

## Article

# The Ideal Type of Innovative School That Promotes Sustainability: The Case of Rural Communities in Catalonia

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**Abstract:** In Spain, the evolution of rural areas has followed very different paths depending on the area. While some areas have experienced a continuous demographic decline, others, like Catalonia, have followed the opposite trend thanks to internal and, to a lesser extent external, immigration. This article presents a detailed and original study of the evolution of the population in rural areas during the period 1979–2005, explaining the main reasons for this migration process and later establishing that schools act as an important pole of attraction for young couples with a high degree of cultural diversity. It presents an innovative and inclusive school model that ensures educational success of all the children and respects the cultural idiosyncrasy of the students and families. The three objectives mentioned correspond to three consecutive research projects, each of which provides complementary information to the previous one and all of which shed light on the relationship between demographic revival, cultural diversity and inclusive rural schools. They also pay special attention to factors that make this revival possible. The first objective, approached from a qualitative perspective, shows that, in contrast to the most alarmist theses, there was demographic growth between 1975 and 2005, which was especially notable between 2000 and 2005. The second objective, approached from a qualitative perspective, explains that while young couples emigrate to rural areas for diverse reasons, these reasons can be organized into subjective and structural factors, the school being one of the most important. The third objective, based on a case study of six “alternative” rural schools, proposes an ideal type of school based on the most radical innovative and inclusive principles. This article provides a detailed analysis of demographic evolution in rural Catalonia during a period in which we lacked data, and it expands the sociological factors explained until now regarding contemporary emigration to rural areas. Finally, from a socio-educational perspective, it provides complementary knowledge with regards to rural schools, analyzing the characteristics of “alternative” rural schools and presenting a school prototype that aims to be radically innovative and inclusive.



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## 1. Introduction

As a number of studies have shown [1–4], the tension between the country and city, the rural world versus the urban world, is something that involves paths that do not always go in the same direction. In the Spanish context, the evolution of rural areas has followed very different paths depending on the area and the period analyzed. While there have been areas that have deepened their degree of demographic decline—as is the case of Castile and Leon [5], there are others, such as Catalonia, that have managed to recuperate their social and economic dynamics by attracting young couples that have envisaged a hopeful future [6]. As explained in the first part of the article, a large part of rural Catalonia between 1990 and 2005 has undergone a change in demographic trend thanks to an influx of people coming from internal and, to a lesser extent, also external immigration.

In which period was this recovery strongest? What factors explain this recovery? What are the most important elements that have attracted young couples that often come

from urban areas? What has occurred in Catalonia is not too different from what has occurred in other parts of Europe. Studies that analyze analogous processes [7–10] coincide in highlighting the multiple factors involved, integrating the very disparate elements associated both with biographical trajectories and structural elements linked to the services and the possibilities offered by the receiving municipalities [11–13].

Based on this consideration and taking into account the work carried out by the Rural School Interuniversity Group of Catalonia (GIER—Grup Interuniversitari d’Escola Rural de Catalunya) and the Xarxa de recerca Demoskole (Demoskole Research Network), this article focuses on three key objectives, the last one being the most important: (1) providing an account of the demographic evolution of the rural villages of Catalonia during the period 1979–2005; (2) presenting some of the elements that attract young people to rural municipalities of Catalonia; and (3) presenting an ideal type of rural school with the capacity to integrate and offer educational success to pupils that, due to the socioeconomic characteristics of their parents, show a high degree of diversity.

This article, which is based on the unpublished results of a large-scale multidisciplinary research project carried out thanks to the funding of three research projects that are closely connected both chronologically and conceptually, is grounded in the following hypothesis: Catalan rurality between 1979 and 2005 has experienced population growth due, above all, to exogenous factors such as immigration. This immigration is the result of a number of factors, with schools being a major attraction. The schools best adapted to this new (highly diverse) reality are those that have been able to transform their traditional structure, adopting the principles of the innovative and inclusive school in their most radical form.

This article, as a whole, provides complementary information to the demographic, sociological and pedagogical research that has studied similar issues. With regards to demography, we provide exhaustive data on the evolution of the population in rural areas during the period 1979–2005, which enables us to complete time periods not yet investigated. With respect to factors that have led to emigration towards rural areas, where research has so far focused on neo-rural and retired populations, a broader perspective is also offered due to the sample’s diversity of profiles. Finally, with regards to the third objective, we consider that we contribute additional knowledge to the study of rural schools since, moving beyond research focused on the study of the potential of these schools, we present a prototype whose objective is to successfully address the increasingly apparent diversity in the new rural contexts.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The first objective aspect is addressed by presenting the results of an original empirical study that was carried out within the framework of the Rural Education Observatory of Catalonia in 2005–2006. This study (Demographic analysis of villages with up to 3000 inhabitants in Catalonia: Evolutionary study during the period 1979–2005), which is essentially quantitative, investigates the demographic evolution of small villages in Catalonia (up to 3000 inhabitants) from the end of the 1970s to the mid-2000s through demographic (evolution of the villages, taking into account the natural population increase—births and deaths—and the migratory balance—emigration and immigration, both internal and external), economic (structure of the population according to the employment of the working population) and territorial (demographic and economic reality aggregated by provinces and by all the small villages together) data. All the data come from the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat), the official statistical body of the autonomous community of Catalonia (The IDESCAT is responsible for the planning, normalization, coordination and management of the Catalan statistical system and has an extensive database referring, fundamentally, to demographic, economic and services questions.). The study was carried out through a systematic and detailed analysis of all the villages of Catalonia that in 2005 did not exceed the threshold of 3000 inhabitants (a total of 680 municipalities).

The second objective is addressed using the results of a case study carried out in 2016 (Study on the factors and motivation that drive young couples to emigrate to rural areas in Catalonia), the objective of which was to study the factors and motivations that led young couples between 20 and 30 years of age to emigrate to rural areas, as well as their sociocultural profile. The research was limited to five rural villages of Catalonia that between 2000 and 2015 had witnessed an increase in population. There were basically three criteria for selecting these villages, based on a multiple purposeful sampling: (a) that the increase in population was mainly due to the migratory factor; (b) that the immigration was both internal (national) and external (foreign); and (c) that the selected populations were regionally diverse.

Considering these criteria, the municipalities studied had the following characteristics: (a) during the stated period each municipality had undergone an increase in population of between 17 and 28% as a result of immigrant population; (b) aggregating the data from all five municipalities, 82% of newcomers came from internal immigration and 18% from foreign immigration (with a predominance of people from Africa (10%), followed by Latin America (6%) and Eastern Europe at a distant 2%); and (c) with regards to the regional criteria, two villages belonged to the province of Girona, and one each to the provinces of Barcelona, Lleida and Tarragona.

A total of 25 couples between 20 and 30 years of age who had arrived in the village during the stated period were interviewed via semi-structured interviews. The couples were selected through a stratified sample that considered the following aspects: (a) origin; (b) social class; and (c) family structure. The final composition of the sample was as follows: 18 couples from big cities in Catalonia, 2 couples from big cities in the rest of Spain and the remaining 5 couples from abroad; 2 couples were upper class, 10 middle class, 7 lower-middle class and 6 lower class; and with regards to family structure, 21 couples had children between 2 and 9 years of age; and 4 couples had no children.

Each interview lasted approximately two hours and were held in situ (most of them in family rooms). During the interviews, in addition to the basic identifying data, the interviewees were asked questions related to their biographies, focusing especially on the reasons why they went to live in the country and also their assessment of this decision. All the interviews were transcribed (For reasons of space, we have not been able to include excerpts from the interviews in this article.) and analyzed based on pre-established categories (Quantitative analysis was performed through speech analysis using the computer program Atlas-ti. With regards to the pre-established categories, two main categories were initially defined: (a) subjective factors; and (b) structural factors. While the first category was left open and defined based on the content of the interviews (because the subcategories that would appear were not predictable in advance), the second category had five initial subcategories: infrastructure, communication, connectivity, work and housing.) that were completed as the analysis progressed.

The third objective, which occupies the substantive part of the article, aims to present an ideal type of rural school capable of being implemented, with the necessary adaptations and specifications, in rural areas with great cultural diversity. This idea type is not built *ex novo* but is rather based on an ethnographic study of six schools that, among other issues, are characterized by being structured around an “alternative” pedagogy and educational perspective in the sense that they are radically opposed to the hegemonic school and are able to integrate all the students, ensuring the educational success of everyone. The concept of “alternative” school is defined by a school model that is opposed to the traditional one and that, according to Almudena García [14] is characterized by: (1) an active methodology and the suppression of textbooks; (2) a teaching-learning process based in the interest of the students; (3) the suppression of the usual subjects and the design of more global learning spaces; (4) the implementation of a democratic system accessible to students; and (5) the implementation of soft disciplinary systems. From a sociological perspective, the features of alternative schools are very well explained by Bernstein in his treatise on “invisible pedagogies” [15]. This ethnographic study, which, as we explain below, was

carried out in two discontinuous periods, is part of two consecutive research projects that aim to study the diversity and plurality of pedagogical renewal. (“The third drive for pedagogical renewal in Catalonia. How to promote a comprehensive educational project for pedagogical renewal in a school so that it radically changes school grammar and culture” and “The fourth drive for pedagogical renewal in Spain”).

The sample of these six rural schools was made from a multiple purposeful sampling that considered the following criteria: (a) that the schools possessed a varied innovative methodology; (b) that the schools adopted plural legal forms; (c) that all the schools have significant cultural diversity; and (d) that the schools respect the provincial regional distribution.

Bearing in mind the mentioned variables, the resulting sample had the following characteristics: with regards to the first criteria, (a) methodology, two schools corresponded to the innovative principles of “active” pedagogy; two were of “free” pedagogy; and two “live” pedagogy. With regards to (b), legal form, three schools were recognized as such, two were cooperatives of teachers and parents, and one was an educational association. As to (c), diversity of pupils, all the schools had a diversity of pupils in terms of geographical origin, mother tongue, social class and religious and ideological affiliation of the family. Regarding (d), regional distribution, two schools were in the province of Girona, two in Lleida, one in Tarragona and one in Barcelona.

They were, of course, all rural schools in the geographical and organizational sense of the term: schools located in small villages (between 600 and 1500 inhabitants) and with either a unitary organization (schools with a single classroom), three cases; or a cyclical one (between two and three classrooms), the remaining three cases.

All the selected schools, apart from being “innovative”, shared a transformative and emancipatory perspective that was reflected in: (i) the work methodology inside and outside the classroom; (ii) the organization and running of the school; (iii) the curriculum; (iv) the educational roles of the educational community; (v) the relationship that was established between the school and the social environment; and, lastly, (vi) their approach towards assessment. In addition, all six schools had a radical, clear and open approach towards attending to diversity and set as their ultimate goal the success of all pupils.

The information of these schools was obtained, in each case, through a number of instruments:

- (a) A survey, the objective of which was to identify and weigh the key aspects of the innovation project. The survey, of 53 closed questions, was answered by the head of the school (or the person delegated by the head) and was conducted between February and October 2019. Given the few cases studied, the survey was tabulated and exploited manually based on descriptive statistical criteria.
- (b) Three in-depth interviews per school (eighteen in total, held between November 2019 and February 2020): one interview with the teacher who had spent most time in the project; one with a father or mother linked to the school for three years or more; and one with a pupil in the final ‘cycle’ (last two years: 10–12 years old) of primary school. In total about 40 h of interviews were recorded, and all the interviews were transcribed and coded and analyzed through the Atlas.Ti program.
- (c) Finally, two discontinuous observations were made per school. The first, lasting two days, was carried out during May and June 2020, and the main aim was to observe the unfolding of the normal activities of the school. The second observation was carried out between November and December 2020 and, in addition to observing the normal class activities, pedagogical meetings (teacher groups and meetings), parents’ association meetings and school parties were attended. In this case, the observation lasted five days in each school. All the observations were recorded in a field diary that was subsequently exploited through pre-established categories.

It should be noted that all this material served as a starting point for presenting the argument for the ideal type of school in Section 3.

### 3. Specific Weight and Demographic Evolution of the Small Villages of Catalonia

Catalonia is an autonomous community of Spain with a large number of small villages of up to 3000 inhabitants, most of which can be included under the category of rural villages. Of the 946 municipalities in Catalonia, 680 belong to this category (see Table 1). Thus, almost three out of four municipalities, 71.8% to be exact, fall within this category, with all that that implies. With respect to the regional distribution of all Spain, Lleida, followed by Girona and Tarragona, are the provinces that have a higher proportion of small villages. However, it should be noted that in the province of Barcelona, the metropolitan area par excellence, four out of every ten municipalities do not exceed 3000 inhabitants.

**Table 1.** National and provincial comparison of the number of small municipalities (up to 3000 inhabitants) in Catalonia. 2007.

Region	Municipalities < 3000 Inhabitants	Municipalities > 3000 Inhabitants	Total Number of Municipalities	% of «Small» Villages
Catalonia	680	266	946	71.8%
		Barcelona		41.8%
		Girona		79%
		Lleida		89.2%
		Tarragona		76%

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

The high percentage of small municipalities in Catalonia as a whole means that they occupy a significant part of its territory (see Table 2). Two thirds of Catalonia, 69% of its territory, is organized around villages that do not exceed 3000 inhabitants. Lleida is the province with the most rural population, followed by Girona, Barcelona and, in last position, closely behind, Tarragona.

**Table 2.** National and provincial comparison of the surface occupied by municipalities in Catalonia. 2007.

Region	Territory Occupied by Municipalities < 3000 Habitants	Territory Occupied by the Remaining Municipalities
Catalunya	69%	31%
Barcelona	56%	44%
Girona	72%	28%
Lleida	84%	16%
Tarragona	52%	48%

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

Although Catalonia has a significant number of rural villages that make up a considerable part of the region (see Table 3), they comprise a small part of the population: 7% to be precise. However, the detailed analysis by province presents us with very different situations: from the province of Lleida, where a third of the population live in small villages, followed by Girona (19%), Tarragona (16%) and, in last position the province of Barcelona, where there is a very small percentage (2%).

**Table 3.** National and provincial comparison of population distribution. 2007.

Region	Percentage of People Living in Small Villages (3000 Inhabitants or Less)	Percentage of People Living in the Remaining Municipalities
Catalunya	7%	93%
Barcelona	2%	98%
Girona	19%	81%
Lleida	33%	67%
Tarragona	16%	84%

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

Regarding age groups, 15.1% of the rural population correspond to the “child-adolescent” (0–14 years) age group, 64% to the “young-adult-mature” (15–64 years) age group, and the remaining 20.9% being elderly (65 years and over). This distribution differs slightly from that of Catalonia as a whole. The percentage of elderly people in rural villages exceeds by 4 points the average of Catalonia, while the “young-adult-mature” population is 5 points below the average. As a result, and bearing in mind these data, it is necessary to speak of a moderate over-ageing (especially when we compare this reality with that of other regions of Spain).

When analyzing the demographic evolution of rural towns in Catalonia during the period 1979–2005, we can identify three very clear phases. In the first phase, during the period 1979–1990, there was a significant decline in population: from 440,344 inhabitants to 425,510 inhabitants. In the second phase, during the decade 1990–2000, there was a change in trend and the small villages as a whole made moderate gains in population (20,221 people to be precise). In the third phase, between 2000 and 2005, there was a significant and accelerated population growth that went from 445,731 to 507,204 inhabitants.

From an overall perspective, what is most interesting is that while until the end of the 1990s it seemed that these municipalities, as a whole, were doomed to demographic decline in the sense that their population loss was unstoppable, as we approach the present there has been a significant revival. So important that in recent years the physiognomy of some small villages of Catalonia has been altered substantially, as have many of the needs associated with the facilities and services. The fact is that, from 1979 to 2005, these municipalities, as a whole, have increased by 15.18%, 1.5 points above the average of Catalonia. This is a fact that clearly must be noted.

When comparing the phases of demographic recovery of the small villages together in each province, significant differences can be observed in terms of the magnitude of the increase, as well as the moment in which they occurred.

Table 4 shows at least three different realities: provinces where small villages (as a whole) underwent considerable population growth during the stated period—especially rural villages in the provinces of Barcelona and Tarragona; regions that grow at a similar rate to the average of Catalonia—small villages in the province of Girona; and regions that are still a long way from recovering the population levels of the late 1980s, as is the case of small villages in Lleida.

**Table 4.** National and provincial comparison of population growth. 2005.

Region	Percentage Increase in Population in Small Villages during the Period 1979–2005	Percentage Increase in Population in Catalonia as a Whole/Province
Catalunya	15.58	13.94
Barcelona	28.19	9.49
Girona	15.30	39.84
Lleida	−2.70	10.47
Tarragona	27.44	33.17

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

Regardless of whether or not these villages recovered their population levels at the end of the period studied, how did rural villages evolve over five-year periods between 1979 and 2005? What progress or setbacks did they undergo? If a fixed portrait is made of demographic evolution over these 25 years, we can see that, to a large or small extent, sooner or later, the rural villages of all the provinces (always analyzing aggregated data by provinces) experienced a demographic recovery. What happened, as Table 5 shows, is that while the rural villages in the provinces of Barcelona and Girona underwent an early recovery (they were already experiencing positive results in 1985), others, like Tarragona and especially Lleida, experienced it later, especially after 1990 and 2000, respectively. In any case, according to the data in Table 5, it is clear that the real demographic push took place everywhere from 2000 onwards, when truly high rates of growth were achieved, as is

the case in the rural villages as a whole in the province of Tarragona, which in five years experienced significant growth reaching 29.4%.

**Table 5.** National and provincial comparison of demographic change over five-year periods. 1979–2005.

Five-Year Period	Small Villages of Catalonia	Small Villages of Barcelona	Small Villages of Girona	Small Villages of Lleida	Small Villages of Tarragona
1979–1985	−2.52	−1.51	−2.32	−3.59	−2.3
1985–1990	−0.87	1.28	1.32	−3.68	−1.9
1990–1995	1.80	5.55	1.31	−0.47	1.05
1995–2000	2.89	6.3	3.87	−0.16	1.68
2000–2005	13.79	15.54	10.71	5.44	29.4

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

The explanation for the demographic recovery of the municipalities that exceed 3000 inhabitants must be sought, taking into account all these municipalities, purely in external demographic factors, such as the arrival of people from other places (either from Catalonia or from outside Catalonia). Internal demographic reasons, such as natural population growth, played no role since during the period we have data for (1986–2006), the number of deaths always exceeded the number of births.

The immigration that brought the largest contingent to the small villages of Catalonia was internal immigration; that is, that which takes place within Catalonia itself. The internal migratory balance has been positive since we have data: during the period 1990–1995 there were about 14,000 people, increasing moderately in the five-year period 1996–2000 and soaring during the period 2000–2005, reaching a net balance of some 28,000 people.

Foreign immigration, despite being more modest, did not stop growing throughout the whole period: if in the period 1990–1995 there were only around 2000 people, between 2001 and 2005 16,000 around people were registered. In any case, in 2007 the foreign population residing in small villages in Catalonia represented 9.41% of its inhabitants.

This percentage becomes more nuanced when we analyze specifically each province. As Table 6 clearly shows, the rural municipalities where immigration has more weight are those in the province of Girona, followed by those of Lleida and Tarragona.

**Table 6.** National and provincial comparison of the percentage of foreign population. 2007.

Region	Percentage of Foreign Population that Lives in Small Villages
Catalunya	9.41
Barcelona	6.32
Girona	10.46
Lleida	9.47
Tarragona	9.41

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

The rural component in economic and productive terms of the small villages of Catalonia was, during the period studied, relatively important and much higher than what the general population thinks (see Table 7). If we focus on the number of people that work in jobs related to agriculture and livestock, we observe that, in the last year we have data for at the time of the study (2001), 13.52% were engaged in such jobs. However, it is still worrying to note that ten years earlier (1991) almost a quarter of the population (24.35%) were engaged in this activity. The decrease of almost 11 percentage points that occurred in this productive sector during the decade 1991–2001 was mainly due to the rise of the construction sector and especially of services, which acted as a true shock absorber of agriculture and livestock sectors' downfall, largely caused by the European agricultural policy [16]. At the beginning of the 2000s, the two productive sectors together concentrated almost two thirds (62.71%) of the working population. As a result, the shift of these villages towards an increasingly tertiary sector is a more than obvious fact and perhaps irreversible.

**Table 7.** National and provincial comparison of the percentage of the working population in the primary sector. 2001.

Region	Percentage of the Working Population in Agriculture and Livestock in Small Villages
Catalunya	13.52
Barcelona	7.32
Girona	9.25
Lleida	23.25
Tarragona	15.40

Source: Author, based on data from Idescat.

Despite not having complete aggregated and sequenced data of the rural villages in Catalonia to date (2021), the partial exploratory analysis carried out in 30 small municipalities of Catalonia enables us to point to what at present is only a hypothesis. The demographic evolution of small villages until 2008 had, taken as a whole, sustained population growth. However, from 2008 onwards, with the economic and financial crisis, this tendency slowed down and there began a demographic decline that lasted well into 2015. From this year on, two opposing trends emerged: while there were some rural villages that have managed to reverse the decline, experiencing a sustained demographic resurgence until today, others, those in a more fragile structural situation, have not been so lucky and have experienced a continuous decline that is increasingly accentuated, and it is yet to be seen if in the future this decline can be reversed.

#### 4. Elements That Attract Young People to the Rural Municipalities of Catalonia

Below we explain the various factors that in the couples studied intervened when making the decision, not always easy, to migrate to the country, often initiating a new lifestyle.

A total of twelve main reasons are outlined, which, following what has been stated in other sections, are ordered into two basic categories. We call the first subjective reasons, which include a whole series of factors related to the person's biography, as well as life expectations often drawn from elements related to social class, cultural capital or ideological positions. The second involves structural reasons, easily identifiable factors related mainly to infrastructure, facilities and resources, both public and private, oriented to people's well-being.

##### 4.1. Subjective Factors

- (a) The search for a more "natural", cozy and harmonious environment. Different couples highlighted that being surrounded by nature was an important factor, being in an environment that enabled them to be in contact or even direct communion with natural elements that are so scarce in big cities (meadows, forests, springs, rivers etc.). This natural environment is seen as a precious asset both for the adults (due to the relaxing effect it has) and the children (as it provides more space for free play and movement).
- (b) The possibility of living at a different rhythm, a different pace. Several couples commented that one of the main factors that made them decide to move to the village was the need to live at a pace that was not as frenetic and stressful as the city. In this regard, rurality is presented as an opportunity to substantially improve certain life conditions linked essentially to the pace imposed by work and everyday life.
- (c) The search for a self-sufficient life. Within the group of couples that could be described as neo-rural, going to live in the village is related, among other factors, to the desire to organize a life that is as self-sufficient as possible by building family units that aspire to carry out both reproductive and productive tasks. Life in the rural world is presented as an opportunity to recover economic-productive and social ways of the past in a context that is different from how they originally arose.



- (d) The search for a fuller community structure underpinned by a new concept of the communal. For some of the neo-rural families, although not only them, what pushed them to move to the country was the desire, the dream to build a community that is plural and meaningful that by way of a permeable network provides a high degree of tolerance and freedom to its members, but at the same time a space for meetings, reciprocal relationships and mutual aid if necessary.
- (e) The search for a new form of governance: Among the more alternative couples that tend towards countercultural approaches, one of the factors mentioned was a belief that another form of governance could be built in a rural environment. A governance very different from formal political structures rooted in a vertical conception of power and way of doing politics. A form of governance that is more informal, democratic, participatory, horizontal, with equitably distributed responsibilities and so forth.
- (f) Reunion with ecology and respect for the environment: Some young couples went to live in the country simply to find greater coherence between their beliefs and ideological choices and their practice. Thus, environmentally-committed couples decided to move to the village in order to live with greater integrity and ease certain principles that holistically guide their lifestyle. Principles that embrace work, consumption, leisure time and child education.
- (g) Change in the socializing framework for children at risk: There are also more “prosaic” reasons that have led couples to decide to move to the country. During the interviews, two interviewees commented that the main reason that drove them to move was the “toxic” environment that surrounded their children, the bad company, or even the bullying they suffered from classmates.

#### 4.2. Structural Factors

- (a) that the village is well-communicated: Many of the couples interviewed stated that when choosing the village where they live, they took into account regional connectivity. The vast majority considered it was necessary that the municipality was not very far from the country capital or a relatively large town, and that it had rapid access to a main road (only a few couples said that it needed to be near a motorway). These conditions allow us to infer that most families consider a dual model of life in which daily life takes place mainly in the village, but also the need to be connected to supralocal areas in order to do certain activities or maintain ties with the family and friends is considered.
- (b) that the village has access to internet: This is a condition that all the couples interviewed highlighted. Some families emphasized it for working from home, others for personal use.
- (c) that the village has certain services and infrastructure: The most mentioned services included a school, a grocery store and an ATM; and, to a lesser extent, some mentioned a chemist’s and doctor’s surgery. The services and infrastructure that condition the choice of the village by the couples interviewed show that the decision to live in the country is determined by a certain infrastructure associated with the organization of the family’s daily life and people’s health.
- (d) that there is housing available: This is a condition required by all the couples, although with very different characteristics depending on social class and occupation. Couples where one of the parents worked at home in a well-paid liberal profession or worked in the city and had a good salary tended to look for very particular housing: isolated country houses or relatively large single-family homes with a certain aesthetic or style. For couples from the most humble classes—which includes, but is not limited to, foreign families—it was enough to find housing that was minimally dignified and affordable given their economic situation.
- (e) The possibility to work in the village: One of the conditions for almost two-thirds of the couples interviewed was that they could work in the village either by doing telework for large and medium-sized corporations or by doing “office” activities that

required occasional travelling (graphic design, interior design, translator, architect, consultant, among others). However, lower social class couples, which included almost all the foreign population and some people from Catalonia) went to live in the country in order to do work related to the primary sector (as shepherds, farmhands, farmers, gardeners, and so on) or tertiary sector (for example, as cleaners in rural houses).

Apart from these very general factors, there were others that were only mentioned sporadically. There were those who considered having a secondary school nearby to be an important factor for when the children completed primary education. Others mentioned the need for a sports facility, a youth club or group or leisure activities during the summer, a municipal library or telecentre, among others. In short, a whole series of services that, by expanding the range of formal, sports and leisure activities, make it possible to live a village life in the sense of creating a network and community.

To end this section, a brief note on the importance of the village having a school, a factor just mentioned in subsection “c”, since it was a condition mentioned by all the couples with children. These families insisted on seeing the school as a place of in situ socialization for both their children and the parents themselves who, through the parents’ association or through participation in the community school structures created ad hoc, saw it as a great opportunity to network. As an example, and not just anecdotal, in three cases the existence of a particular type of school that was organized under the umbrella of an alternative pedagogy was the main and practically only factor that led to choosing the village.

## **5. Presentation of an Ideal Type of Rural School Capable of Integrating Diversity and Offering Educational Success in Today’s Rural World**

As mentioned in the previous section, if we want rural municipalities to slow down the depopulation process—even becoming poles of attraction—it is absolutely indispensable that they have certain services, with a school being an essential one. Both national [17,18] and international [19] research on school and region highlights the “magnet” effect of the rural school. The school is a major attraction for young families with children insofar as it resolves an essential and unavoidable question: the close schooling of one’s children, thus avoiding the inconvenience of travelling every day to fulfil a social and educational obligation.

In all places, but inescapably in rural villages made up of a diverse population and social structure—villages made up of people who have been settled there for generations, people who come from different parts of Catalonia, from the rest of Spain or from abroad—it is necessary to think about a rural school “alternative” to the dominant school model that involves, among other things, the conception of an educational project (both theoretical and practical) that properly addresses the high degree of diversity of its students. There is a great deal of solid international research on this issue. Research by Stephanie Tuters in Canada [20], Suseela Malakolunthu and Nagappan Rengasamy in Malaysia [21] and James Forrest and Kevin Dunn in Australia [22] explain very well the positive reception in communities of schools that are able to build a knowledge, curriculum and school culture around a broad and transparent plurality and diversity. These schools, capable of providing educational success to the son of a farmer, the neo-rural, the middle or upper-class family that teleworks or travels to work in the city every day, among others, not only stand out due to their ability to integrate the families settled in the area, but also become a point of attraction for new families that are considering emigrating. Some previous research [23] has shown how families of medium-sized and large cities who participate in an alternative or non-hegemonic culture and decide to move to the country, choose areas with school projects that give them “cultural security”; that is, where the school culture respects the idiosyncrasy of their child and, by extension, of their family.

The aim of this final section, in accordance with the title of this article, is not to present a comparative analysis of how the areas mentioned in the different schools are approached,

but rather, taking into account the most radical approaches and practices, to offer an integrated synthesis that as an ideal type provides inevitably controversial clues for the construction of an alternative rural school, whose goal is to ensure the success of all pupils, regardless of their particularities, differences and starting conditions.

The school we propose involves a radical change in traditional school culture [15] and an uncompromising alteration of the hegemonic school grammar [16] that reverses the underlying pedagogical approaches. In other words, each of the six aspects that we will explain below is contemplated as an alteration of what dominates in most schools and, at the same time, is intertwined with different educational dimensions, since for change to make sense there has to be an integral and integrated transformation of all the elements that make up the school. The ideal type that we project is, as you will see, a radical change in educational perspective, as well as in the inclusive conception that, in the most essential, is perfectly aligned with the postulates of Booth and Ainscow [17] who, as is well known, are committed to absolute respect of all kinds of diversity (cultural, religious, sexual orientation, pace of learning, children's interests, and so on) through the respectful role of the teacher and the articulation of an essentially inclusive curriculum. Below we consider each area.

(i) *Methodological (didactic) area*: The school opts—with practical consequences—for the active, living and experimental methodology. Active pedagogy is conceived as an orientation that guides all school activity so that daily life in the school is steeped in creativity, cooperation and a global conception of knowledge. The innovative method that we propose as a result of the experiences analyzed redefines everything that happens in the school; and below, we highlight three particularly important aspects.

First, the activity, as a form of learning, guides the educational gaze in the sense that the action and participation of the pupils becomes the core of learning. Through project work, interests, discoveries, prepared environments, among others, the student occupies a central position and is responsible for everything that is done in the school.

Second, understanding learning as a process means that the results are not the fruit of the assessment of what the student knows at any given moment, but rather they are the result of the dialectic process that the learner establishes with reality. There is no homogenous starting point for everyone, nor is there a point to be reached by necessarily taking the same steps.

Third, pedagogical eclecticism shapes the pedagogical approach to methodology as a whole. The innovative rural school accepts pluralism as a way to keep the school alive through experimentation, creativity and research. It is about searching for ways to accompany the children's learning processes that best suit their needs and difficulties. Mixing, redefining, inventing and adapting methods is what best defines this school, a school that avoids the use of predetermined and standardized formulas, because they diminish, until they disappear, the singularities of the children.

(ii) *Organization and running of the school*: The school model that emerges—fruit of what we have observed in the schools that have been part of the object of study—is based on radical democracy in the sense that there is a real distribution of power, democratic values are lived with maximum intensity, and there are spaces and times for the educational community to be able to express itself freely and responsibly. That is why this ideal type of school is built upon internal and external structures where the participation and involvement of the protagonists is a perfectly normalized reality. Students, teachers, fathers, mothers, administrative staff, volunteers, friends of the school, members of the community, neighbors of the village are all part the school, which is understood as a space for meeting, research, reflection and thought.

A primary objective of the school is to open spaces of communication between students, between teachers and students, between families and teachers, where the dialectical and rational process that determines the community as such is established, which is a necessary condition for making education an emancipatory collective process. In this way, through the recognition of others in all their individual and collective circumstances, the

subject defines him/herself as a social being; that is, as part of a school-collective and as a member of society.

In order to carry out these principles, to exercise these values, it is absolutely essential to create—as we have seen in the schools studied—open, horizontal and participatory assemblies where the voice of everyone is heard and taken into account. It is important to create assemblies where dissent/the student has a place, where the particular reasoned opinion has a place and where the confrontation of ideas serves to advance towards approaches that clearly go beyond postulates that are taken for granted.

(iii) *Curriculum*: The school has a flexible, open, leisurely curriculum that is sensitive to what occurs both in the more immediate rural environment and the world as a whole.

An alternative way of thinking and doing to the hegemonic school model aims to decouple the fragmentation of knowledge, the homogenization of students and the standardization of rhythms—imposed by the curriculum—from school common sense. From our point of view, therefore, integral and integrated education embodies an education that is not indebted to work but rather is worthy of human beings, which means thinking about the curriculum in a radically different way from how the traditional school does.

In the curriculum of the schools that we have studied, what is consubstantial to the physical, historical, political, economic and social aspects of the municipality they are located occupies a central place. The school is, first of all, sensitive to the reality of the social environment and, therefore, incorporates what the students and their families experience beyond school time. The curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the members of the educational community in all its diversity, prioritizing what is experienced over pre-established content, which is often detached from the immediate reality of the students and their families. The different areas of knowledge are linked to one another in order to help understand the world as a whole—instead of fragmenting and abstracting it. Reality is one and many at the same time, but it is not something fragmented or unconnected. That is why the learnings given in each area of knowledge maintain coherence and complementarity, describing the same thing from different perspectives. Weaving knowledge as a network that enables us to understand the local and global world in a critical and complex way is the goal of a curriculum designed for the student and not as a set of obstacles to overcome.

The other essential element to consider is the curricular time. Giving time to the right moments for learning is crucially important, accepting the circularity and relativity of time, creating the right conditions to initiate, develop and conclude the processes that shape the gaze of the student. Respecting the pace of the learner, instead of imposing the lineal time set by the clock and the curriculum, enhances the quality of the process, and enables students to delve more deeply into what they are learning and to pay attention to how they learn. It is a question of prioritizing *kairos* over *chronos*, which is why it is necessary to have an organization and operation that allows for a new approach to school time. The fragmentation of knowledge prevents an understanding of the world in a deep and global way, and the segmentation of time fails to promote the continuity of the learning process that knowledge requires.

(iv) *Educational roles*: The first issue to highlight is that the teacher, despite being a central figure in the educational process of this school model, is by no means the only one: the administrative staff, the cleaning staff, the kitchen service and the janitors are also educational agents. There is therefore no strict separation between those who teach and those who do not, since education, in the framework of the school community, is something that is provided on many levels and everyone contributes their part.

The innovative and inclusive rural schoolteacher, as the protagonist of the learning process, is seen as someone who respects and knows the rural environment in which the school is embedded, with the capacity for research and the desire to undertake all kinds of projects.

This teacher is portrayed as a companion in the path the students take on their own feet, facilitating the acquisition of tools and knowledge, inviting them to take new steps and showing possible subjects and territories to discover. Moreover, he/she is presented as

an agent of change for the community, who sees his/her task as a vital one, as a political commitment, that bears no relation to the public servant mentality that promotes the approach of the conventional education system.

The teacher at this innovative school knows how to listen to and observe the people around him/her: the students and families in all their diversity and plurality. He/she respects them in terms of equality, questions them without judging them, and shows them recognition without creating dependency. In the same vein, based on what we have seen in all the schools, adapts his/her interventions to the needs, desires, limitations and strengths of the student, creating supportive, trusting, stimulating and positive relationships. This does not mean that the teacher renounces authority or responsibility. On the contrary, the teacher accepts that he/she is a vitally important role model with regards to attitudes, values, knowledge, commitment and effort—and therefore acts as such in every moment.

Finally, the family of the students and the community also have a key role to play in building an innovative and inclusive school. In this regard, the structures open to the participation of the fathers, mothers and grandparents—to which we have referred to previously—are essential. Their involvement has positive effects in every educational dimension, from enriching the contents that are worked on to resolving conflicts between children and improving the running of the school through the constant review of the workings of the school. That is why the families have an active role in academic matters, in the management of the school, in the preparation of specific activities or even, although this is not very frequent, in the running of the school. The school, as a village school, belongs to them. It is nothing more and nothing less than the reappropriation of the educational debate by the community, an exercise in direct democracy that guarantees equality, equity and educational quality.

The school model presented here makes an effort to think beyond the school's walls, bringing in and serving the community at the same time, becoming an essential element for community cohesion and social transformation. The fact is that the approach we have taken leads directly to the education of citizens that are critical, active and solidaric—be they adults or children—which is the purpose of the innovative educational task, as we will see below.

(v) *School-local environment relationship*: The school incorporates the local environment into the curriculum and plays an active role in the community. As we have already made clear, the school must be a place of confluence between generations, knowledge and practices. A community space that invites people to learn and participate, to exchange knowledge and tools, a space where the community questions itself guided by the question of how to educate our children in the path towards emancipation. This openness aims to break down the walls that have often turned the school into an institution of recruitment and control, into a dark space of discipline and a tool of separation between children and adults. That is why we do not speak of the school as something isolated from the community but as an entity that forms part of it and that, therefore, maintains a fluid, permanent and necessary relationship with the other social agents, entities and collectives. The school is born from the community and intervenes in it, it feeds from what happens there and transforms it, it wonders what the causes of the problems that run through it are and proposes solutions. That is why the open organizational structures we have referred to above and an architectural conception of the school that reflects these principles are essential. That is why the innovative pedagogical thinking questions, among other things, the physical structure of the school, the use that is made of each space, the distribution of the students and the furniture and aesthetic of the school, because it understands that architecture also reflects a specific pedagogical conception. Standardized classrooms, individual tables and static whiteboards no longer serve. The innovative rural school needs light, multipurpose spaces, furniture that adapts to the activity being carried out (and not the other way round), meeting spaces, accessibility to materials, comfort for students, a pleasant and inspiring aesthetic, contact with the outside and proximity to the local environment. Above all, it needs to be able to go out into the street, to the village square,

the forest or the river, and it must let itself be affected by what happens there. That is the way to understand the world, by immersing oneself in it. Thus, in the innovative school there is a constant coming and going of students, neighbors, friends, families that make the school a place full of life that acts as, and is claimed as, part of the community.

(vi) *Assessment*: An innovative rural school makes a qualitative and reasoned assessment of the students and understands it, essentially, as a careful observation of the child. Needless to say, assessment is a key element of the learning process, but like the other areas analyzed, it cannot follow the conventional logic if we wish to adopt an innovative logic. From our perspective, and picking up on what we have seen in the schools observed, assessment cannot be understood as an instrument to identify and separate those that are academically capable from those that are not, those that obey the school logic from those who reject it. From the perspective advocated here, it can only be conceived as an instrument of revision, an instrument for becoming aware of one's own learning process that helps detect those aspects to be improved, those shortcomings that need to be overcome. That is why tools such as the work plans chosen by the students or co-assessment, which reflect the logic described so far and that seek to place the students at the center, incorporating assessment into the very learning process and not at the end of it, as if it were a reward/punishment. Assessment under the innovative perspective is integrated into the learning process in qualitative terms and acts as a driving force and not as a brake. That is why, in addition to assessing the students, the teachers and the school are also assessed. Teachers assess each other through observation and reflection on their difficulties and shortcomings (this allows for teamwork). The teachers are assessed on the fulfillment of the challenges proposed for each year and on the achievement of the pedagogical project. The school as a whole asks the whole community what aspects need improving and what areas need substantial changes. Thus, also through formative assessment the school is kept in permanent research and the community is involved in the improvement of the school, which allows an innovative educational practice to be carried out in the terms outlined and to maintain it over time.

## 6. Conclusions

The first part of this article, in line with studies that highlight the need for sectorial and limited research both in time and space that avoid a standardized vision of demographic evolution in the rural world [18–20], explained how rurality in Catalonia, in contrast to what has happened in many other regions of Spain, experienced a moderate growth in population between 1990 and 2000 that was accentuated between 2000 and 2005. There are indications that this growth slowed down with the economic crisis of 2008, and from 2015 onwards some rural villages have been experiencing a comeback again. In any case, at least in Catalonia, it is something that will need to be studied carefully, completing the demographic series that have been presented here in order to determine, among other aspects, the magnitude of this recovery.

The population growth alluded to above is due, as explained throughout the article, mainly to migration. An internal migration and, to a lesser extent, also external migration has enabled what some are calling a rural "miracle" [21]. Beyond the research that has basically focused on quantitative data, there is a need to study the processes of integration versus segregation. It cannot be ignored that in the rural areas of Catalonia, when they have been made up only, or mainly, of people from the region ("native"), the arrival of a foreign population has generated on more than one occasion manifest or latent tensions that have hindered processes of social and cultural integration. It is important to study how such tensions have been resolved (if they have indeed been resolved), as well as the processes of building new identities capable of integrating the population, regardless of their origin. In this regard, the research of anthropologist Luciana Trimano [24] and María Fonte and Claudia Ranaboldo [25] can help. The former studies a similar question in the Traslasierra Valley, in the west of the province of Cordoba (Argentina), and the latter, from an extraordinary comparative perspective, study rural areas in the European Union and

Latin America. On a more theoretical level, of great interest is what Marc Mormont [26] proposes when addressing the notion of rural identity in a traditional society (a concept clearly opposed to urban identity) and a modern and technological one (characterized by mixtures, diffuse borders and cultural tensions).

The second part of the article explained that there are many factors that attract young couples to rural villages. Both this study and other studies already mentioned show that these reasons are diverse in the sense that they are due to both subjective and very personal issues and also structural ones that are closely linked to services and infrastructure.

With regards to the subjective questions, research that provides an in-depth and comparative analysis of the variability of these factors, taking into account the conditions of social class, work (often linked to social class) and culture, is deemed necessary. In this article, although some differences have been noted, we do not have enough information to provide an exhaustive analysis. Regarding the structural issues, it is worth completing what has already been explained with the results of a study (“The state of small villages in Catalonia: Situation and problems of villages with up to 3000 inhabitants”) carried out in 2010 that quantified, for the first time, strengths and weaknesses that might stimulate, or impede, migration towards rural regions. This study highlighted as strengths of rural Catalonia the following facts: that 94% of the small villages have access to the Internet (despite only 75% having broadband connection); that 90.7% had a doctor’s surgery; that 81.2% had a bus stop; that between 78% and 88% had a postal service, restaurant-bar or grocery store; that 89% had a secondary school relatively nearby (maximum 20 km); and that 89% had some sports infrastructure. In contrast, as weaknesses with regard to attracting migrants, it highlighted the following: 36% of the rural villages could not offer summer activities for children and young people; 55% had difficulty enrolling their 0–3 years-old child in a nursery as there was none in the municipality; and one revealing fact is that 90% of the municipalities had not built social housing in the last five years.

From an institutional European perspective, we consider the contributions made by Enda Stenson [27] in the document *EU strategy for rural revival* to be of great value. In it he sets out as central elements six actions aimed at supporting rural communities so that they can be sustainable and dynamic; supporting businesses and job creation; improving digital connectivity and infrastructure; maximizing the potential of rural tourism; and including the creativity and cultural potential of rural areas. This set of actions specifically mentions the importance of providing rural villages with schools.

It is quite clear that if we want the rural villages of Catalonia or of any other place to attract migrants, especially young couples of all socioeconomic conditions, it is essential to implement an infrastructure policy that compensates for the regional inequalities that have historically occurred in favor of large cities. Otherwise, rurality will likely only be possible for upper-class migrants that can do without certain goods and services precisely because they can afford them. This produces what some specialists call “rural gentrification”, which has been especially studied in Latin America by researchers like M. J. Lorenzen Martiny [28], in Quebec by L. Guimond and M. Simard [29], and in Europe by Martin Phillips [30] and Aileen Stockdale [31]. All these studies, especially the latter, speak of the complexity of the term and, starting from the idea that gentrification involves the displacement of the native population, or making them invisible, consider that there may be some positive aspect that has not always been taken sufficiently into account.

This article ends with an educational proposal—the construction of an inclusive, innovative rural school with the ultimate goal of educational success of all students. In light of what we see in most schools, it might seem that this proposal is utopian in the sense that it cannot be carried out. In these conclusions, we would like to emphasize that the proposal follows the pedagogical approach and educational practice of six rural schools in full operation. Rejecting, then, the charge of utopia in the sense just mentioned, another question we need to ask ourselves concerns the conditions required for these alternative educational projects to take root and survive. Research addressing this issue [23,29] is not too different from what we have seen in the schools observed. First of all, it should

be noted that both the implementation and sustainability of these projects are not easy. The possibility of having stable, well-trained, professional teams with sufficient time to think and rework the innovative project, with the capacity to resist accommodation and with a clear ideological position regarding the treatment of cultural diversity, plays an important role. Xavier Besalú [32], when talking about cultural diversity in today's society, considers that we need to keep in mind not only the dichotomy "indigenous" culture and foreign cultures (often associated with external migration) because this diversity is also present within the native population. Not everyone in this group has the same cultural references and universes, not everyone belongs to the same religion (assuming they have one), not everyone has the same sexual identity, sexual preferences or class identity. Modern society, in today's rural settings, is also characterized by being structured around a diverse cultural mosaic that schools must take up, recognize and preserve. The role of education professionals is crucial, as is the commitment and responsibility of the government to enable and favor schools like the ones we have proposed, because they become beacons of the most groundbreaking, most radical and most avant-garde pedagogical renewal. In any case, however, there is no doubt that a school like the one presented here is a vital factor in building a cohesive community and attracting new couples, many of whom, being different, seek a school where their identity traits are respected [33].

One last point to finish: in the event of successful research that addresses the aforementioned aspects, it will be necessary to consider an unforeseen factor whose effects are still noticeable: COVID-19. After the effects of the first lockdown of the pandemic (May–June 2020 in the case of Spain, a modest transfer of urban population to the rural world has been detected that has helped some schools whose situation was relatively fragile.

When the situation of strict lockdown of the whole country ended, some families that lived in large cities decided to move to a more open, more natural environment that was not as restrictive as the big cities are. The fact is that COVID-19, as well as exposing the budget cuts and lack of investment in such important sectors as health, education and social services, also made clear the psychosocial consequences of living in big cities. Since June 2020, several real estate agencies have received more and more requests from families who, being able to afford it, were looking for new housing in rural areas. We are talking about middle-upper and upper-class families who, thanks to the possibility of working from home, could live in one place or another. Unfortunately, at the time of closing this article, we do not yet have data to make a global estimate of this phenomenon, but there is enough evidence to say that this transfer has given oxygen to rural schools that were about to be closed due to lack of students.

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