

Expectations of Empty Spain in Rural Schools

Las expectativas sobre la España vaciada en la escuela rural

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Abstract

The rural school occupies a key role in the phenomenon of "empty Spain". This research has focused on finding out the assessment and expectations about the rural world that predominate among teachers and students in the rural area of El Bierzo (León), as well as analysing whether the rural world is present in school materials and in the daily work of the school in this area. The mixed research methodology triangulated quantitative instruments (questionnaires) with qualitative ones (interviews and discussion groups) in a complementary way, allowing a comprehensive and extensive view. The results of the research indicate that the value of the rural world as a model for sustainable living is largely invisible in schools and that the urban imaginary as a place of success continues to prevail in the collective mentality of the educational community. This implies a devaluation of the rural context and space in which the school develops its educational work. The discussion and conclusions highlight the need to question and rethink this imaginary, to which the school contributes, which does not tend to consciously promote a future of hope that makes it desirable for future generations to inhabit the villages, but which, nevertheless, can have a decisive influence in allowing us to collectively build opportunities and alternatives to recover and repopulate this "empty Spain".

Keywords: rural school; emptied Spain; rural world value; education.

Resumen

Es clave el papel de la escuela rural ante el fenómeno de la “España vaciada”. Esta investigación se ha centrado en conocer la valoración y las expectativas que sobre el mundo rural predomina en el profesorado y estudiantado de la zona rural de El Bierzo (León), así como analizar si el mundo rural está presente en los materiales escolares y el trabajo cotidiano de la escuela de esta zona. La metodología de investigación mixta ha triangulado instrumentos cuantitativos (cuestionarios) con cualitativos (entrevistas y grupos de discusión) de forma complementaria, que permitan una visión comprensiva a la vez que extensiva. Los resultados de la investigación indican que el valor del mundo rural como modelo para una vida sostenible está en buena medida invisibilizado en la escuela y que el imaginario urbano como lugar de éxito sigue predominando en la mentalidad colectiva de la comunidad educativa. Lo cual supone una desvalorización del contexto y el espacio rural en donde la escuela desarrolla su labor educativa. En la discusión y conclusiones se destaca la necesidad de cuestionar y repensar este imaginario, al que contribuye la escuela, que no tiende a impulsar de forma consciente un futuro de esperanza que haga deseable habitar los pueblos para las futuras generaciones, pero que, sin embargo, puede influir decisivamente en permitir construir colectivamente oportunidades y alternativas de recuperar y repoblar esa “España vaciada”.

Palabras clave: escuela rural; España vaciada; valor mundo rural; educación.

Introduction

Rural folk wisdom says that "when a school closes, it is the death sentence of a village" (Monge et al., 2020). It is a symptom of the death of the village that the school is no longer viable. One of the great struggles of small towns is to keep their local school open. They know that the moment it closes, the roots of the few families with children disappear (Pueyo, 2021). Those families are going to leave and, behind them, the future of the village.

In recent decades, rural depopulation has become one of the greatest challenges for rural areas in Spain. This phenomenon is characterised by a sustained population decline and an accelerated ageing of the population, which has led to the impoverishment of rural areas and the loss of their economic and social fabric (Zurro and Rueda, 2018). Schools play a key role in the fight against depopulation in Spain, as they can be a key factor in retaining young people in rural areas (López-Pineda and Perdomo-Vanegas, 2024; Pueyo, 2021).

The school can be a driving force that operates on the expectations generated in the present generations, on the future capacities and growth options of the rural area. Because rural schools not only maintain the population of the smallest localities, but also provide the backbone of the territory, becoming a point of

reference, both educationally, culturally and socially (Zurro and Rueda, 2018; Welsh, 2024).

The hypothesis on which this research is based is, therefore, that in order to reverse the situation of growing depopulation in rural areas and the exodus of so many young families to the urban world, one of the key factors is the role played by the curriculum, schools and education in general in building a positive and desirable vision of the rural world and its future as a hope and a project for re-inhabitation.

This research focuses on the region of El Bierzo, an area of the community of Castilla y León, which is one of the regions most affected by the phenomenon of depopulation in Europe (Rico, 2020). El Bierzo, made up of 38 municipalities in the basin of the river Sil, in the north-western part of the province of León, has become a paradigmatic example of "Empty Spain" (Población, 2022). This region has lost 15% of its population in the last 20 years (Montes, 2020).

The centralist "development" model implemented since Franco's dictatorship, which assigned rural areas a subordinate role in the service of the urban world, the epicentre of growth, has turned peripheral and rural areas into sacrifice zones (Espinoza, 2022): destined, in any case, to the production of raw materials with relatively low added value, which makes them dependent on the acquisition of manufactured and industrial products with high added value (Rico, 2020); into zones of extractivism centred on the exploitation of large-scale biomass, polluting macro-farms, photovoltaic and wind farms, etc. as well as landfills for growing industrial and urban waste, which pollute land and aquifers (Valero and López, 2019).

The emigration of the population from rural areas caused by this model simultaneously entails a "socio-cultural emptying" (Alamá-Sabater et al., 2019) that significantly affects the social, cultural, educational and vital life of these areas, generating a silent violence of loneliness, forgetfulness and forgetfulness: the disappearance of knowledge, traditions and forms of collective relationships. This cultural emptying not only destroys geographical diversity, but also the socio-cultural diversity of the population and its territories (Poeta, 2019). It turns it into an empty and emptied place, a space without the capacity to resist, without memory or with a fragmented memory (García and Espejo, 2019).

To reverse this model, we believe that not only economic, social and cultural policies are required to combat the growing depopulation of rural areas; it is also necessary to create a positive and hopeful discourse of "re-inhabiting" villages from a life approach designed to build a society that cares for the planet, the only one we have, slow and close social relations, the relationship with nature and the ecosystem, the recovery of close and supportive relationships, the community of mutual support, etc. (Morales-Romo, 2023). In other words, a more habitable way

of living, knowing that we are eco-dependent and interdependent (Herrero, 2022).

Education has a fundamental role to play in promoting and promoting this approach. In short, in this research we asked ourselves whether schools, especially schools in rural areas, and in this case in the rural area of El Bierzo, really reflect in their curriculum, in their pedagogy, in their daily educational work and as educational communities, whether they are contributing to the development of this model. To this end, the advantages, opportunities and exciting challenges of life in a rural environment have been studied and analysed (Cubero et al., 2020; Herranz, 2020). Without an attractive future for rural areas, it will be difficult for people who want to live and build their future in rural areas to stay there (Biddle and Azano, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2023).

Methodology

Mixed design

A mixed research methodology was used, combining a quantitative instrument (questionnaire) with qualitative instruments (interview and focus group). The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies has been chosen, given the complementarity between both methodologies when studying a multidimensional phenomenon such as education (Aguilar-Solano, 2020; Cook and Reichardt, 1986). Ethical requirements have been complied with during this scientific research, respecting the rules related to authorship and intellectual property, and maintaining the confidentiality agreements with the participants and ensuring their anonymity, as well as requesting permission from the responsible families in the case of the participation of minors .

Participants

The sample universe was the teachers and students of El Bierzo in the province of León. The academic year 2020-2021 started with 39,863 students in El Bierzo under the responsibility of 2,880 teachers, according to the statistical data of the Junta de Castilla y León (Boya, 2021). The total sample consisted of 314 participants, of whom 121 were teachers and 193 pupils: 16 teachers and 37 pupils were interviewed. A further 13 teachers and 15 new students took part in the four focus groups. The people interviewed and in the focus groups were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (a) they were from different schools in the area, (b) they had different years of teaching and school experience, (c) there was parity in participation. The teacher questionnaire was answered by 92 teachers from

different schools and 141 pupils from different public schools in the area (secondary schools).

Strategies and instruments

Qualitative instruments

1. *Semi-structured interviews (ES)*: two models of semi-structured interviews have been created, one for each of the sectors of the educational community involved in the study (teaching staff: ES_p and pupils: ES_a), with the aim of obtaining their perception of the topic under investigation.

2. *Discussion Groups (DG)*: four discussion groups were held, consisting of meetings of 6 to 10 people who discussed the object of research. A focus group model was designed for teachers (GD_p) and another for students (GD_a), with flexible and open discussion scripts. The interactions and key issues that arise during the discussion are recorded and analysed afterwards.

Quantitative instruments

1. *Teachers' questionnaire (CU_p)*: a specific questionnaire was designed and divided into 5 thematic blocks: (a) identification data and location of the respondent; (b) teachers' perception of the future of the rural world; (c) rural imaginary of the school; (d) opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of life in rural versus urban environments; (e) voluntary participation in a subsequent personal interview was requested. An example of a question from the questionnaire conducted would be: "Do you think that the curricular materials used in the school show and value rural life and the rural world sufficiently?"

2. *Student questionnaire (CU_a)*: a specific questionnaire was also designed, divided into 3 blocks: (a) identification and location data; (b) perception of the future of the rural world; (c) advantages and disadvantages of rurality versus urbanity. The questions in each block were adapted to the level of the students. An example of a question from the questionnaire would be: "Do you think that what is taught at school encourages to value the rural area?"

These questionnaires were transferred to Google forms so that they could easily answer them via their mobile phone or computer and the results were collected quickly.

Procedure

To validate the research instruments and ensure that the questions and topics addressed were relevant and pertinent to the object of study, the Delphi method was used, a consultation technique in which the consensus of experts is sought through several rounds of questions and answers (Guilbert, 2021; Quezada et

al., 2020). In the first round, the questionnaire was presented to four university experts with research experience on the topic, who reviewed it and provided comments and suggestions for improvement. In the second round, a structured online discussion was conducted to discuss and clarify any remaining points of contention with the four experts and a fifth expert who contributed to this second round. This ensured that the instruments were rigorous and appropriate for the research.

Since there was a higher participation of male and female teachers and students in the questionnaire (with an average of 74%) than female teachers and students (with an average of 26%), it was decided to prioritise the participation of women in the interviews and focus groups. Therefore, 6 male and 10 female teachers and 12 male and 25 female students were interviewed. As for the focus groups, 5 male and 8 female teachers and 6 male and 9 female students participated. The interviews and focus groups were conducted by the researcher.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews and focus groups was carried out by means of content analysis according to the research objectives, coding and categorising the most significant elements in terms of their presence, frequency and intensity. In this way, the information was grouped coherently into categories according to their common elements and finally, through the contrast between the entire research team, the categories with the most relevance in the analysis and the objective sought were grouped and selected, according to which the results were organised.

A descriptive analysis of the results obtained from the questionnaires was carried out. Using figures and graphs to show trends, we tried to summarise, in a clear and simple way, the research data to show examples of the categories or to reinforce interpretations inferred in the descriptive analysis of the data (Hidalgo, 2019).

Results

The results are presented focusing on four categories that have been obtained in the process of analysing the data obtained:

- vision on the rural environment
- an educational vision of the rural
- vision for the future of the rural world
- transforming rural habitation.

The four categories are based on the objective of the research: to find out the assessment and expectations about the rural world that predominate among teachers and students in this rural area of El Bierzo (León), as well as to analyse whether the rural world is present in school materials and in the daily work of the school.

More than half of the teachers participating in the research (59%) have worked in rural areas for less than 8 years. But almost a third (29.7%) have more than a decade of teaching experience in rural areas.

Vision on the rural environment

In the research carried out, the interviews and focus groups with teachers highlighted aspects that improve the experience of living in a rural area, such as social proximity and the feeling of community and direct relationship with neighbours, as shown in the interviews: there are "*closer and more personalised relationships*", or a "*sense of belonging to a community*". The possibility of "*access to more affordable housing*", and also that "*there is less danger than in the city: more sense of security*".

For their part, the students who participated in the research refer to the advantages of living in a rural environment as "*not being so dependent on mobile phones*", the "*proximity to teachers*", "*it is more welcoming*", "*contact with nature and animals*", "*playing outdoors*", "*we all know each other*", "*real and healthier food*", "*you have more freedom to move around*", etc.

However, a certain pessimism seems to be perceived in some of the statements made in the interviews with teachers: "*It is assumed that the disappearance of the rural world as a way of life is irreversible*" (ESp13), "*The rural environment is stereotyped, ridiculed and treated superficially*" (ESp4); even "*it seems that if you do not live in a city you do not exist*" (ESp7) or "*socially it is considered that those who live in the villages are those who have no other option, losers*" (ESp9).

Furthermore, 59.8% of teachers in the questionnaire were of the opinion that society has created a stereotypical and unfavourable image of life in rural areas, as can be seen in Figure 1. Figure 1.

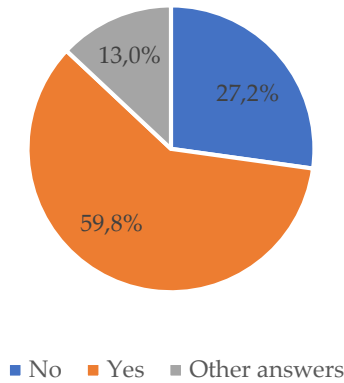


Figure 1. Do you think that a negative stereotypical view of rural life has been socially constructed?

However, during the interviews and focus groups, certain nuances regarding this perception emerged: *"it is simply not talked about"* (GDp2), *"yes stereotyped, but not negative"* (ESp6), *"more than negative, invisible or postcard, but not realistic, diverse and complex"* (ESp13), *"sometimes a romantic vision and others of backwardness, remoteness and ignorance of reality"* (ESp2) or *"I think that nowadays many people value the rural environment, but perhaps in the big cities there are still many prejudices and ignorance about it"* (GDp1).

Educational vision of the rural

The positive educational aspects highlighted by the teachers in the interviews and focus groups repeated the *"lower ratio"*, the *"greater ease of going out into the countryside and proximity to nature"*, the *"cooperation between ages"* referring to the multigrade or multilevel classrooms, that *"rural education is in contact with nature, is very social and transmits tranquillity, calm and tranquillity"* or that *"it favours the autonomy of the children as they can walk or cycle anywhere, play in natural environments..."*.

However, in the questionnaire more than half of the teachers, 55.4%, and 65.2% of the students stated categorically that the school does not encourage appreciation of the rural area, compared to 29.3% of the teachers and 27.7% of the students who were of the opposite opinion (Figure 2). Figure 2).

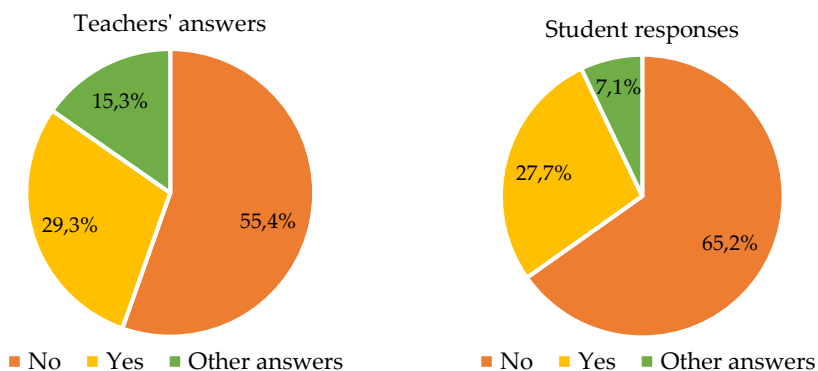


Figure 2. Do you think that what is taught at school encourages people to value the rural area? Teachers (left) and students (right).

70.9% of teachers focus this problem on the curricular materials used at school, considering that these "do not sufficiently show or value rural life and the rural world". However, 43.5% of teachers believe that pupils from rural areas cannot see themselves identified and valued, as inhabitants of this area, with the images, contents, examples, etc., which are habitually used in class, in teaching practice.

In the interviews, they confirm this by alluding to the fact that the curricular materials do not show "the great benefit that the rural area brings, avoiding the degradation of the natural environment" (ESp10) or what another teacher colleague points out: "there is no mention of the opportunities that can be found in the rural environment" (ESp5). In the same sense, one teacher stated that "the urban environment is associated with progress and the rural environment with the past, with a very poor vision of what happens in the rural environment" (GDp2).

Another major discussion centred on how textbooks dealt with the rural world. One teacher emphasised that "textbooks analyse the world from the perspective of cities; for example, in geography, urban planning is studied in cities, in one subject, rural population, so diverse in Spain, occupies a section of a learning standard" (ESp1). Speech corroborated by another fellow teacher in the focus group: "it is assumed that everything a child needs is in a city, they only refer to the rural environment when talking about the primary sector, they do not teach the benefits of living there and they do not talk about the disadvantages of the city" (GDp1).

In line with the above, there is a questioning of the curriculum proposed by the public education administrations: "Both in the curriculum and in the classes, the rural world is completely forgotten. In the curricula, a lot of importance is given to

economic values, consumerism, liberal entrepreneurship... everything centred on urban centres" (ESp2).

There was also space for comments which relativised the weight of the school in the construction of the image of rural areas: *"I don't think that it is promoted by the school, more by the media"* (ESp15). However, it should be pointed out that some teachers consider that *"teachers in rural areas manage the resources and methodology to ensure that the rural environment is valued very positively"* (ESp3; ESp11; ESp8).

With regard to pupils, 80.2% of pupils stated in the questionnaire that the school gives more importance or teaches them to value the urban environment more than the rural environment. In the qualitative field, the responses focused on the subjectivity and personal vision of the pupils: *"I have had teachers who laughed at me just for being from the village"* (ESa7). Also comments with a certain hindsight: *"from a young age we are taught concepts related to urban life (car, traffic lights, building, office), but we learn less about rural life in textbooks and classes"* (GDa1).

Vision for the future of the rural world

When asked about the key elements they considered necessary to attract people to live in rural areas, it is noteworthy to mention that in the survey the two most selected options were public services, health care, education (90.2%) and employment opportunities (84.8%). High-speed internet and Wi-Fi (75%) and communication services and public transport (73.9%) were the next most important options indicated. The least chosen options, although still significant in percentage, included leisure and cultural services (57.6%) and participation in associative organisations (47.8%).

On the other hand, pupils highlighted almost the same elements as teachers in terms of the importance of public services, health and education. However, during the interviews and group discussions, they also pointed out other aspects, such as leisure, culture, bars and local shops nearby: *"more leisure for young people"* or *"more leisure areas"*, *"bars"*, *"providing entertainment for both inhabitants and visitors"*, *"houses in good condition that can be lived in"*, *"cultural offer"*, *"possibility to stock up on all kinds of products without having to travel far"*, *"a clean and beautiful appearance"*, *"having schools to study at various levels"*, etc.

Regarding the projection of the future in the rural world promoted by the schools, the view is negative: *"at school they teach you that if you want to succeed you have to go to big cities with big universities"* (ESa11). In the same way, the focus is placed on the lack of emphasis on the positive expectations of the rural world in the area of employment: *"Nobody explains the advantages of a rural environment which, if one wanted to, would provide a lot of work"* (ESa3). 64.5% of students see

themselves living in a city in 15 years. While only 27% of pupils see themselves living in a town (Figure 3).

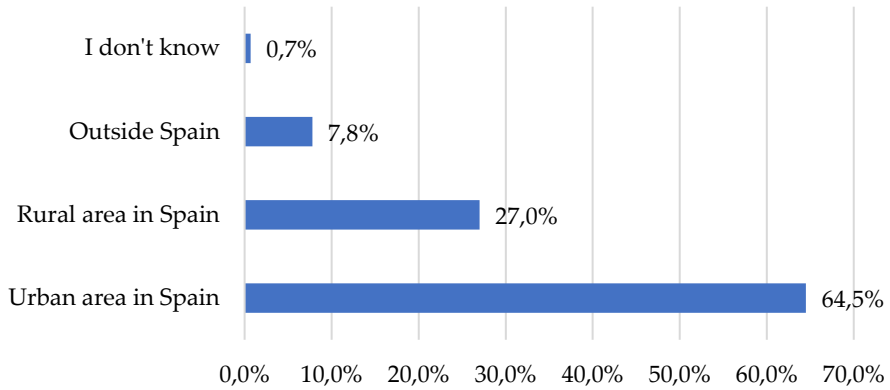


Figure 3. Where do you see yourself living in 15 years' time?

When students were asked about the possibility that they could choose where to live in the future, the situation changed. The number of students who would remain in a rural area almost doubles (46.1%), while those who would choose an urban area decreases significantly (37.6%). In other words, when asked where they really think they will live in the future, students are resigned, and when asked about the possibility of choice, students prefer to stay in a rural area as their first choice (

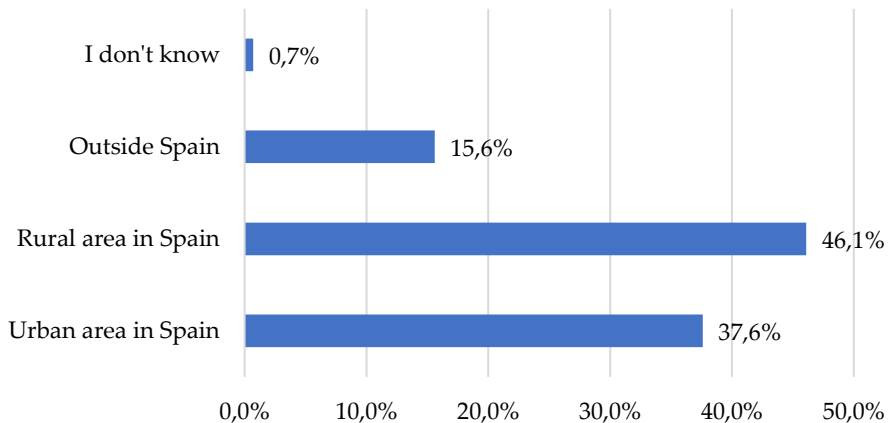


Figure 4).

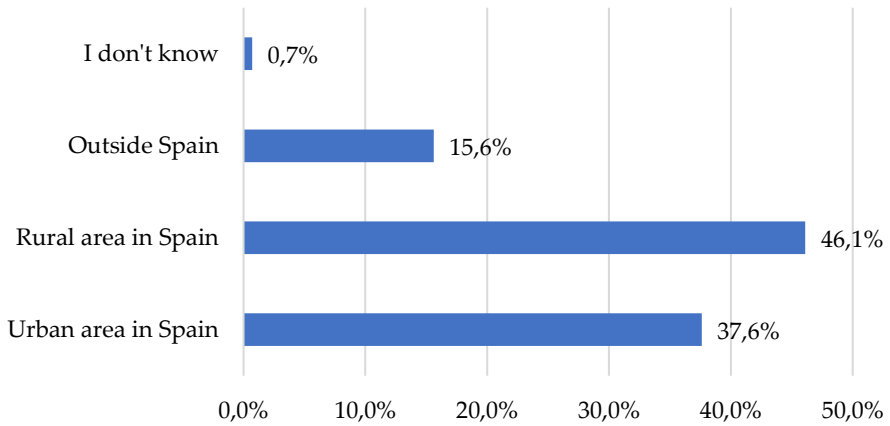


Figure 4. *If it were up to you and you could choose the place where would you choose to be living in 15 years' time?*

Transforming rural living

One out of four pupils said they would like to change and improve their village (

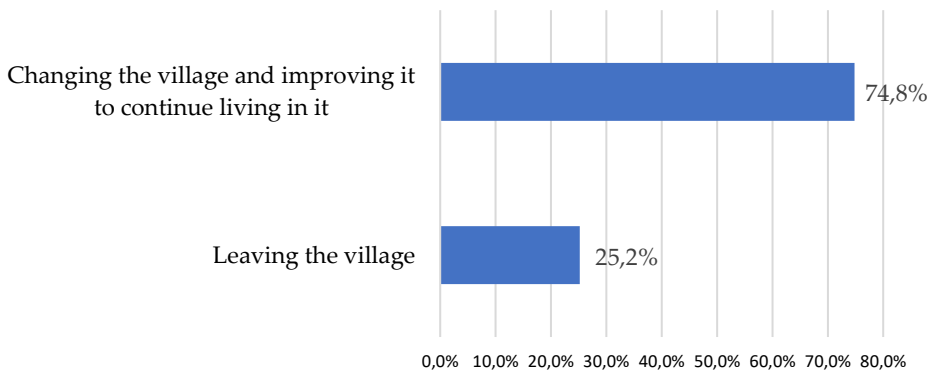


Figure 5), with the aim of continuing to live in the rural environment. In the light of these results, it is to be hoped that this optimism and hope will be backed up by concrete actions to transform the rural world, especially by the younger generations, who have more opportunities to give life and support to the repopulation of empty Spain.

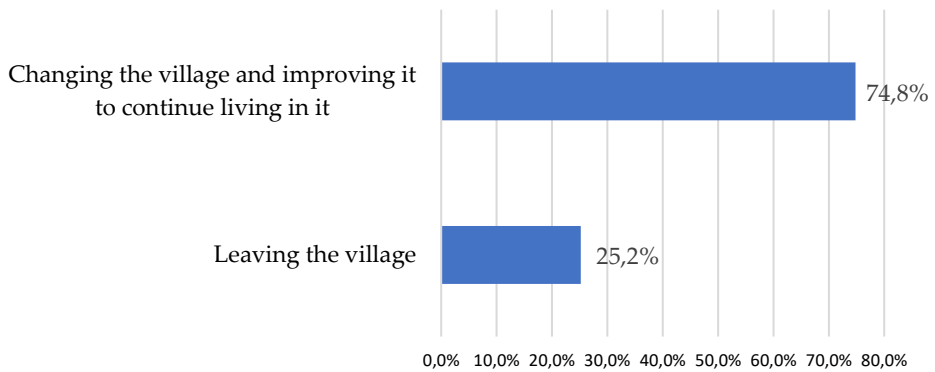


Figure 5. Do you want to change and improve the village or leave it?

It is therefore coherent to link this result with the following one, where teachers value the rural world much more highly than the urban world, in terms of quality of life. 65.2% of teachers and 44.7% of pupils (Figure 6) consider that there is more quality of life in rural areas.

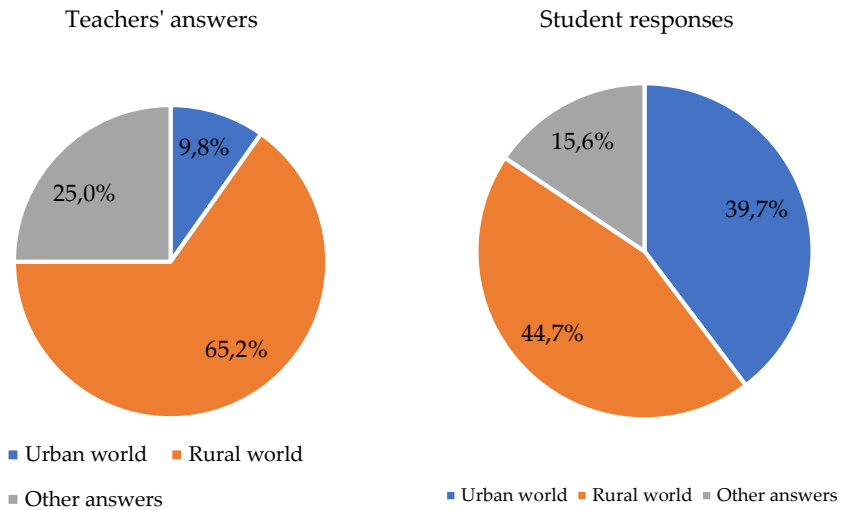


Figure 6. Where do you think there is more quality of life (teachers, left; students, right)?

They understand and specify as "quality of life", in the interviews and focus groups: "living without haste", "it is less likely to suffer stress"; healthier

environment: *"clean air and less pollution"*, contact with nature: *"it gives me the possibility of cultivating a vegetable garden and having animals, something unthinkable in an urban environment"*; in the rural area one can *"perceive the seasons and their changes"*; or proximity to rural areas that *"allow one to go out to the countryside or the mountains without difficulty"*; as well as less pollution in all its aspects: *"no noise pollution"* or the proximity to work: *"I go to work in two minutes and what I save on petrol I spend on books"*.

To close this category, it is worth highlighting the great difference between teachers, where only 9.8% of teachers say that there is more quality of life in the city than in the rural world, compared with almost 40% of pupils. It seems that what for teachers is quality of life (contact with nature, unhurried life, no pollution, quiet life), for pupils is identified more with a higher level of leisure, more access to the internet, more cultural life or more capacity for social relations. Perhaps this is the reason for the big difference shown in the results of the questionnaires.

Discussion

In order to make the school a driving force for transformation, it is necessary to ensure that the school itself changes its relationship with the rural environment, that it works towards a more hopeful imaginary (Rodríguez-Bueno, 2023).

It is difficult to see oneself as "re-inhabiting" a place that is neither offered nor presented to us as desirable. Schools can play a crucial role, rethinking their curriculum, their organisation, their relationship with the environment, their daily work in order to change the desirable expectations of the future in the rural world. It is one of the key factors for a future for empty Spain (Schnellert et al., 2023).

"The rural school is often forgotten in education, but the truth is that this institution is sometimes the only service that remains in the village and allows it to stay alive" (Pueyo, 2021, p. 26). But we have seen that the educational system and the rural school itself have forgotten, ignored or minimised the importance of the value of the rural environment in its contents, in its pedagogical planning, in its outlook and in the daily life of the school. Moreover, the rural school is still considered almost as an exception that tends to disappear progressively or, in any case, a peripheral diversity that is costly and abandoned by the educational administrations (Morales-Romo, 2023).

The rural world continues to be a "second-class" place compared to the urban world, anchored in a vision of inferiority, subordination and dependence on the urban world. Meanwhile, the urban world has become a reference of what is

desirable, of the "success" that is aspired to as a space for personal and social "success", constructing an urban-centric collective imaginary (Abós et al., 2021).

The added problem is that this urban-centric imaginary is also encouraged by the media and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, Be Real...). This continues to drive many young people to situate their expectations for the future outside rural areas, as it situates triumph and success in urban contexts, as they continually see in films and series, almost all of which are American-made, in digital communication and interaction networks (Domínguez, 2020; Rodríguez-Bueno, 2023).

The perception of both students and teachers in the north-west of empty Spain that participated in this research shows that rural schools themselves have largely introjected an urban-centric vision and continue to fail to value their own reality.

It is surprising in this sense that not enough emphasis has been placed on the pedagogical value of the educational model of the rural school and its relationship with the social, living and natural environment of its area, which could be a reference for urban education and not the other way around, as is usually the case, given the important pedagogical contributions and educational innovations that have marked the future of the rural school (Álvarez-Montoya, 2023; Jiménez, 2020; Schnellert et al., 2023).

Multigrade classrooms in rural schools that take advantage of the possibilities of learning together, students of different ages, in a collaborative way and practising mutual support, without renouncing the need to strengthen their own individual learning pace (Boix and Domingo, 2021). Multigrade classrooms that become places where intergenerational forms of social organisation are developed similar to those that take place outside school, in society, and where helping another classmate involves the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills that are essential for progressing in the deployment of one's own learning (González-Labrada et al., 2022).

Pedagogical strategies that are habitually developed in rural schools, such as the flexibilisation of time and space or project work from a vision of an integrated curriculum, which implies a global proposal that transcends the methodological perspective conventionally used (Mora et al., 2021).

And many other forms of pedagogical innovation and contributions to an authentic pedagogical renovation that are not usually valued from the urban sphere and that have characterised rural education, such as co-tutoring among students, the commitment to an ecological pedagogy with the natural environment, the more real possibility of inclusion in small groups with more personalised attention, collaboration and support among smaller teaching teams or the involvement of the school in community projects and social

transformation that are useful to their environment and help them to seek solutions and solve problems in their community (Abós et al., 2021; Arán, 2021; Jiménez, 2020; Piñero et al., 2023).

In conclusion, we consider that rural schools and the policies of the education system in general must make a real effort to give value to the rural world if we want it to have a future of hope that will allow us to re-inhabit the emptied Spain.

The rural school must be at the forefront in this recovery and enhancement of the value of "the rural", the communal, the ecological, the slow and leisurely life in a natural and more human environment than the big cities, if we want future generations to learn to appreciate this space as a desirable alternative to the stressed macro-industrial and spatial model governed by the individual interest of the urban world (Castro, 2023; Sequera, 2020).

The rural world will only have a possible future if a model of repopulation is resolutely promoted that stops encouraging the concentration of the population in industrial, administrative and tourist centres and if the administration supports and encourages re-inhabiting the territory in a balanced way and also with the promotion and dissemination of an imaginary that makes it desirable to live and build a future in rural areas from a more socially humane and ecologically sustainable approach with the only planet we currently have (González-Rodríguez et al., 2023). In this process, the education system, but especially education administrations, have an inescapable responsibility (Lorenzo et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Bueno, 2023; Sales et al., 2019; Santamaría-Cárdaba and Samp Pedro, 2020). Because schools are a key element in rural areas for building collective identity and social cohesion (Del Moral Pérez, 2017).

Logically, this educational policy must be accompanied by an economic, social and cultural policy that provides real employment opportunities in rural areas, access to land and decent housing, with a basic rural income that allows survival, with tax exemptions for those who re-inhabit the rural world, with high-speed online connection that allows digital communication, an essential common good today but linked to respect for digital sovereignty, with public transport services on demand as well as guaranteed social, educational and public health services, which also promotes new occupations not only linked to agriculture and livestock farming, as well as a plural and wide range of training and cultural development (Díez-Gutiérrez and Rodríguez-Rejas, 2021). Let us not forget that, as Herrero et al. (2019) say, a sustainable society is undoubtedly more rural than urban.

We would like to point out three essential limitations of the research carried out: (a) the intentional sampling method applied in the selection of the participant sample, (b) the fact that the sample is limited, and (c) that the study is focused on the area studied, Bierzo de León. Nevertheless, we have tried to

carry out an in-depth investigation, triangulating quantitative and qualitative instruments, which would allow the results of this research to be transferable to other territories with similar or similar characteristics and would serve the social community that participated in this study to put forward proposals and solutions that would help to reverse the process of emptying the rural areas of this "emptied Spain".

With a view to the future, this study lays the foundations for new research that not only covers more and larger territorial areas of "empty Spain", but also facilitates comparative research to discover the similarities and differences that may exist between the vision of the rural world held by those who live and study in an urban context and those who live and study in a rural environment.

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