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CATALOGUE OF ENABLING ELEMENTS FOR THE QUALITY OF RURAL SCHOOLS AS A PUBLIC SERVICE IN LOW-DENSITY SPAIN

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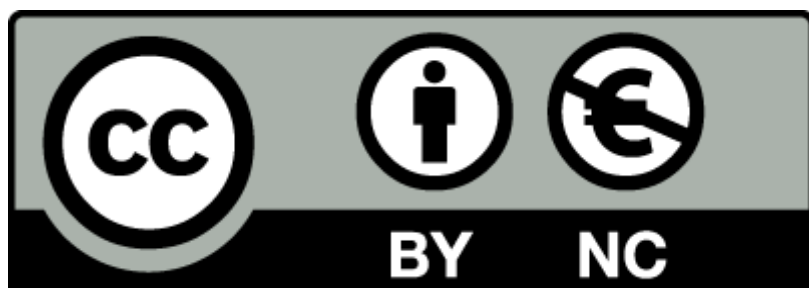


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GENERAL PROJECT OVERVIEW

Throughout the 21st century, and especially during the second decade of the same, the process of depopulation has intensified across large portions of Spain. This trend has led to increasing territorial inequalities in social, educational, and economic terms. Additionally, the digital divide and structural poverty processes have further reinforced these disparities. This territorial bias, which undermines interterritorial cohesion, also has a major impact on public services, particularly education and schools, whose presence in certain areas is often unfeasible due to demographics or population distribution patterns.

Rural schools, initially understood as educational institutions located in rural areas, are conceptualised as essential public services for territorial development. They act as key drivers with the potential to contribute to the demographic revitalisation of low-density and depopulated Spain, which largely overlaps with its most rural regions.

This project highlights the importance of rural schools as basic services for halting depopulation, based on principles of social justice, territorial equity, and educational equality. It also seeks to demonstrate how the rural school model has undeniable potential to positively impact the endogenous development of rural areas. The following are the general project objectives:

- (1) To determine the role of rural schools as basic services in low-population-density areas.
- (2) To assess the quality of educational service provision in these areas.
- (3) To propose improvement strategies that support social justice and territorial equity through rural education in depopulated and sparsely populated territories.

Additional specific objectives include:

- (1) To analyse and evaluate the pedagogical characteristics of rural schools in low-density areas.
- (2) To analyse and evaluate the territorial dimension of schools (as recipients of identities and emotions, active members of the territorial institutional system, generators of social capital, and agents of rural social construction).
- (3) To develop a catalogue of enabling elements that ensure the quality of educational services and enhance their contribution to territorial development, based on the analysis conducted for the previous objective. This catalogue may be systematised in an atlas format.
- (4) To design strategies that strengthen and raise public awareness of the role of rural schools as public services, and their contribution to territorial equity and sustainable rural development.

To achieve these goals, the project conducted three consecutive and interrelated studies using a mixed-methods approach, adapted to the research objectives and phases. This methodological combination enabled the use of complementary strategies and the triangulation of methods and analytical perspectives, permitting nuanced results that reflect the diversity and complexity of the socio-educational contexts under study.

The research team was guided by two principal investigators who are leading experts in the field of rural schooling. They were supported by sixteen additional researchers with expertise in this same area. Of these, eleven are based in the Spanish autonomous communities having the highest number of rural schools (Andalusia, Asturias, Aragon, Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, and Extremadura), which helped ensure the successful development of this ambitious project. Furthermore, twenty additional researchers formed a complementary working team, enabling the inclusion of other

regions that were not initially represented in the original project application (Galicia, the Canary Islands, and the Valencian Community).

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3

As previously stated, Specific Objective 3 of the project focuses on developing a catalogue of the elements that enable the quality of the educational service and enhance its contribution to territorial development. This objective is clearly aligned with Specific Objective 2, which aims to understand and assess the territorial dimension of schooling. Therefore, achieving Objective 2 was a prerequisite for preparing the catalogue.

The catalogue presented here is based on the conceptualisation of the rural school as an educational centre (CDnU) located in a rural and/or sparsely populated area, serving the local school-age population through multi-grade groupings. This organisational model ensures and upholds the right of children in these areas to receive a high-quality education with opportunities that are equal to those of children living in more densely populated towns and municipalities with urban-type schools (i.e., schools where each group typically consists of a single grade level).

The categories included in the catalogue are primarily derived from the results of the documentary analysis conducted in Study 1 of the project, as well as from the general premises guiding the selection of case studies in Study 3. These case studies were chosen for their embodiment of good practices through which school and rural territory jointly contribute. To identify these good practices, the team conducted an in-depth review of academic literature and legislation related to rural schools and their involvement in public policy and territorial development initiatives. This review is one of the project's most significant contributions.

Tables 1 through 5 summarise the catalogue's structure, highlighting the elements and content identified under each category. The presentation follows a consistent sequence: the concept is defined, followed by a brief documentary analysis, and then a selection of up to three pieces of evidence is provided to underscore its relevance. These may include examples of good practices, legislative documents referencing the element, or scientific research addressing the topic. Finally, each element includes a discussion of future challenges and issues that may arise.

The final chapter of this work provides the full list of bibliographic, legislative, and documentary references used.

Table 1: Territorial Dimension.

Category	Elements	Contents			Challenges and Issues
Territorial Dimension	Access to Education	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	
	Lifelong Learning	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	
	Territorial Heterogeneity	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	

Table 2: Pedagogical Characteristics.

Category	Elements	Contents	Challenges and Issues
Pedagogical characteristics	Flexible groupings	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Autonomous learning and self-management of knowledge	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Cooperative learning	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Attention to diversity and inclusive education	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Integrated and flexible curriculum	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Heterogeneous spaces	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Active and participatory methodologies	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Multi-grade teaching	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Personalisation	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Peer tutoring	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	

Table 3: Relationship with the Community

Table 6: Relationship with the Community					
Category	Elements	Contents			Challenges and Issues
Relationship with the community	Local community	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	
	Educational community (families)	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	

Table 4: Territorial Development

Category	Elements	Contents	Challenges and Issues
Territorial development	Service-learning (SL)	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Social capital	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Social commitment of education	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Entrepreneurial culture / entrepreneurial education	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Talent development and attraction	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Open school	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Innovation	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Shared projects	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	
	Knowledge transfer	Concept	
		Documental analysis	
		Evidence	
		GP Investigation Legislation	

Table 5: Construction of Territory and Collective Identity.

Category	Elements	Contents			Challenges and Issues
Territory-making and collective identity formation	Rootedness and identity formation	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	
	Heritage value	Concept			
		Documental analysis			
		Evidence			
		GP	Investigation	Legislation	

CATALOGUE OF CATEGORIES AND ELEMENTS

CATEGORY 1: TERRITORIAL DIMENSION

Element 1.1: ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Concept

“Access to education relies on three key elements: non-discrimination, physical accessibility, and economic accessibility” (UNESCO).

Documentary Analysis

“Promotion of policies, grants, and scholarships aimed at addressing identified needs at each educational level in rural areas” ([Doc. 55](#), p. 169).

“Maintenance of school units beginning with 4 pupils in Early Childhood and Primary Education” ([Doc. 56](#), p. 24).

“Actions are defined to provide greater guarantees for access to education throughout the territory” ([Doc. 58](#), p. 39).

Evidence

Good Practices

- The [Reviu programme](#) by the Valencian Regional Government strengthens rural schools as a strategy to combat depopulation through the promotion of rural education.
- The European Erasmus+ project [VETgoesRURAL](#). According to European Commission recommendations, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes must become more accessible to rural populations. *VETgoesRURAL* has the following objectives: to improve the skills and capacities of VET professionals to deliver higher quality training and encourage student engagement in isolated rural areas of the EU; to innovate educational practices; to develop methodologies and VET approaches that respond to the needs and expectations of professionals and students in these areas; to increase quality, participation, and retention in VET programmes; and to strengthen the capacities and practices of national, regional, and local VET networks.
- [Escuelas Familiares Agrarias](#) (EFA) have played a key role in anchoring rural populations in their own territories and limiting the depopulation of their regions of origin.

Research

- It is essential to ensure the continued existence of rural schools. These schools, which are public services, play a vital role in addressing early inequalities among students by providing the most valuable tools and strategies to overcome educational challenges ([Vázquez Recio, 2016](#)).
- It is also necessary to increase the visibility of rural schools and to position them appropriately within the educational landscape, given their importance in ensuring access to education in rural territories (Abós et al., 2021).

- Furthermore, the rural school should be understood as a key element in fighting depopulation, promoting early access to education, and supporting continued participation in the education system ([Carrascal & Magro, 2022](#)).

Legislation

- “The Canary Islands government shall promote specific support for rural schools with the aim of ensuring access to and continuity in the education system under equal conditions for all, regardless of their place of residence.” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 56).
- “...public authorities shall guarantee the right to education and access under equal conditions...” ([LOMLOE](#), Preamble); “...effective equality in access to and retention in the education system” ([LOMLOE](#), 2020, Art. 81).
- “High-quality public education will be guaranteed in rural areas (...) ensuring equal access to higher levels of education, as well as equal opportunities for those living in rural and urban areas alike.” ([Act on Economic, Social and Tax Measures to Counter Depopulation and Promote Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha, 2021](#), Art. 30).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Conducting a participatory assessment of the state of education in rural areas to generate key data that will inform public policies aimed at improving access to education and reducing territorial inequality.
- ✓ Developing comprehensive policies that incorporate so-called complementary services (transportation, school meals, work-life balance services, extracurricular programmes, and enrichment activities), given their particular importance in rural schools and their major influence on both educational access and rural community retention.
- ✓ Improving and/or creating well-equipped educational infrastructures (with internet connectivity and access to digital resources) near rural communities, to ensure that students do not have to travel long distances to receive a quality education. This would enable more learning opportunities and raise aspirations. These infrastructures should be accompanied by scholarships and financial aid to support access to non-compulsory education and special education services.

“School transport routes will continue to operate in rural areas for non-compulsory education stages.” (La Voz del Trubia, May 17, 2024).



Diario de Teruel, September 28, 2023

Element 1.2: LIFELONG LEARNING

Concept

Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and life. It encompasses learning activities for people of all ages (children, youth, adults, and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men), in all contexts (family, school, community, workplace, etc.), and through various modalities (formal, non-formal, and informal). Together, these activities cover a wide range of learning needs and demands ([UNESCO, Institute for Lifelong Learning](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“All individuals have the right to lifelong learning. To ensure the effective exercising of this right, regional governments will promote flexible learning opportunities that permit the reconciliation of personal, professional, and family life with education” ([Doc. 7](#), p. 41).

“Lifelong learning is a shared responsibility of various institutions that addresses the needs of the entire population by increasing employment opportunities, supporting the acquisition and updating of knowledge and skills, and promoting social integration” ([Doc. 76](#), p. 82).

“Along with other structures, the rural school must actively participate in the educational service understood as a lifelong process” ([Doc. 93](#), p. 285).

Evidence

Good Practices

- *Employment retention through the development of technological skills.* The KEMP Course emerged as an initiative of the Lifelong Learning Programme, aimed at addressing the educational challenges of an increasingly ageing population by supporting the development of ICT-based learning content, services, and practices, and by equipping workers with the tools and skills required to adapt to change and remain in the workforce—with a particular focus on digital skills ([CREMOLE, 2009](#)).
- [CPEPA Hermanas Catalán de Odón](#): One of the centre’s hallmarks is its collaborative work and interaction with the community and local heritage.
- [FADEMUR](#) (*Federation of Rural Women’s Associations*): Offers training and support for the creation of rural service cooperatives. Its goals include providing specialised training to unemployed women in rural areas—especially those at risk of social exclusion—and empowering women currently engaged in caring for the elderly in situations of dependency, supporting their entry into the labour market.



Research

- The most frequent attitude in this area of education is appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism, *confirming* the new direction *being taken by* adult education ([Pascual & Fombona, 2019](#)).
- Some key proposals for the future of rural schools include the importance of lifelong learning and coordination with other stakeholders through network-building, especially with local councils and regional administrations ([Etxarte, 2019](#)).

- *Individuals taking part in activities offered in rural settings report high levels of satisfaction with the benefits that they receive. These are not only educational or cultural in nature. The main benefits are related to socialisation, companionship, friendship, and community life. Given the context in which these individuals live, with increasingly widespread isolation and loneliness, these aspects should take on a central role in shaping their lives* ([Alonso, 2021](#)).

Legislation

- “Implementation of vocational training programmes for the unemployed and combined employment-training programmes, *especially* in proximity services and care for dependent persons. Vocational training for employed workers, training in entrepreneurial and managerial skills, as well as training in new activities and technologies” ([Act for the Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment, 2007](#), Art. 22).
- “According to the terms established by the specific law regulating it, *adult education aims to ensure* the right to education at any *life* stage” ([Catalonia Education Act, 2009](#), Art. 69).
- “*Within* the framework of a lifelong learning culture, *non-formal education includes* all educational activities, media, and contexts that take place outside of formal education and are aimed at *individuals* of any age (with a particular focus on children and young people). *These activities have an educational value in themselves and are explicitly designed to meet educational objectives in various areas of social life, including* personal development, the promotion of community values, sociocultural engagement, social participation, quality of life, the arts, technology, leisure, or sports, among others” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 5 bis).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ *Improving* coordination among institutions and *organisations* that offer lifelong learning programmes (both formal and non-formal) *that are* targeted at residents of rural areas. In addition, Adult Education Centres (CEPA) should work directly with their communities, playing an active role in the socio-educational and cultural *revitalisation* of rural settings, and cooperating closely with schools at compulsory education levels.
- ✓ *Designing and implementing* programmes that incorporate diverse methodologies (dual, online, evening courses, etc.) and cross-cutting approaches (environmental education, digitalisation, etc.), *especially* in non-compulsory education stages. These should facilitate access to adults and/or those in situations of heightened vulnerability and *they should* be tailored to specific territorial needs.
- ✓ *Ensuring* that all activities adopt an inclusive and equitable approach, particularly through policies *addressing* the educational needs arising from migration dynamics.

Element 1.3: TERRITORIAL HETEROGENEITY

Concept

“Rural territory is far from a homogeneous concept (...) a new territorial landscape has gradually emerged as a result of the new functions that society assigns to this space...” ([Fundació Món Rural, 2019](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Defining rural schools is challenging given their diversity and heterogeneity, which also characterises the contexts in which they operate” ([Doc. 17](#), pp. 216–217).

“Acknowledging territorial, social, and resource diversity (...) along with their specific features and challenges” ([Doc. 62](#), pp. 219–220).

“New social contexts and challenges demand that we address this new sociodemographic reality”
([Doc. 74](#), p. 14).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Eduteka: The course “[Territories as Organisers of Education](#)” aims to critically examine the relationship between territory and education, and to understand how territories shape educational and social outcomes.
- [Territorial Distribution of Educational Competencies in Spain](#): Responsibilities are divided among the General State Administration, autonomous communities, local authorities, and educational centres.
- Creation of the Territorial Service in Central Catalonia: This service encompasses 169 municipalities, aiming to bring the administration closer to citizens and facilitate the decentralisation of education, taking decisions that are more responsive to local needs.

Research

- When referring to the rural context, there is a clear recognition of the influence of the territorial dimension on education (Champollion, 2011), since the territory itself acts as a primary educational agent, shaping various dimensions of the educational domain ([Champollion, 2022](#)).
- Rurality is an uneven and heterogeneous reality (Rubio, 2021) since neither territories, nor the relationships and interrelations that they sustain, are identical.
- The *Manual of Good Landscape Practices* compiles strategies and actions aimed at revitalising rural spaces, promoting their socioeconomic development, and enhancing the quality of life for rural residents. Each identified practice includes a detailed profile describing the challenges and opportunities for its implementation and potential transferability to other territories ([Pérez et al., 2024](#)).

Legislation

- “... to specifically guide policies aimed at developing rural areas in the Chartered Community of Navarre” ([Rural Development Act of Navarre, 2003](#), Art. 1).
- “In Cantabria, these factors are compounded by severe territorial imbalances caused by coastalisation and peri-urbanisation, as well as the decline of certain inland rural municipalities, resulting in a coast–interior valleys divide” ([Resolution Approving the Strategy to Address Demographic Challenges in Cantabria, 2019–2025](#), p. 265).
- “The areas that make up the rural territory of Castilla-La Mancha will be classified into the following categories: sparsely populated areas, areas at risk of depopulation, intermediate rural areas, and peri-urban rural areas” ([Act on Economic, Social, and Fiscal Measures Against Depopulation and for Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha, 2021](#), Art. 11).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Educational planning for the school network must consider demographic, social, and economic diversity, permitting flexibility in decision-making that transcends political boundaries.
- ✓ Promoting education that is more closely aligned with both the needs and strengths of different territories.
- ✓ Implementing cross-cutting policies in the planning of essential public services (education, healthcare, culture, care services, women’s services, youth programmes, etc.).

CATEGORY 2: PEDAGOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Element 2.1: FLEXIBLE GROUPING

Concept

Albericio (1994) defines flexible grouping as an “organisational modality by which students may be grouped in different ways to adapt their progress, learning pace, interests, and needs to distinct classroom situations” (p. 49).

Documentary Analysis

“One of the most distinctive characteristics of rural schools is flexible grouping” ([Doc. 125](#), p. 2).

“This flexibility has been inherent to rural schools since their earliest origins; it is one of their hallmarks. It is the same organisational flexibility that, fortunately, is now becoming popular in age-homogeneous schools through what is known as ‘flexible grouping’” ([Doc. 199](#), p. 10).

“In rural classrooms, work is carried out using various grouping methods: in pairs, in groups, etc” ([Doc. 216](#), pp. 676–677).

Evidence

Good Practices

- At Escola Mont Cós ([ZER El Llierca](#), Catalonia), inter-level workshops, learning stations, and project-based learning are implemented, requiring a flexible student organisation that accommodates various types of groupings.
- The learning boxes developed by teachers at CRA CELUMBRES are aimed at both Early Childhood and Primary Education. They are designed for multi-grade, heterogeneous groups, and are suitable for all ages—an excellent tool for adapting to different learning paces and dynamics within the classroom, allowing both younger and older students to engage with the same content.
- Project-based learning at CRA Teruel 1 (Aragon) involves diverse types of grouping (younger students, older students, classroom assemblies, learning cycles, pairs, individual work, etc., by classroom, by school, or across the entire CRA).

Research

- Grouping students begins with the principle of respecting natural heterogeneity and serves as a foundation for learning from and with others (Boix, 2004).
- The presence of students from various age groups enables the creation of flexible groupings, which facilitate differentiated instruction and support student development based on their curricular competency levels ([Bustos, 2006](#)).
- Experiences with flexible grouping consistently prioritise student learning processes over teacher-led instructional processes. Therefore, organisational flexibility is essential, permitting multiple grouping formats within the school and classroom depending on student characteristics, interests, motivations, and learning need ([Calatayud, 2018](#)).

Legislation

- “Schools shall have the autonomy to flexibly organise groups and subjects and to adopt other measures to address diversity... Flexible grouping may be considered, among other measures” ([Andalusian Education Act, 2007](#), Art. 48).
- “These operational models may include work plans, forms of organisation, student groupings, extended school hours, or innovation and research projects...” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 60.2).
- “Educational authorities shall encourage schools to implement flexible measures in the organisation of subjects, instruction, space, and time, and should promote methodological alternatives to personalise and enhance learning and student outcomes” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 19.5).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Design and implementation of specific regulations for multi-grade schools/classrooms that support school autonomy and consider the diversity of students, territories, and institutions.
- ✓ Positioning students as the central axis of organisational decision-making criteria.
- ✓ Teacher training in multi-grade didactics and the promotion of co-teaching practices.

Element 2.2: AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND SELF-MANAGEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Concept

Autonomous learning refers to the learner’s ability to organise their own learning process (to guide, regulate, and evaluate it) within the context of their interaction with the environment and with others (Piaget, Vygotsky, etc.).

Documentary Analysis

- “The pedagogical approach that characterises rural schools highlights responsibility, a key aspect of teaching for understanding, linked to the triad of freedom, autonomy, and decision-making” ([Doc. 121](#), pp. 10–11).
- “As a transversal and methodological competence, autonomous learning requires the development of the following abilities: self-management of one’s own learning; confidence in one’s decisions; assuming responsibility for those decisions; and an understanding of interdependence and personal intra-dependence, without relying on others” ([Doc. 160](#), p. 5).
- “...the rural school can and should promote autonomy.” ([Doc. 212](#), p. 75).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Organisation of spaces and development of autonomy at [CEIP Eutiquio Ramos](#) (Asturias).
- The Learning Zones approach followed by [ZER Conca de Barberà](#) (Catalonia) enhances student autonomy and personal initiative. One of the school’s priorities is to assist each child in becoming responsible for their own learning, encouraging them to take initiative in their tasks by setting personal challenges and finding the tools required to make progress.
- At [CRA La Alifara](#) (Aragon), a weekly “practical life” session has been introduced, at which students engage in everyday activities that are usually performed by adults but have been adapted for children. These activities foster autonomy and boost the students’ self-esteem.

Finding and Folding Matching Pairs of Socks:



Research

- In many multi-grade classroom situations, students gradually develop the ability to work independently given that their teacher's attention is divided across different grade levels ([Boix & Bustos, 2015](#)).
- Students in rural schools tend to be quite autonomous, since routines are established that allow them to work with minimal adult assistance ([Barba, 2014](#)).
- As Sinclair, McGrath, and Lamb (2000) pointed out, the goal is not for the teacher to relinquish all initiative and control, but rather, for them to create teaching-learning situations that encourage students to consciously reflect on their own learning process and everything that it entails, together with their peers.

Legislation

- "The second principle is based on autonomy and participation. The current challenge is to educate autonomous individuals who understand and engage in the contemporary world (...). This involves selecting relevant curriculum content, teaching methods, learning experiences, assessment systems and strategies, and organisational models that foster meaningful learning and the autonomous development of personal, social, and professional identity" ([Cantabria Education Act, 2008](#), Preamble).
- "To enable students to develop strategies for self-regulated learning, autonomous learning, and the performance of professional activities" ([Catalonia Education Act, 2009](#), Art. 52.h).
- "Fostering meaningful learning for the development of transversal competencies that promote autonomy and reflection" ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 19.2).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Assessment of existing educational infrastructure in rural areas (accessibility, structural deficiencies, location, etc.).
- ✓ Construction of new facilities based on pedagogical criteria, with multipurpose use and openness to the community.
- ✓ Teacher training in active methodologies and promotion of co-teaching.

Element 2.3: COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Concept

"Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximise their own learning and that of their peers" (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 5).

Documentary Analysis

“The conditions of rural schools foster a collaborative mindset and cooperative learning among students” ([Doc. 93](#), p. 283).

“This type of grouping encourages cooperative learning: students rely on each other, and this interdependence enhances individual responsibility within the group, as well as positive interactions throughout the learning process” ([Doc. 142](#), p. 13).

“Moreover, small group sizes and classroom heterogeneity are not considered negative or limiting, but rather, they offer opportunities for cooperative learning through respect for differing maturity levels” ([Doc. 204](#), p. 15).

Evidence

Good Practices

- The [cooperative classroom](#) is an inclusive, participatory space where students work together on various projects using cooperative learning: “A skating corner in the playground,” “Building a bike rack,” “A pottery classroom,” or “Discovering the Fallas festival” ([CRA El Pinar](#), Valencian Community).
- In the [R3 Project](#) at [CRA La Marina](#) (Asturias), students from five different schools have collaborated using remote experiments.
- At [CPR Tiñosa](#) (Andalusia), education “seen from a village” uses cooperative learning and cross-curricular projects to take advantage of its natural environment and the local community.



Research

- It may be argued that cooperative learning achieves similar levels of content acquisition as traditional methods, while significantly improving the development of social skills ([Barba, 2010](#)).
- Cooperative work is a common learning strategy in rural classrooms. It is closely aligned with the needs and realities of rural students. Its implementation depends largely on the coordination models established among teachers, which provide coherence and meaning to the project. Therefore, technological tools serve as key resources to facilitate coordination, communication, and interaction ([Del Moral & Villalustre, 2012](#)).
- Cooperative learning methodologies are connected to the communicative approach to English language teaching. This promotes peer interaction, supports the development of social and communication skills, and addresses classroom diversity through heterogeneous groupings by age, background, and ability. This approach promotes the development of linguistic competencies, participatory attitudes, active listening, and tolerance for differing ideas ([Sebastián, 2017](#)).

Legislation

- “In basic education, the duty to respect different learning rhythms, address student diversity according to individual needs, and employ active, participatory, and teamwork-based methods is sacred” ([Extremadura Education Act, 2011](#), Preamble).
- “The structure and organisation of schools must define learning environments that enable networked collaboration” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 24.4).
- “To promote competence integration, the school timetable will allocate time to meaningful student projects and collaborative problem-solving” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 19.4).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Assessment of the existing educational infrastructure in rural areas (accessibility, structural deficiencies, location, etc.).
- ✓ Construction of new facilities based on pedagogical criteria, designed for multipurpose use and open to the community.
- ✓ Teacher training in active methodologies and the opening of the school to members of the educational.
- ✓ Teacher training in active methodologies and the opening of the school to members of the educational and local community as active participants in student learning.

Element 2.4: ATTENTION TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Concept

“An inclusive school embraces diversity as a foundational principle, ensuring that all children and young people (girls and boys) have access to quality education with equal, fair, and equitable opportunities. The goal of such a school is the academic success of all students, recognising that true excellence is achieved when every student reaches the fullest development of their personal abilities, oriented towards acquiring basic competencies” ([Framework Plan for the Development of an Inclusive School, Basque Government, 2019](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Rural schools are currently experiencing additional layers of diversity in addition to their traditionally diverse reality” ([Doc. 74](#), p. 14).

“It is, in fact, the democratisation of the multi-grade classroom as a vehicle for and builder of diversity” ([Doc. 147](#), p. 9).

“Diversity is an undeniable and inescapable reality in our classrooms. A fundamental trait of all individuals is that each brings their own idiosyncrasies. This means that everyone contributes their unique intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics to society” ([Doc. 216](#), pp. 172–173).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Personalised and inclusive education: We aim for the educational success of all students through personalisation, proximity, teamwork, and pedagogical models focused on equity, inclusion, and educational transformation toward quality (Use of ICT, innovation in PE...) ([CRA Río Aragón](#), Aragón).

- [Inclusive education through the implementation of the Universal Design for Multilevel Learning](#).
- “[Diversidad CRA](#)”: A blog of resources for the educational community at [CRA Castrillón-Illas](#) (Asturias).



Research

- Teachers in rural schools recognise the importance of planning, assessment (of students and of themselves), methodology, resources, and time in addressing diversity. They also perceive that their practices in these areas encourage attention to heterogeneity ([Vigo, 2009](#)).
- When multi-grade teaching is considered an opportunity and not merely a structural necessity, rural schools are enriched by inclusive practices, through which differences become a didactic resource, and students regulate their own learning process ([Domingo-Peñafiel, 2014](#)).
- Rural schools are inherently inclusive, never restricting access or arbitrarily discriminating against any student. They welcome the full diversity of their surrounding territory ([Núñez et al., 2016](#)).

Legislation

- “The general principles of inclusive schooling to be developed within the Canary Islands’ education system include the following: a) School autonomy to reflect local microcultures and school practices that support attention to diversity” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 42.4a).
- “Respect for and recognition of diversity within the framework of an inclusive school” ([Extremadura Education Act, 2011](#), Art. 2.j).
- “Guarantee a public school network that inclusively meets the needs of compulsory education” ([Act on Rural Development in Aragon, 2023](#), Art. 57.a).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Educational planning for diversity support services based on real needs and proximity to students’ homes.
- ✓ Inclusive and accessible educational infrastructure, both existing and newly developed.
- ✓ Collaborative networks between all diversity support services (healthcare, early intervention, social services, transport, etc.).

Element 2.5: INTEGRATED AND FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM

Concept

Curriculum integration is essentially about organising and presenting the educational curriculum around a thematic axis that meaningfully connects various content areas. This makes learning more recognisable and understandable for students since it reflects their reality and situations that capture their attention and interest, permitting deeper and more authentic understanding. An integrated

curriculum incorporates the idea of unity among various forms of knowledge and disciplines and allows for both practical and theoretical approaches ([Álvarez et al, 2020](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“It is necessary to make school organisation and curriculum planning more flexible in rural schools... It appears essential to incorporate the study of the environment, especially local and regional heritage (historical, cultural, artistic, natural...), into the rural school curriculum” ([Doc. 76](#), pp. 316–317).

“A contextualised curriculum. Within the framework of school autonomy, adapting the official curriculum to the uniqueness of the multi-grade school through the school-wide curricular project and annual general programme (across the entire CRA), and corresponding classroom-level planning” ([Doc. 154](#), p. 12).

“A curriculum that takes into account the territorial dimension, with schools organised around shared educational projects, and the value of the multi-grade classroom organised by interest, in accordance with a pedagogical model based on learning to learn” ([Doc. 159](#), p. 24).

Evidence

Good Practices

- *Education through your rural environment*: This project aims to integrate cultural aspects, knowledge, and values from the student’s context into their academic education (Andalusia).
- [CRA del Ebro](#) (Aragon) uses methodologies that integrate different curricular areas (min. 3, sec. 19 of video).
- *Vendoval Media: Rural Audiovisual Community* – CRA Río Viar (Extremadura): An interdisciplinary project where students research, create, explore, develop, and present content on current affairs, and local, national, and international history.

Research

- Integrated curricula in rural schools offer a comprehensive approach that extends beyond conventional methods. The case studies reveal progress toward a more integrated and contextual model based on projects, student-centred active methodologies, and diverse materials, with a socio-constructivist orientation ([García-Prieto & Pozuelos, 2017](#)).
- The development of an integrated curriculum addresses dynamic topics including diverse types of knowledge—not just academic—and fosters meaningful student engagement. It defies rigid planning and requires varied resources. Its adaptability is as wide-ranging as the differing needs of the distinct educational contexts ([Pozuelos & García Prieto, 2020](#)).
- The curriculum should be an open and flexible working and reference tool, and also a rigorous one, ensuring that schools and teaching teams can adapt it to their context (*CEIP Ramón y Cajal*, Alpartir, 2019).

Legislation

- “Bringing education closer to rural areas as a fundamental instrument of territorial cohesion by offering quality instruction through an educational structure and curricular designs tailored to the specific features of rural Navarre” ([Rural Development Act of Navarre, 2003](#), Preamble).
- “To facilitate student acquisition of coherent knowledge enabled by an interdisciplinary vision of content” ([Andalusian Education Act, 2007](#), Art. 37.c).

- “To ensure that students receive a comprehensive education supported by a global and interdisciplinary perspective, enhancing meaningful and relevant learning” ([Cantabria Education Act, 2008](#), Art. 8.b).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training (both initial and continuous) in multi-grade didactics.
- ✓ Greater flexibility from educational authorities in developing institutional documents, and in organising timetables, mentoring, subject specialisation, diversity support, etc., aligned with the real needs of multi-grade schools and classrooms.
- ✓ Promotion of co-teaching.

Element 2.6: HETEROGENEOUS LEARNING SPACES

Concept

The learning environment is the third teacher. A well-prepared space also functions as an educator. Therefore, the organisation of the physical environment is essential in order to inspire learning, experimentation, communication, and inquiry. (Loris Malaguzzi, Reggio Emilia Schools)

Documentary Analysis

“The community, in turn, makes use of the school’s facilities and services. The rural school is an institution that gives life to the village” ([Doc. 93](#), p. 283).

“It is worth recalling that the places where rural schools are located may include the towns themselves, their landscapes, and geographic settings, as part of their natural heritage” ([Doc. 160](#), p. 11).

“The spatial layout in rural schools is also different: necessity becomes a virtue. With mixed-age classrooms, the needs vary greatly, and the space adapts to these realities” ([Doc. 176](#), p. 13).

Evidence

Good Practices

- At [CRA de Valga](#) (Galicia), students are educated in close contact with nature: *“At the CRA, we don’t limit ourselves to the physical boundaries of the classroom—we make use of all spaces having educational potential.”* —Antía Piñeiro, headteacher.



CATEGORY 2: PEDAGOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- “Last Wednesday, the boys and girls from the Freixinet School ([ZER El Solsonès](#), Catalonia) visited El Miracle. At the beginning of the visit, we explored the Town Hall area. Then, we visited the Bee area, entering a large beehive. We also saw honey. Then, we toured the various rooms of the large house: the dining room, hearth, kitchen, and stables. Finally, we had breakfast and went for a walk-in nature.”
- Learning environments foster the *learning-to-learn* competence while addressing student diversity (with indoor environments in hallways, and outdoor environments during recess). These are complemented by the use of additional spaces, such as municipal facilities ([CRA Montesnegros](#), Aragon).



Research

- The rural environment facilitates close contact with nature—something that is not possible in the overcrowded urban schools. It allows for the development of a range of pedagogical activities and strategies that connect the school with its surroundings, effectively turning the environment into a generalised educational resource and source of motivation (MRP Aula Libre, 1990).
- Outdoor spaces: Often, these are highly enriching and offer numerous opportunities for learning in the natural environment ([Pedraza, 2011](#)).
- Spaces for both formal and informal learning... not limited to enclosed, static areas, but including open environments, thematic corners, and flexible learning settings ([Murillo, 2024](#)).

Legislation

- “... encouraging (...) contact with green spaces” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Preamble).
- “The structure and organisation of schools must define learning environments that support networked learning and diverse forms of knowledge transmission to groups or classes, as well as individual activities for study and work” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 24.4).
- “The use of natural and rural environments as educational resources will be promoted at all levels of the education system. This will permit differentiated activities in rural areas that leverage their environmental and social surroundings, in contrast to urban settings. It will also highlight the value of rural culture and knowledge in Extremadura” ([Act on Demographic and Territorial Challenges in Extremadura, 2022](#), Art. 61.2).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training in the use of alternative resources and materials beyond textbooks.

- ✓ Flexibility in scheduling to permit longer periods of time for excursions into natural and social environments.
- ✓ Promotion of multi-purpose spaces shared by the school and the local community (e.g., sports halls, green areas, municipal or cultural spaces).

Element 2.7: ACTIVE AND PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES

Concept

Active methodologies are, above all, a perspective and a school paradigm that emphasise who is learning, for what purpose, and how this learning occurs. These methodologies focus on individuals and processes, not merely on content ([Murillo, 2024](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“... this leads to the use of flexible, participatory methodologies that support the development of learning strategies suited to diverse levels, abilities, and interests, while also promoting interdisciplinary and inter-level work” ([Doc. 144](#), p. 9).

“Project-based work in rural schools integrates the local environment with the school experience” ([Doc. 156](#), p. 7).

“Despite recognising the challenges of multilevel classrooms, teachers value classroom heterogeneity since it enables more flexible methodologies and educational innovation, fostering more holistic education resulting in better academic outcomes” ([Doc. 115](#), p. 4).

Evidence

Good Practices

- We promote the integration of new methodologies in the classroom, such as learning boxes and flexible learning environments, to meet our students’ educational needs and maximise their learning potential ([CRA Somontano Bajo Aragón](#), Teruel, Aragón).



- The Villas del Tajo Rural School Group (Toledo, Castilla-La Mancha) was a finalist in the SIMO 2024 awards in the Rural School category with two innovative projects. One, entitled “[A destajo por el Tajo](#)”, simultaneously develops multiple competencies through a hybridisation of methodologies that enable the creation of a flexible classroom environment.
- The CRA Villayón (Asturias), featured in the [Unexpected Auditors](#) campaign under the Samsung Smart School programme, supported the adoption of new methodologies and improved digital and communication competencies among students.

Research

- The multi-grade experience reveals the need to diversify teaching strategies, not in terms of higher or lower quality, but as complementary and inclusive approaches. This diversification enables every student to participate in the learning process according to their strengths rather than their limitations ([Santos, 2011](#)).
- Methodologies should teach students how to learn, foster interaction and group work, support peer tutoring through differentiated organisation of students, space, and time, and establish strong links with the community and region. Project-based methodologies exemplify this approach by integrating the environment into a collaborative and community-centred learning experience ([García-Prieto & Pozuelos, 2017](#)).
- Improving digital competence in rural schools is essential for fostering inclusive and integrated education in a globalised society. The current challenge no longer revolves around resources or connectivity, but rather, it relates to teachers recognising the potential of new technologies and the social-structural characteristics of rural schools to implement projects that support social justice and inclusion for all students, regardless of where they live ([Morales, 2017](#)).

Legislation

- “Teaching methodologies in these educational stages should be fundamentally active and participatory, supporting both individual and cooperative learning” ([Andalusian Education Act, 2007](#), Art. 46.3).
- “Teaching methodologies in these educational stages should be active and participatory...” ([Castilla-La Mancha Education Act, 2010](#), Art. 46.1).
- “Methodology should consider student learning rhythms and be fundamentally active and participatory, encouraging autonomous learning and teamwork” ([Extremadura Education Act, 2011](#), Art. 88.3).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training in technology (ICT, audiovisual resources, collaborative networks, etc.).
- ✓ Promotion of resource use beyond textbooks, providing financial support for families.
- ✓ Exchange of experiences and best practices through networks of rural, multi-grade classrooms and schools.

Element 2.8: MULTI-GRADE TEACHING

Concept

This pedagogical situation involves students of different ages and grades learning together in the same classroom. It is a defining characteristic of rural schools, given the low enrolment, and suggests that the multi-grade teaching-learning process (didactics) has intrinsic pedagogical, psychological, and epistemological value.

Documentary Analysis

“There are rural schools and multi-grade CRA classrooms of distinctive pedagogical and methodological characteristics due to their small size, mixed-age grouping, and close ties to the educational community. These are essential to ensuring the right to education in rural villages and maintaining the social fabric of rural territories” ([Doc. 75](#), p. 146).

“What makes rural schools different is that they are multi-grade” ([Doc. 76](#), p. 20).

“Multi-grade teaching as an opportunity, not merely a structural necessity” ([Doc. 144](#), p. 9).

Evidence

Good Practices

- *The miracle of the minimum school* (CPR Valle de San Juan, Jaén, Andalusia).
- [CRA Nosa Señora do Faro](#) (Galicia) actively promotes multi-grade instruction.
- [Borredà School](#), part of ZER Berguedà Centre (Catalonia), groups a small number of students in multi-grade classrooms where children of different ages learn together.

Research

- Multi-grade classrooms in rural schools allow for varied instructional levels and experimentation with different types of groupings based on grade and curricular competence (Bustos, 2008).
- Multi-grade teaching as a pedagogical choice offers a more global and contextualised approach. It provides meaningful learning opportunities and fosters shared teaching-learning processes, where collaboration, peer work, and teacher guidance are central. Rather than a limitation, diversity of age, interest, background, and ethnicity are enriching ([Domingo-Peñafiel, 2019](#)).
- Results reveal strong inter-age relationships and a positive influence of multi-grade instruction on children’s education and overall development ([De la Fuente & Álvarez, 2024](#)).

Legislation

- “Specific procedures and support measures will be established for classrooms that enrol students of different ages in rural settings” ([Andalusian Education Act, 2007](#), Art. 46.3).
- “Specific procedures and support measures will be established for classrooms that enrol students of different ages in rural settings” ([Canary Islands Act on Non-University Education, 2014](#), Art. 56.3).
- “The Government of Extremadura guarantees the operation of rural schools providing Early Childhood and Primary Education in localities with at least five students” ([Extremadura Act on Demographic and Territorial Challenges, 2022](#), Art. 61).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training on multi-grade didactics considering the distinct classroom configurations potentially encountered by educators (single-unit, cyclic, multiple grades, etc.).
- ✓ Development of applied research projects focused on the characteristics, needs, benefits, and challenges of multi-grade classrooms/schools, involving their main actors (teachers and students) and highlighting their pedagogical potential.
- ✓ Design of specific regulations and professional incentives to counter the perception of teaching in such classrooms as a “hardship post.”

Element 2.9: PERSONALISED LEARNING

Concept

Personalised education is an approach based on respecting and attending to the diversity of each student, considering their personal characteristics, learning pace, interests, and needs (Buxarraís & Racionero, 2017).

Documentary Analysis

“The rural school (...) adapts to the characteristics and specific needs of individuals” ([Doc. 145](#), p. 17).

“Some teaching strategies and practices in rural schools serve as fundamental references for personalised education, such as individualised attention” ([Doc. 192](#), p. 24).

“Greater respect for individuality and learning pace” ([Doc. 209](#), p. 5).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Almaraz de Duero School (Zamora, Castilla y León): Currently with only three students. “Here, education is more dynamic, more individualised. We adapt to each student’s learning pace,” [says María, the teacher](#).
- [CRA Tras la Sierra](#) (Extremadura): Their school identity is based on understanding students’ maturity, attitudes, and interests in order to organise goals and content that support individualised learning.
- [CEIP Virgen de la Cama](#) (Cantabria): “We respect each child and each family’s differences. We understand that every child is unique and needs different things. Therefore, no two people are treated the same—this is not seen as privilege or discrimination but as respectful and caring personalisation.”

Research

- Students having behavioural difficulties also improve their social skills (Barba, 2014).
- The personalised approach best suits the needs of rural schools, treating each student as a unique subject on their path to developing a Personal Life Project ([Soria, 2014](#)).
- Findings show that rural schools offer opportunities for individualised instruction due to small class sizes ([Álvarez et al., 2020](#)).

Legislation

- “...proposes a cross-cutting approach oriented toward (...) greater personalisation of learning” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Preamble).
- “Comprehensive education that considers students’ abilities and learning pace” ([Andalusian Education Act, 2007](#), Art. 7.2.d).
- “The educational project should include the personalisation of teaching” ([Order regulating the organisation and operation of rural school groups in Castilla-La Mancha, 2023](#), Art. 4.2).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training in didactic strategies centred on learning based on each student’s potential.
- ✓ Active involvement of educational authorities (training, financial, and administrative support) in multi-grade school projects that foster inclusion.
- ✓ Development of programmes and projects that promote the observation, research, and implementation of best practices in personalised education in multi-grade classrooms/schools.

Element 2.10: PEER TUTORING

Concept

Peer tutoring is a methodological strategy based on pairing students in an asymmetric relationship (based on the tutor and tutee roles), with a common goal: the acquisition of a curricular competence. This process is structured by the teacher and is based on the didactic goal of supporting meaningful learning. (Duran & Vidal, 2004)

Documentary Analysis

“Older children explain things to younger peers, engaging in peer tutoring. This means regularly revisiting and structuring content logically, coherently, and clearly” ([Doc. 143](#), p. 9).

“Peer tutoring is another key feature of the multi-grade classroom” ([Doc. 147](#), p. 7).

“Student tutors are characteristic of multi-grade schools, which leverage students’ abilities to support their peers at specific moments” ([Doc. 154](#), p. 12).

Evidence



Good Practices

- A peer tutoring experience based on the “We Read in Pairs” program, focusing on the development of an inclusive, intercultural, and democratic school ([CRA Benavites](#), Quart de les Valls, Valencian Community).
- Reading sponsorship... *Reading sponsorship is a cooperative activity carried out in pairs formed by the older students in the school, who act as reading mentors, and the younger ones, who are their reading protégés* ([Escola Pere Sarret](#), [ZER Baridà-Batlíia](#), Catalonia).
- At [CRA Muniesa](#) (Aragon), the reading sponsorship model is reversed. Younger students read to the older ones, who in turn help them advance in the challenges of reading. A great success and a powerful source of motivation.



Research

- The fewer students there are in a rural school, the more frequently peer tutoring strategies are used. These approaches encourage individualised teaching and tailored responses ([Molina Díaz et al., 2019](#)).
- [Hamodi & Aragués](#) (2014) identify positive aspects of these multilevel groupings: they benefit younger students by allowing them to learn concepts from higher grade levels, while also supporting older students by strengthening their sense of responsibility in the classroom when assisting their peers.
- Moreover, peer tutoring was a common practice in single-classroom rural schools where students of different ages learned together ([García, 2019](#)).

Legislation

- "... learning about coexistence and citizenship, as well as shared responsibility and collective effort..." ([Education Law of Cantabria, 2008](#), Preamble).
- "... cooperative learning and peer support..." ([Education Law of Castilla-La Mancha, 2010](#), Article 15).
- "... peer cooperation will be promoted in a cross-curricular manner..." ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Preamble and Article 18.6).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training in didactic strategies that enable shared learning and the development of critical knowledge.
- ✓ Opening the school up to the community so that local stakeholders can collaborate in situated learning.
- ✓ Research on methodological approaches that enhance the pedagogical value of multi-grade classrooms/schools and its integration as a core component of teacher training programs.

CATEGORY 3: RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY

Element 3.1. LOCAL COMMUNITY

Concept

We consider “community” to be the population residing in the same locality where the school is located and sharing its environment, resources, and needs. In the case of school clusters or institutions receiving students from towns without a local school, the concept of community may extend to multiple localities.

Documentary Analysis

“It is essential to rely on the participation of local stakeholders, both from the rural environment and society as a whole” ([Doc. 64](#), p. 27).

“Through its projects, the school must promote the active involvement of the institution in its environment, with a commitment to cooperation and integration within the community” ([Doc. 76](#), p. 316–317).

“... a project that earns the trust and engagement of parents and the town as a whole has a high likelihood of achieving educational success, while also serving as a tool for social cohesion” ([Doc. 154](#), p. 10).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Mayors and families speak (La Rioja).
- “Establishing collaborative ties with cultural associations and the local council in each town.” This is one of the educational objectives outlined in the [Educational Project of CPR Serranía](#) (Andalusia).
- What began as a school project has evolved into a municipal project—a space for community engagement that now hosts a wide range of educational, recreational, and cultural activities ([Puig Segalar School](#)).

Research

- In order to effectively and efficiently fulfil their educational and social functions, schools should open themselves to the community. Communities, for their part, cannot and should not do without the school. Sustained connection and communication between school and community enable integrated communities where education is a shared collective responsibility (Castro et al., 2007).
- Involving the school in its community involves rethinking project development and redefining the school’s identity ([Tahull & Montero, 2018](#)).
- Education should begin with the community, and the town itself can become the school. One of the great strengths of rural schools is fostering an emotional connection between students and their town, making the school a communal meeting place (Alcalá, 2019).

Legislation

- “The Department of Education shall promote the development of educational projects that foster collective responsibility and the involvement of the educational community with the immediate or broader environment” ([Education Law of Cantabria, 2008](#), Art. 132.5).
- “The educational administration shall promote coordination among the various stakeholders operating in rural areas, particularly local governments, and shall implement programs and measures for the educational development of rural areas with the collaboration of local entities” ([Education Law of Extremadura, 2011](#), Art. 14).
- “The educational administration shall foster coordination between the different agents operating in rural areas, especially local governments, and promote programs and measures for the educational development of the rural environment with the support of local administrations” ([Non-University Education Law of the Canary Islands, 2014](#), Art. 56.5).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Establishing networks for collaboration between educational centres and their communities in relevant areas (work-life balance, caregiving, complementary services...).
- ✓ Cross-sector policies focused on rural territories (*rural proofing*).
- ✓ Creation and maintenance of quality public services with active participation of residents from the different territories.

Element 3.2. FAMILIES

Concept

The school alone cannot meet all of the educational needs of its citizens; the organisation of the educational system must involve parents as active members of the educational community.

Documentary Analysis

“From my experience in education, I have had a more direct and continuous relationship with the families in rural schools than with those in large institutions” ([Doc. 142](#), p. 7–10).

“Aragon’s rural school is a genuine forum for interaction, where fathers lead workshops, mothers prepare theatre plays, and grandparents tell stories. In many rural schools, there are no extracurricular activity monitors—parents spend more time with their children” ([Doc. 116](#), p. 1).

“...a project that earns the trust and engagement of parents and the town as a whole has a high likelihood of achieving educational success, while also serving as a tool for social cohesion” ([Doc. 154](#), p. 10).

Evidence

Good Practices

- Currently, the most important feature of our school is its openness to families and their active involvement in the educational project, sharing learning experiences with the students.



[CRA Bajo Gállego](#), Aragon (Spain)

- [Working groups on rural schooling from the parent's association \(AMPA\) in Castilla y León](#). The CONFAPACAL working groups include one current and one alternate representative from each participating federation. The group meets in person twice a year, typically at the beginning and end of the school year. All other work is carried out remotely. Each group uses a WhatsApp group that includes both representatives and members of the CONFAPACAL board. The current representative is responsible for active participation, while the alternate remains informed so that he/she may step in as needed.
- Interactive groups at [CRA Los Olivos](#) (minute 15 of the video).

Research

- Parental participation should be viewed as a committed, voluntary, and responsible involvement in the decision-making process concerning the school goals that contributes to the achievement of the same. Through this process, shared principles are developed ([Bas et al., 2010](#)).
- Tahull and Plaza (2018) highlight the essential role played by families in the functioning of rural schools, supporting many positive dynamics that are highly valued by both teachers and families.
- Family involvement should extend beyond basic support, moving towards increased socio-cultural engagement ([Álvarez-Álvarez & Ugarte-Higuera, 2019](#)).

Legislation

- "... cooperation is a fundamental element in achieving coherence and continuity between family and school actions" ([Education Law of Cantabria, 2008](#), Art. 80).
- "To promote teacher participation in the educational system and family involvement in their children's learning process..." ([Education Law of Andalusia, 2007](#), Art. 5.p).
- "... strategies and actions should be proposed to improve educational outcomes and enhance coordination and relationships with families and the surrounding environment" ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 62.2 ter).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Highlighting the value of education in rural areas so that families place greater importance on its role in their children's academic success.
- ✓ Specific research on family-school relationships in rural territories, recognising it as a key social issue in achieving quality education.
- ✓ Improvement of rural classroom/school organisational structures to support the model of an open school with shared responsibilities.

CATEGORY 4: CONTRIBUTION TO TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

Element 4.1. SERVICE-LEARNING

Concept

Service-learning (ApS) is an educational approach that integrates pedagogical intention with social transformation as core principles, promoting the connection of educational stakeholders across the community and the territory ([Miró-Miró & Molina-Luque, 2016](#)). It is a method of combining learning with social commitment, learning by providing a service to the community (Spanish Service-Learning Network).

Documentary Analysis

“To promote the active involvement of the school in its social environment” ([Doc. 31](#), p. 4).

“To recognise the importance of the rural school to the regions where it operates, encouraging service-learning as a tool for local development” ([Doc. 67](#), p. 6).

“... educational programs that foster active and transformative citizenship” ([Doc. 91](#), p. 545).

Evidence

Good Practices

- “We see that our school has very old facilities, outdated décor, an unused library, peeling and unattractive walls, and a playground that consists of three older kids playing football while the rest sit and eat until recess ends... This project aims to create an inclusive playground and improve all of the school areas through a service-learning initiative. All of the students in the school are actively participating—both preschool and primary students, for a total of 40 children, approximately 75% of the student body. At least one adult per family is involved. Depending on the task, fathers, mothers, and grandparents join in. At least 50% participate. All teachers in these towns are involved whenever possible. The town councils are fully committed, not only by providing materials but also by sending workers to clear brush, prepare the grounds, etc. These practices, which link learning with social service, allow our children to apply classroom knowledge in their communities while acquiring new skills and demonstrating competencies in real-life contexts. This fosters valuable learning for their development as active and engaged citizens and for their future integration into the workforce, with respect for individual diversity.” (Novoa, C.E., 2020).
- [Rootedness: Service-learning programme in my \(rural\) environment](#).



- [Salud Torvis School Cooperative](#): A service-learning project to improve community health (CRA Zurbarán, Extremadura).

Research

- In these complex times of educational and social upheaval, it is essential to promote pedagogical actions and intervention initiatives in the local environment that make it possible to connect learning with the territory and its community, placing special emphasis on the experiential values involved in constructing and deconstructing transformative knowledge ([Miró-Miró & Molina-Luque, 2016](#)).
- The results reveal discrepancies between the service-learning methodology and more traditional approaches, as well as limited involvement from the larger educational community. However, the findings confirm that service-learning may effectively link schools to organised local stakeholders, provided that the school encourages a culture of openness to the community ([Monfort & Sales, 2019](#)).
- Service-learning restores the social value of education. It is a tool for building committed citizenship and advancing the common good. It contributes to community development and is a valuable resource for working in favour of the community and its needs, in line with the mission of educational institutions. Ultimately, it provides a powerful opportunity for education aimed at social transformation ([Martínez-Odria et al., 2023](#)).

Legislation

- “Educational volunteering, as a planned solidarity action integrated into the system and the educational community, enhances the possibilities of carrying out extracurricular and complementary activities. Specifically, it may contribute to reducing potential inequalities existing among students due to social, personal, or economic differences, through the use of (among other things) service-learning programmes” ([Andalusian Volunteering Law, 2018](#), Art. 7.f).
- “... a collaborative project involving community service” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Preamble).
- “These subjects may take the form of a monographic project or a collaborative initiative involving service to the community” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 25.3).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Recognising all spaces and time frames—both within and outside of the school—as educational, thereby expanding opportunities and learning experiences.
- ✓ Empowering students in decision-making processes that affect their everyday realities.
- ✓ Contributing to the strengthening of education’s role in territorial development.

Element 4.2. SOCIAL CAPITAL

Concept

[Putnam](#) (1995) defines social capital as the features of social life that enable participants to act effectively in pursuit of shared goals.

Documentary Analysis

“In this context, to also promote the territorial participation of social agents in the fight against depopulation, through a ‘bottom-up’ approach that recognises the importance of initiatives emerging from society itself for the economic development of the territory” ([Doc. 61](#), p. 9–10).

“The prosperity of a territory no longer depends primarily on physical capital but on human capital—on the value of people as knowledge generators and users, and as creators of wealth for society as a whole” ([Doc. 63](#), p. 77).

“More social capital leads to greater social cohesion and less division” ([Doc. 177](#), p. 348).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [CRA Las Cañadas](#) (Castilla y León) takes part in the “[Steam Talent Kinds](#)” Project: transforming young talents into successful leaders.
- The creation and maintenance of collaborative networks and/or workspaces increases trust among participants and strengthens future expectations ([Rural Schools Network of Navarra](#)).
- The “[STEAM-ULAMOS EXTREMADURA](#)” project focuses on developing methodologies based on inclusion, creativity, and computational thinking through STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) projects in innovative environments such as the Future Classroom Lab (FCL). These FCLs make schools innovative educational spaces using diverse pedagogical approaches, aiming to positively impact skill development, academic performance, innovation-oriented attitudes, and students' technological literacy ([CRA La Espiga](#), Extremadura).

Research

- The rural school is a collective resource that enhances the social and identity-based “solidity and fluidity” of the local community, and it plays an essential role in generating and sustaining local social capital (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993).
- The value of locality and the relationships it fosters make the development of social capital possible. Local networks generate mechanisms of cooperation that support both individual growth and community development (Putnam, 2002).
- Educational institutions can be both agents in the creation of social capital (through the development of community relationships) and beneficiaries of those same community structures ([Ortíz, 2011](#)).

Legislation

- “Simultaneously, education is a fundamental reality for any national community, since it is the main factor in generating human capital, contributing to the growth of social capital, and serving as an element of social and cultural cohesion through equal opportunities” ([Education Law of Catalonia, 2009](#), Preamble).
- “... new public policies must view the elderly as an economically distinct and proactive group, representing great opportunities for innovation...” ([Strategy for Addressing the Demographic Challenge of Cantabria 2019–2025, 2019](#), p. 199).
- “... sustainable development and inclusive economic growth require human capital” ([Law for the Revitalisation of the Rural Environment of Aragón, 2023](#), Preamble I).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Attracting new residents as a means of rejuvenating rural territories and energising local economic and social life.
- ✓ Designing and developing organisational, pedagogical, and curricular models that enable rural schools to enhance their role in forming and strengthening social capital in rural areas.

- ✓ Shifting educational policy perspectives from a purely economic rationale toward one that values social return on investment and increased equity.

Element 4.3. SCHOOL SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Concept

This form of education is not only a necessity, but also it is a responsible commitment to modern societies, aiming to “offer everyone the opportunity to realise their potential in pursuit of a sustainable future and a dignified existence” ([UNESCO, 2015](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Through its projects, the school must encourage the active engagement of the institution with its environment, under a framework of cooperation and integration with the community” ([Doc. 76](#), p. 316–317).

“A transformative, community-based, and participatory rural school addresses not only academic aspects but also embraces a social, cultural, and quality-of-life commitment to its surroundings” ([Doc. 156](#), p. 1).

“The rural environment offers great opportunities that may be harnessed through educational and sociopolitical commitment” ([Doc. 114](#), p. 2).

Evidence

Good Practices

- The *Guardians of the Territory* project delves into the highly topical issue of climate change: its causes, consequences, and possible responses. The program is funded by the LEADER initiative and is managed by the ADEMA Association, based in Molinos. It aims to improve the quality of life and support the development projects of the villages in the Maestrazgo region that form the CRA networks ([CRA Olea](#) and [CRA Alto Maestrazgo](#), Aragón).
- [The Telde Valsequillo Collective of Rural Schools](#) is located in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. It provides early childhood and primary education and consists of five schools: San Antonio, Montaña Las Palmas, Las Breñas, Agustín Manrique de Lara, and San Roque. The network serves 109 students and has been recognised as a “Biosphere School,” a designation granted to schools that are committed to sustainability and environmental responsibility.
- The [CPR Alto Guadalquivir](#) (Andalusia) has received numerous awards, including the *Andalusia Flag* and the *Green Flag for Eco-Schools*, in recognition of its outstanding work in environmental education.



Research

- The rural environment offers enormous potential that may be harnessed through educational and sociopolitical commitment, as well as through joint and coordinated efforts of rural communities and their dedication to transforming rural schools into instruments ensuring continuity and the evolution of rural society toward new horizons ([Lorenzo et al., 2017](#)).

- Rural schools may serve as powerful drivers of social transformation, particularly in the inclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through educational projects and curricula. Therefore, active teaching teams are key to designing and implementing educational projects that prepare committed individuals to build a more just and equitable society ([Coma et al., 2019](#)).
- Rural schools should take significant steps toward sustainability, given that this is a shared commitment that educational institutions cannot ignore. In rural schools, actions fostering a balance between nature, society, and the economy are already underway or may be developed further ([Abad, 2022](#)).

Legislation

- “Any other actions that contribute to strengthening freedom, participation, and the values of solidarity and social commitment in education” ([Education Law of Andalusia, 2007](#), Art. 177-1.g).
- “... ensuring quality education for all citizens requires the commitment of all members of the educational community and society as a whole” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Preamble).
- “... to incorporate educational content related to demographic challenges and to highlight the opportunities and resources of the interior municipalities of the Valencian Community, promoting networks for experience-sharing and collaboration among schools and teaching staff” ([Comprehensive Law on Measures Against Depopulation and for Territorial Equity in the Valencian Community, 2023](#), Art. 16.3).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ ✓ Inclusion and critical, cross-curricular treatment of content related to climate change, due to its direct impacts on rural areas (e.g., prolonged droughts, flooding, rising temperatures).
- ✓ ✓ Health education as a means of improving quality of life, supporting prevention efforts, and helping to build healthier communities.
- ✓ ✓ Building active and participatory citizenship, as education fosters a sense of belonging through the promotion of values of solidarity, respect, and social commitment.

Element 4.4. ENTREPRENEURIAL CULTURE/EDUCATION

Concept

“Entrepreneurial culture in schools refers to the commitment to a cooperative, grassroots model promoting democratic and participatory management while strengthening the dimension of social responsibility” ([Educación 3.0](#)).

“Entrepreneurial competence involves developing a life approach oriented toward acting on opportunities and ideas, using the specific knowledge needed to generate valuable outcomes for others” ([Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, and Sports, Spain](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Entrepreneurial spirit will be promoted through regionally-designed elective subjects related to entrepreneurship” ([Doc. 56](#), p. 7).

“To promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the fields of education, culture, and tourism” ([Doc. 62](#), p. 267).

“To establish a network of collaboration and shared knowledge among participants on entrepreneurship initiatives so that they can improve their skills before launching new projects” ([Doc. 65](#), p. 288).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [Entrepreneurial Culture Programme](#) in Extremadura: This programme unites different branches of the regional administration to design cross-cutting actions in innovation, inclusion, entrepreneurship, and the improvement of educational success. It is implemented throughout the overall educational journey—from primary school to university—within the broader educational community.
- [Blended courses for young rural entrepreneurs in the Balearic Islands](#): This initiative aims to promote self-employment among rural youth. Its actions focus on two areas: first, providing the necessary knowledge for the entrepreneurial development of their ideas; and second, encouraging entrepreneurial spirit through networking and innovation as means of growth and development.
- [Entrepreneurial Rural School](#) (Somiedo, Asturias): This initiative promotes entrepreneurship and self-employment among young women who are at risk of exclusion in the Camín Real de la Mesa region. It supports the return and reintegration of female talent and encourages participants to take action on new, sustainable ideas.

Research

- Education professionals must explore different ways to develop entrepreneurial projects, always prioritising the development of programme participants over mere implementation. We live in the knowledge era—possibilities have never been greater—so let us make education the lever that empowers people to shape their futures ([Uribe et al., 2013](#)).
- In vocational training, proposals are emerging to integrate entrepreneurship transversally—not only into curriculum subjects but also into school administration. This involves engaging leadership teams, raising awareness among teachers, and building partnerships with local institutions and businesses. These efforts extend benefits to the surrounding community and, by extension, to society at large ([Rodríguez et al., 2015](#)).
- There is a clear need to foster a new entrepreneurial culture, emphasising the importance of adapted and attractive training programmes and overcoming the inherent challenges of rural environments—such as limited infrastructure and services ([Spanish Network for Rural Development, 2024](#)).

Legislation

- “Without prejudice to their specific treatment, reading comprehension, oral and written expression, audiovisual communication, digital competence, social and business entrepreneurship, the promotion of critical and scientific thinking, emotional and values-based education, and creativity shall be addressed across all subjects” ([LOMLOE, 2020](#), Art. 19).
- “To develop training programmes aimed at fostering entrepreneurship” ([Rural Development Law of the Basque Country, 2022](#), Art. 6.3, Section VIII).
- “To promote entrepreneurial spirit in rural areas, especially among young people, in order to retain the territory’s population” ([Law for the Revitalisation of Rural Areas of Aragón, 2023](#), Art. 35.a).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Teacher training in entrepreneurship, both in initial and ongoing education, to ensure they can integrate this approach across all stages of the educational system. This allows students to acquire essential entrepreneurial competencies.
- ✓ Public policies that stimulate entrepreneurship and innovation.
- ✓ Empowerment of girls and women as a foundational pillar in the fight against depopulation.

Element 4.5. TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND ATTRACTION

Concept

Talent development and attraction involve cultivating a network of opportunities that promotes inclusion and sustainable development (...) and creating an ecosystem conducive to personal and professional growth. Attracting talent to rural areas is a matter of geographic redistribution, of recognising and valuing the unique skills that may emerge from these settings. Geographic diversity in talent not only enriches the social fabric but also brings varied ideas and perspectives that catalyse innovation and progress in communities that are eager for revitalisation ([Francisco Hevia](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Retaining population in the territory requires transforming it into a space of opportunity (...) capitalising on talent associated with the local environment... adapting educational processes to the region’s potential” ([Doc. 58](#), pp. 38–39).

“It is necessary not only to recognise innovative talent in rural areas but also to attract and retain it” ([Doc. 179](#), p. 146).

“The plan views rural areas and small municipalities as sites of opportunity and entrepreneurship—capable of generating economic activity by leveraging endogenous resources and local talent” ([Doc. 241](#), p. 455).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [AlmaNatura](#) works to improve the quality of life in rural areas and combat depopulation by creating opportunities through projects on employment, education, health, and technology.
- The [Campus Rural Programme](#) enables university students to take part in internships in depopulated rural municipalities, contributing to territorial rebalancing by encouraging the arrival of human capital in the most underpopulated areas.
- “Fostering talent is just as important as retaining it... What is needed,” according to Zubillaga, “is the implementing of plans that ensure that towns meet the essential requirements in terms of quality of life, services, remote work infrastructure, employment, economic viability... and of course, education” (San Rafael del Río Town Council, Valencian Community).

Research



- The importance of investing in young rural talent lies in demonstrating that it is possible to reverse the trend of youth migration from rural areas. This can be achieved through a comprehensive strategy that combines respect for heritage, the creation of added value, cooperation among stakeholders, and citizen participation. This commitment to the future of rural areas not only has the potential to transform local communities but it can offer the possibility of exporting this model to other regions facing similar challenges. It allows for networking, enabling young people to discover other contexts ([Sánchez-Briñas, 2023](#)).
- Efforts should be made to highlight the positive aspects of rural life, fostering motivation, creativity, and the innovative mindset of its inhabitants. This includes involving the rural population in project design and development through a strategic approach, awakening their innovative potential, and encouraging local population retention (Rural 3D, 2023).
- There is a general consensus that cultural projects have resulted in positive local outcomes, regardless of the type of impact considered. These results highlight the intangible assets associated with the so-called “smart growth,” such as human capital and innovation, which are driven by shared efforts and daily dialogue that activates and brings together diverse talents (Ministry of Culture, 2024).

Legislation

- “The competent body for addressing emigration and promoting return shall implement a Strategy for Return and Talent Connection” ([Law on Measures to Address Demographic and Territorial Challenges in Extremadura, 2022](#), Art. 47.1).
- “... activities aimed at enhancing the talent associated with the territory” ([Comprehensive Law on Measures Against Depopulation and for Territorial Equity in the Valencian Community, 2023](#), Art. 10.4).
- “... the attraction of talent to rural areas” ([Law for the Revitalisation of the Rural Environment of Aragón, 2023](#), Art. 36.O).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ One of the key challenges for businesses is to attract talent to rural areas by supporting innovative projects.
- ✓ Creating an ecosystem conducive to personal and professional growth, grounded in a deep understanding of local needs and opportunities.
- ✓ Digitalisation is a key driver for attracting talent and business development in rural areas.

Element 4.6. OPEN SCHOOL

Concept

An open school is a space of encounter between students, the educational community, and the local community—designed to foster learning and cultivate shared values.

Documentary Analysis

“The school open to the community” ([Doc. 76](#), p. 298).

“...the rural school must open itself to its context, to students, and families. And the teacher must understand and value the environment, traditions, and beliefs held by the community regarding education” ([Doc. 153](#), p. 2).

“...the importance of the rural school increases when the school is open” ([Doc. 218](#), p. 365).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [Education 360](#) A socio-educational initiative offering a global and inclusive perspective that calls for the engagement of the entire municipality and all members of the educational community.
- [CEIP Gutiérrez de la Vega \(Castilla-La Mancha\)](#). The school collaborates with families, public agencies, and private institutions to create a dynamic and open learning environment.
- [One school, one village, one educational community](#). An educational model in which the school opens itself to the local community (CEIP Ramón y Cajal, Alpartir, Aragón).



Research

- The open school trend includes, among other aspects, an openness to the local environment. This requires that the institution be responsive to the demands and expectations of its context (...). When the open school model prevails, the relationship with the community is integrated into the institutional project. As a result, social demands are channelled and aligned with the core tasks of teaching and supporting students during their educational journey (Krichesky, 2006).
- The results of the study reflect teachers' perceptions regarding the functioning of rural schools. The main conclusion refers to the use of the local environment as an educational resource, a facilitator of learning, and a key to implementing innovative, place-based educational experiences ([Selusi et al., 2020](#)).
- "... the opening of schools to community participation... the creation of educational communities" ([Carrete-Marín et al., 2023](#)).

Legislation

- "The opening of schools to the community. Promoting schools' engagement with their surroundings and the use of the community's social resource networks" ([Education Law of Cantabria, 2008](#), Art. 3.I).
- "To contribute to the opening of educational institutions in Andalusia to their social, cultural, and economic environments" ([Education Law of Andalusia, 2007](#), Art. 177.b).
- "These centres shall also be available to local authorities and parent associations for the development of extracurricular activities..." ([Comprehensive Law on Measures Against Depopulation and for Territorial Equity in the Valencian Community, 2023](#), Art. 47.3).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Educational approaches that move beyond an information-based school model to one based on a participatory and knowledge-based society.
- ✓ A school model open to its environment and community, where active citizenship values are developed through all types of activities (artistic, cultural, sports, social...) and with the involvement of diverse stakeholders.
- ✓ Promoting participation and the shared use of material and human resources, as well as spaces and facilities.

Element 4.7. INNOVATION

Concept

Innovation in rural areas refers to the introduction of new ideas or changes that allow these areas to address their economic, environmental, and social challenges. Talking about rural innovation means developing real solutions for resilient and better-prepared rural territories ([Spanish Rural Education Network](#)).

Documentary Analysis

“Mechanisms of cooperation between administrations will be promoted to create innovation spaces” ([Doc. 10](#), p. 33).

“To promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the fields of education” ([Doc. 62](#), p. 267).

“... the rural school is defined as innovative, engaged with its environment and the community it serves, positive, active, and participatory” ([Doc. 69](#), p. 1).

Evidence

Good Practices

- CRA Martín del Río (Teruel) – [School Time Project](#): “For us, innovation involves making methodological changes and proposing activities that help to achieve one fundamental goal: to be happy. Children, teachers, and families all have the right, and the responsibility, to be happy. Adults must create spaces and environments where students can grow, learn, live, and develop in intellectual and emotional balance.”
- Unitary schools in the Canary Islands have spent the last three years engaging with science through the [STEAM Laboratory in the rural classroom](#), an initiative by the regional government. This project aims to reduce the gap in science and technology education in rural (especially non-capital city) islands and promote quality, equity, equality, and inclusion in the Canary Islands education system.
- “[Tirar de la lengua](#)” Educational Innovation Project ([CRA Valle Oja-Tirón](#), La Rioja): Aims to improve linguistic communication skills as a basic tool for learning, revising pedagogical methods, and integrating the school library as a core space for educational resources, information access, and experiential learning.

Research

- The rural school is an educational centre that seeks to promote educational innovation and community development (Santamaría, 1996).

- Rural schools in Aragón are strongly linked to innovation. In my view, the most committed, complex, and determined projects have been carried out in many of our village schools ([Mallada, 2012](#)).
- Pedagogical innovation in small rural schools has very specific characteristics, not only due to their unique nature but also because of their close connection with the local context ([Jiménez, 2020](#)).

Legislation

- “The educational administration will incentivise schools that, in exercising their autonomy, stand out for their good teaching practices, innovation activities, and the development of projects that contribute to educational success” ([Education Law of Extremadura, 2011](#), Art. 127.3).
“Incorporating innovation in rural areas as a tool for social, multidisciplinary, and systemic transformation” ([Rural Development Law, Basque Country, 2022](#), Art. 5.C.X).
- “To develop specific innovation programmes and adapt general innovation programmes that improve the quality and equity of education in rural areas...” ([Law for the Revitalisation of the Rural Environment of Aragón, 2023](#), Art. 61.b).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Considering innovation as a point of convergence between education and the territory.
- ✓ Linking innovation to quality of life and the well-being of rural populations through contributions of the information society, digitalisation, and technology (care, lifelong learning, vocational training, etc.).
- ✓ Designing and developing projects that consider the structural changes currently taking place, both in education and employment, lifestyles, sustainable development, and population ageing.

Element 4.8. SHARED PROJECTS

Concept

A shared project arises from the need to address situations and problems that affect different individuals and/or groups through collaborative processes aimed at achieving common goals.

Documentary Analysis

"Creation of collaborative spaces by aggregating stakeholders from the territorial ecosystem to foster synergies and increase knowledge and value" ([Doc. 60](#), p. 49).

"In relation to innovation, it proposes... the participation of the school in community-based projects" ([Doc. 76](#), p. 11).

"A school that views itself as part of its territory, its needs and experiences, incorporating them into its organisational and pedagogical planning, and a territory that views the school as an essential component. These are two sides of the same coin" ([Doc. 144](#), p. 7).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [CRA VALLE DEL ALAGÓN](#) (Cáceres). “This year, our biggest challenge has been to create an Augmented Reality Literary Route called *Gotica and the Club of Lost Stories* across the three towns that make up our CRA. Students wrote their own literary stories (through the

REBEX Library Project) about the most emblematic places in each town and designed a cognitively accessible AR app for the literary tour. To achieve this goal, we organised a series of innovative workshops and collaborated with various stakeholders (entrepreneurs, families...), associations (Ampas, Placeat, Ascapas, Aunex, Rurex, the Pensioners' Home of Alagón del Río, the Intergenerational Centre of San Gil, ONCE, and the folklore group Surcos Nuevos of San Gil), and local institutions (municipalities and Circular Fab of Moraleja)."

- [Virtual Rural Learning Space](#): Our project, strongly grounded in ICT, presents an innovative approach to addressing educational shortcomings in rural areas: a real-time collaborative virtual space where rural schools can support each other, immediately filling gaps in teachers, content, and activities. We are building not only a technological environment but also a community around it, made up of rural schools and key stakeholders in education and rural development.
- Creation of the [Andalusian Network for Innovation and Educational Collaboration of Rural Public Schools](#) (CPRs).

Research

- Teachers involved in community-based educational projects increase their sense of belonging and transmit it to both local families—who learn new ways of engaging with the school—and new families, who are attracted to the rural school and help enrich it, but most importantly to the students ([Marugán, 2016](#)).
- The *SERIGO* project is grounded in participatory, community-based research. It studies factors that drive social exclusion, examine innovative economic solutions for social inclusion and equity, and identify challenges while comparing social economy practices and policies across the EU at national, regional, and local levels ([Red PAC, 2024](#)).
- Conclusions highlight the importance of including local stakeholders in the territorial dimension of these projects, especially given the school's role in promoting the sustainability of rural territories. The need to foster student attachment to and appreciation of their locality is also stressed ([Carrete et al., 2024](#)).

Legislation

- "To promote the active involvement of schools in their environment and cooperation among all schools linked to the Catalan Education Service, while supporting them in this area and facilitating cooperation through educational zones, involving local governments and other social and educational stakeholders in the territory" ([Catalonia Education Act, 2009](#), Art. 158c).
- "The educational administration will promote the creation of educational communities committed to developing projects that contribute to providing quality education for all students. A school's educational project is the constitutive element of its educational community and defines the commitment of all educational stakeholders to cooperate equitably to create the most favourable conditions for learning" ([Canary Islands Non-University Education Act, 2014](#), Art. 11.2).
- "The public administrations of Castilla-La Mancha will promote public-private partnerships for developing projects that address demographic challenges and will encourage the inclusion of demographic factors in the social responsibility policies of the private sector, in order to make the rural environment a space of opportunity" ([Law on Economic, Social, and Tax Measures to Address Depopulation and Promote Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha, 2021](#), Art. 28).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Raising awareness of the role of education in territorial cohesion.

- ✓ Increasing social and institutional recognition of education as a driver of rural development.
- ✓ Developing cross-sector public policies (housing, culture, leisure, sustainable development, primary sector and services, entrepreneurship, women, care...) in which education acts as a connecting vector.

Element 4.9. KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Concept

The transfer of knowledge generated through research and evaluation processes refers to the implementation of academic and scientific knowledge and its outcomes so that society can benefit from them ([Mercedes Siles](#), former director of ANECA).

Document Analysis

- “... produce studies and reports that support the development of educational policies by the department responsible for non-university education” ([Doc. 70](#), p. 2).
- “To propose and support the collaborative organisation of activities aimed at improving quality in rural schools and promoting knowledge transfer in this context” ([Doc. 73](#), p. 2).
- “... rural schools may become spaces showcasing educational experiences and realities that are transferable to other contexts” ([Doc. 196](#), p. 12).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [ItineraSTEAM Project](#): Implemented in rural school groups (CRA) located in areas of severe depopulation in the province of Cuenca, this project focuses on topics related to Science, Technology, Arts, and Mathematics. Its results will be presented to the educational community at a travelling rural science fair and aim to foster scientific dissemination and the public communication of science.
- *CIID 2021*: Presentation by Joan Tahull titled “[The Rural School in Catalonia: Engine of Change and Educational Innovation](#)”
- [A Rural School in Cantabria Captivates Spain through a Documentary](#): One of the most inhabited valleys of Spain is found in Cantabria: Polaciones. There, a rural school in the village of Puente Pumar continues to thrive. Its students and teachers have gained recognition in other valleys and coastal regions, both in Spain and abroad. This is due to a documentary created on the lives of ten children, aged two to eleven, from the *Colegio Público Valle de Polaciones*.



Research

- One of the main goals of this research is to determine whether the educational model of multi-grade classrooms and the pedagogical and school practices implemented within them can be transferred to other classrooms that are not multi-grade or not exclusively situated in rural areas ([Bustos, 2011](#)).
- This is a shared research initiative carried out by a community of teachers and researchers, grounded in commitment, mutual exchange, and support, with the aim of collaboratively sharing meanings and knowledge ([Álvarez et al., 2020](#)).
- The results indicate that rural schools undergo the same economic and symbolic marginalisation as rural areas in general. However, they also have great potential as spaces of pedagogical innovation and institutions that drive rural community development. One of the main challenges is to enhance teacher training to meet the specific realities of rural education. In conclusion, this study contributes to the scientific understanding of the rural school context and its specific needs ([Santamaría-Cárcava et al., 2020](#)).

Legislation

- "The education department shall promote strategies for mentoring and the exchange of experiences to ensure that rural schools provide equal educational opportunities. For this, a public network of rural schools in the Canary Islands shall be established" ([Canary Islands Non-University Education Law, 2014](#), art. 56.4).
- "The regional administration, within the scope of its competencies, shall promote research and the implementation of new models for providing services to citizens based on information and communication technologies" ([Demographic Impulse Law of Galicia, 2021](#), art. 80.2).
- "...the study of demographic challenges, particularly territorial depopulation, its determining factors, effects, and impact on the welfare state and territorial cohesion, ensuring its transfer to the citizenry..." ([Comprehensive Law on Measures Against Depopulation and for Territorial Equity, Valencian Community, 2023](#), art. 11.1).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Creation of useful and transferable knowledge to design effective strategies for territorial development based on education.
- ✓ Establishment of local, regional, national, and international collaborative networks for the exchange of knowledge, human and material resources, experiences, and best practices.
- ✓ Strengthening the link between research and educational institutions and local stakeholders to enhance participatory action research projects.

CATEGORY 5: PARTICIPATION IN TERRITORIAL CREATION (COLLECTIVE IDENTITY)

Element 5.1. ROOTEDNESS AND IDENTITY CREATION

Concept

The action and effect of taking root; derived from the Latin *ad* and *radicare*, meaning “the act of putting down roots” (RAE).

Rootedness and the sense of belonging are both processes and outcomes of the relationships established with a territory (Quezada, 2007) and are closely tied to socio-affective processes and interpersonal relations developed by individuals within the same ([Monterrubbio, 2014](#)).

Documentary Analysis

According to Maya Frades (2006), education systems where students can explore the potential of their own territory through a curriculum that focuses on the immediate environment are more likely to foster rootedness and encourage long-term commitment to their community ([Doc. 163](#), p. 9).

Efforts should be made to strengthen the sense of belonging, cohesion, and the empowerment of the community, fostering attachment to the territory ([Doc. 62](#), p. 17), and promoting education aimed at territorial engagement and rootedness ([Doc. 62](#), p. 277).

When a community participates in a traditional, deep-rooted celebration, the bonds between its members are strengthened and the sense of identity and group belonging is reinforced ([Doc. 118](#), pp. 1–2).

Evidence

Good Practices

- [CEIP Virgen de los Ríos](#) in Caldearenas (Huesca, Aragón) works with other nearby schools on the local language and tangible heritage as a means of reinforcing the students’ sense of belonging to their territory.
- “In Aragonese, there are many expressions to refer to group work: *á comunal*, *á mancomún*, *á vezinal*, *á ixena*...”
- XVIII MEETING OF ASSOCIATIONS OF THE NORTHWEST: The central theme for this event was [THE SCHOOL THAT BUILDS COMMUNITY](#). It explored the characteristics of a school that contributes to community-building, encourages students to take root in their surroundings, and promotes admiration for the territory, caring for and strengthening the same (Asturias).
- The “*VIERA Y CLAVIJO*” award granted to one-teacher schools is a recent recognition of the value of this quality educational model. “We enjoy addressing topics related to local traditions, identity, and neighbourhood idiosyncrasies. Every year, we organise a pilgrimage in a different municipality on the island and promote initiatives related to popular culture, agriculture, traditional cisterns, etc., all of which involve families” ([La Palma](#), Canary Islands).

Research

- The value of emotional attachment and aspirations are among the key factors that encourage settlement in a territory ([Afonso et al., 2011](#)).
- The survival of rural schools contributes significantly to rooting the population ([Álvarez et al., 2020](#)).

- In the context of rural education, the essential role it plays in fostering rootedness and preserving local identity is highlighted, as well as its contribution to the democratic inclusion of all, cultures, and ideologies coexisting in these environments ([Carrascal & Magro, 2022](#)).

Legislation

- "The Catalan education system must enable the awakening and strengthening of rootedness in Catalonia. Only through knowledge of one's own identity is it possible to open up to other realities and recognise their uniqueness" ([Catalonia Education Act, 2009](#), Preamble).
- "New models of public and rural schools must be incorporated to increase knowledge of the environment and promote rootedness" ([Special Guideline for Territorial Planning on Demographic Policy and Against Depopulation, 2017](#), 3.4.A.3).
- "Public administrations shall promote actions in cooperation with local action groups and other key agents to raise awareness among rural society about local and rural identity..." ([Law for the Revitalisation of the Rural Environment in Aragón, 2023](#), Art. 6.5).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Assessment and recognition of the specific characteristics, needs, aspirations, representations, and demands of youth living in rural areas.
- ✓ Promotion of associations, with special attention to the most vulnerable groups, as well as addressing the gender gap.
- ✓ Curricular inclusion of historical, natural, and cultural elements that recognise local knowledge and foster a territorial and collective identity among students.

Element 5.2. VALUE OF HERITAGE

Concept

"The landscapes shaped (...) by the people who live off the land, (...) and from the exploitation of natural resources. The buildings that form what is known as rural architecture (...). The products of the land adapted to local conditions and to the needs of the people who created them. The techniques, tools, and knowledge that made their creation possible and are essential for their maintenance, restoration, and modernisation (...) including cultural symbols and meanings" ([Chiva, 1994](#)). If this is heritage... then we must place value on it.

Documentary Analysis

"... and the fact that in this vast rural territory lies the entirety of our natural resources and a significant portion of our cultural heritage..." ([Doc. 8](#), p. 1).

"This heritage is a strategic resource for rural development, supporting the fight against depopulation and promoting territorial cohesion" ([Doc. 63](#), p. 81).

"The rural territory offers a set of multiple economic activities and geographic, historical, cultural, landscape, and ecological assets, along with distinct lifestyles and local knowledge differing from those of the cities. These indicators are part of the school's identity and can (and should) be incorporated into the school curriculum" ([Doc. 147](#), p. 9).

Evidence

Best Practices

- [Circular Project from the Rural School](#): This project enables learning by doing through an active, integrative, playful, and participatory methodology that successfully motivates students and helps them acquire knowledge about their heritage. The *Circular Project from the Rural School* continues to grow and has enabled a special exchange between the schools of Ricla and Alpartir, in which students had the opportunity to discover the heritage of another town and share their own with peers. This twinning activity constituted a peer-to-peer and cooperative learning experience in which students interacted with one another to achieve educational goals.



- [Guardians of the Territory: Innovation and Rural Revolution in the 21st Century](#) – *Project Aldea 0*: This initiative focuses on revitalising rural areas through technology and the preservation of local culture. The actions implemented promote community building and intergenerational learning by linking the recovery of local culture and traditions with innovation. Thus, a vibrant and sustainable rural environment is created (Asturias).
- [Reviving “Hacenderas”](#): *The Celebration of Collaboration* is a project aimed at promoting social sustainability through the appreciation and restoration of *hacenderas*—traditional collective work practices (Castile and León).

Research

- Rethinking heritage from an educational perspective entails understanding education as a project for the future that, from this point of view, can contribute to the (re)discovery of local heritage—often ignored or devalued—through experiential learning (strengthening ties between school and community) and contextualised learning (engaging with different types of sources, fostering historical thinking, and identifying the historical value of specific elements) ([Marqués et al., 2020](#)).
- It presents an evaluation of an educational project based on the identification with the intangible cultural heritage of a school located in a rural community ([Marqués et al., 2020](#)).
- This study analyses heritage (natural, tangible, and intangible) and the cultural context of rural schools through the arts, designing an educational intervention aimed at various preschool groups within Rural Grouped Schools (*Colegios Rurales Agrupados*) ([Notario de Dios, 2024](#)).

Legislation

- “As a priority, the curriculum should include contents and activities related to the natural environment and the cultural heritage of Castilla-La Mancha, so that it is known, valued, and respected as a shared asset within the Spanish and global context” ([Education Law of Castilla-La Mancha, 2010](#), art. 34.3).

CATEGORY 5: PARTICIPATION IN TERRITORIAL CREATION (COLLECTIVE IDENTITY)

- “Development and innovation in the territory (...) especially from the perspective of natural, historical-artistic, and cultural heritage” ([Order TED/1358/2021](#), OE.5).
- “The preservation of the rural environment’s natural, cultural, and identity heritage, both tangible and intangible, must be safeguarded, enhanced, and strengthened for future generations” ([Rural Development Law, Basque Country, 2022](#), art. 5.c.X).

Challenges and Issues

- ✓ Promoting heritage as an educational resource and a generator of territorial development, by raising awareness of the importance of sustainable practices, and thus contributing to the protection of natural resources.
- ✓ Establishing collaborative networks with other territories (at local, regional, national, and international levels) that share similar or complementary heritage assets.
- ✓ Developing different systems of accessibility (digital, transport, dissemination, etc.) to existing heritage elements to facilitate their use as educational, cultural, and tourist resources.

TO CONCLUDE

The Spanish rural school is a fundamental public service with a clear territorial dimension and socio-educational and pedagogical characteristics that endow it with a distinctive value in the pursuit of equity and social justice. It also serves as a driver and contributor to territorial development. Giving voice to this school through the creation of useful and transferable scientific knowledge is one of the pillars sustaining the future of a rural school with its own identity—one that fosters a sense of belonging and future opportunities, rooted in the diversity of the territory in which it is located, its inhabitants, and its students. It is a participatory school, open to its environment, and above all, a **VISIBLE** one.

The catalogue presented has been organised into five categories of analysis: the territorial dimension of the rural school, its pedagogical characteristics, the relationships that it maintains with both the local and school communities, its participation as an agent of development, and its contribution to the creation of territory and collective identity among its inhabitants. Each category includes elements that have been identified throughout the project's development to facilitate the quality of the educational service and promote the school's participation as a key node in the territorial capital of rural areas.

These elements reflect the wide range of perspectives from which rural schools may be examined and engaged: access to education, lifelong learning, structural and functional heterogeneity, student grouping, the learning-knowledge tandem, attention to diversity, curriculum, spaces, methodologies, mentoring, school and local communities, social capital, commitment to the local environment, entrepreneurial culture, talent attraction, innovation, knowledge transfer, rootedness and identity formation, and the valorisation of heritage. This array of possible dimensions for reflection and action also highlights the complexity of rural schooling.

Its role as a catalyst for development in rural areas has been demonstrated throughout the preceding pages, both through concrete evidence in teaching-learning activities implemented over recent years and with the scientific contributions of various authors. It is also supported by an analysis of how educational legislation recognises rural schools, as well as the personal reflections made by the authors on the challenges and opportunities that each element entails. To a large extent, the future of rural education may depend on how these challenges are addressed.

We believe that this publication, made available to the scientific community, serves as a valuable tool to effectively guide the participation of rural schools in promoting justice and territorial equity in sparsely populated areas. These are precisely the territories where, despite their designation as essential public services, rural schools often face the greatest uncertainty given the significant demographic decline. The insights offered here are aimed to inform and support not only educational practice but also academic research, legislation, and development policies.

Teruel and Barcelona, March 13, 2025

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