were working in schools serving a rural cluster rather than just one community, they exhibited a greater knowledge of the projects carried out by their school than of the projects carried out by the school cluster as a whole. Bearing in mind that most rural schools in Catalonia belong to rural school clusters and that all the schools within one rural district tend to share activities including educational projects it is easy to imagine that teachers within a single district tend to have the same views and approaches to work in the classroom concerning the territorial dimension. Therefore, there needs to be close and continued communication among schools in the same district to strengthen and promote the projects carried out in the territory. Given that most of the teachers surveyed were teaching full-time, members of their school's management teams and civil servants, this should not be a problem.

The results also reveal which factors related to these projects shared between schools and local administrations condition both teachers' degree of satisfaction with these projects and their assessment of the value of the school as a leader in the setting up of stable networks with local institutions and entities. In this regard, we have seen that the degree of satisfaction with these projects on the part of teachers in Catalan rural schools could be conditioned by the requirement that their aims be closely linked to meeting the needs and problems shared by the rural school and the territory it serves. In addition, the results do not allow us to confirm the same concerning the aims of the projects shared between the school groups and the administrations or local bodies. This confirms once again that there is often a certain lack of knowledge about the shared projects carried out by the groups. Bearing in mind that the development of the territorial dimension should be carried out by the various agents present in the territory jointly with the teachers at local schools, it is essential that such actions be carried out and also that networks facilitating this process be established as it was reflected in theoretical or empirical studies that analysed the relationships established in rural communities (Fundació Món Rural, 2019; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009; Longás et al., 2018; Ortega-Arias & Cárcamo-Vásquez, 2018; Theobald, 2018). Moreover, also taking into account the need for these connections and interactions to respond to joint problems (Lugo-Morin, 2013). In this way, sharing the same purpose or project among schools to generate joint actions would have a greater impact than networks and actions generated by a single school acting alone.

On the other hand, a key factor in the assessments made by these Catalan school teachers is related to their perception of how much the school and local communities value the role of the rural school as a key agent in the revitalisation and development of the territory and the driving force behind these projects linked to the territorial dimension. This would highlight the importance of the recognition of the roles played by members of the educational and local communities in the promotion of shared

projects with both agents, the establishment of networks by the schools and their exercise of leadership (Berry & Little, 2006; Boix & Buscà, 2020; Boix et al., 2015; Grané & Argelagués, 2018). The teachers involved in these projects must be aware of external recognition of the role played by the school in this type of project. Otherwise, rural schools and their teachers may choose not to make the necessary efforts to establish and sustain relations and communication with partner organisations and members of the local community (Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021; Rué, 2005).

Obtaining a sample of rural teachers participating in the study has allowed us to obtain reliable data that represent the universe of teachers in rural primary schools in Catalonia. It has also allowed us to identify important relationships between the variables included in the questionnaire to describe and understand how teachers view the educational projects carried out jointly with local administrations to develop the territorial dimension and what aspects related to the content and implementation of these projects condition their attitudes. However, the questionnaire data carried out may have certain limitations, due to the complexity of the term "territorial dimension". It is possible that this issue influenced respondents' understanding of the questions and the objective of the questionnaire, as reflected in the lack of knowledge observed in some teachers' responses. As a complement to this survey questionnaire and to obtain more nuanced data, it would be of interest to carry out further qualitative studies to examine the views of not only teachers but also their collaborators, whether in the educational community or outside it, regarding their participation in these projects and their real impact on rural areas.

There are not many studies in the research education field focused on rural schools. This fact justified studies such as those presented here. It contributes to building a theoretical framework based on empirical data which provides an alternative sight of rural schools and their territories. In other words, their findings allow the spreading of what rural schools are doing to preserve and promote their social capital and territories and how it is possible to collaborate with local entities and communities. However, it is also necessary to do more research following this approach because most of the current studies are only focused on providing some evidence about the potential of rural schools to achieve the same learning outcomes that urban schools do.

Finally, it is necessary to consider that understanding what the territorial dimension refers to as a construct is not simple, and even more so when it must be worked on from the perspective of the school and the other agents in the territory. Above all, it is important to acknowledge the key role of educational institutions in local territories and the degree of involvement of teachers in the promotion and reinvigoration of local municipalities, their development and overcoming inequalities. Teachers must understand the role and importance of the school as a dynamic actor in the territorial dimension, as an active member of a territorial institutional system that contributes to the consolidation of a rural society, which is necessary for the sustainability of rural territories. It is well known that being a teacher is more complicated in rural areas, not only because of the idiosyncrasies of rural schools and their configuration. It is also due to the school's necessary link with the surrounding territory and its role as a key element for the sustainability of the territories and thus the schools themselves, the rooting of the population, the concentration of talent, the overcoming of inequalities,

and the fight against depopulation and other threats. These are problems that affect all rural territories and to which schools cannot remain oblivious.

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