

# CHANGE AGENTS AND EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FACING RURAL DEPOPULATION IN SPAIN

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## Abstract

The presented project is a collaboration between 29 Spanish universities, Faculties of Education, including Comillas Pontifical University, and the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* (FPdGi) through the *Generación Docentes* program. This initiative focuses on the professional development of preservice teachers and offers them the opportunity to engage in four-month curricular practices in rural schools. Since 2020, 30 student teachers have participated in this program each year. Notably, this initiative is particularly relevant given that 84% of the Spanish territory is occupied by rural municipalities, where only 9.4% of the total population of Spain is registered.

Furthermore, the *Generación Docentes* program equips preservice teachers with training to acquire tools and skills necessary to adapt to society. It also provides them with the chance to be part of the Edu Lab Challenge, a space for socio-educational entrepreneurship. Here, they collaborate with mentors and other young teachers to develop educational innovation projects. Over the course of four years, 120 preservice teachers have completed their educational practices in 29 rural centers located in areas known as "Empty Spain." These Service-Learning experiences have reached over 2,500 children.

This project aligns with the topic Global Issues in Education due to the fact that the FPdGi has detected a need at national level of the Spanish territory with respect to rural schools in "Empty Spain". In this regard, the service-learning methodology which is the framework of the project allows the teacher students from urban areas to create an engagement with the rural community.

This partnership makes it possible to address the needs identified and to work for society, with society and in society:

- For society. The universities, FPdGi, and preservice teachers address the pressing issue of rural depopulation, which is of increasing concern nationally.
- With society. Collaboration and commitment from all educational stakeholders are vital. University agents, including teachers, tutors, curricular practice supervisors, and Final Degree Project directors, facilitate preservice teachers' combination of university studies with the experience in rural areas. This engagement extends to the local inhabitants (children, families, teachers, mayors, etc.), encouraging students to gain insights into different realities and reflect on the societal role of their professional practice.
- In society. Preservice teachers spend four months away from their primarily urban origins, immersing themselves in rural communities. They learn about, understand, and meet the genuine educational needs of rural schools. Additionally, they develop their Final Degree Projects in multi-grade classrooms (where children of different ages and educational needs are found), applying the knowledge and skills gained during their academic training and project involvement.

In conclusion, when universities embrace new experiences that expose their students to different and relatively distant realities like rural education, everyone benefits. The learning process is enriching for all involved stakeholders.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Rural Depopulation, Teacher Education, Community Engagement, University Networks.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Rural schools are the great unknown in many parts of Spain; however, their work is worthy of admiration. It is very difficult to give an exact definition of them due to their diversity and heterogeneity, also due to the context in which they develop: the rural context. This involves many factors that are also very different according to each area, so there is no universal definition of what is rural [1-3].

Specifically, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA) and the European Union (EU), the population threshold for rural areas is considered to be less than 10,000 inhabitants [1]. However, Law 45/2007, on the Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment, considers a municipality to be a small rural municipality when it has a population of less than 5,000 inhabitants and is integrated into the rural environment.

It is worth noting that, although only 9.4% of the Spanish population is registered in these small rural municipalities, they are the most numerous in Spain as they account for 78.1% of the total and occupy 69.3% of the territory [4]. Figure 1 shows the distribution of rural and urban municipalities in Spain [5].

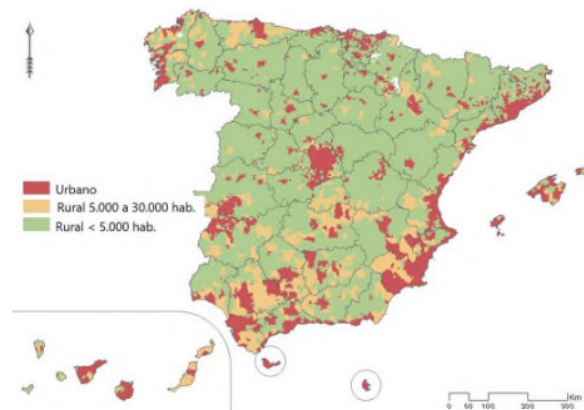


Figure 1: Rural and urban municipalities in Spain in 2020. Source [1] (p. 2)

Therefore, according to the data collected previously, the total number of rural municipalities with less than or more than 5,000 inhabitants occupies 84% of the entire Spanish territory.

Despite the relevance that rural areas have geographically, few children go to them compared to urban areas and this is due to the alarming depopulation that is being experienced in the “Empty Spain”. This disadvantage goes hand in hand with the convenience of urban centers, which can be detected when we see that the four autonomous communities with more population registered in their rural municipalities are *Castilla y León*, *Castilla la Mancha*, *Extremadura* and *Aragón* having between 30 to 50% of the total inhabitants [5] and communities such as *Cataluña*, *País Vasco* or *Madrid* have 7% of population registered in rural areas.

This problem raises a number of issues such as that there are rural schools throughout Spain that due to depopulation in these areas do not have enough students to keep them open and therefore are in the sad situation of having to close these schools. This means not only that the village in which the center was located loses the engine that gives it life, the children, but also that the few children who attended these centers are forced to go to other schools in the area, which implies mobility, time and difficulties for families, as many do not have adequate resources and time to take their children to other towns early in the morning.

## 1.1 Rural schools in Spain

In view of these data that point to the existence of very varied rural areas throughout the country, it is also necessary to highlight the diversity of rural schools that exist depending on the context in which they are located. The rural school is sustained by the environment and the culture that surrounds it [6], which is why it is vitally important that it takes advantage of the benefits that its environment can offer at the cultural, social, academic or community level [1].

It is crucial to know how to define and differentiate between rural and urban schools. For this reason, Llevot and Garreta [3] recommend taking into account that the organizational character of a school is guided by the number of students, tutors, classes or classrooms. With all this in mind, the different typologies of rural schools are presented: Cyclical or graded school, unitary school and Grouped Rural Center. Each of these rural school concepts is explained below.

- Cyclical or graduated school: It emerged between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It is characterized by the classification of students into homogeneous groups according to age and learning levels. They arose with the aim of schooling a large number of

students and grouping them according to psycho-evolutionary criteria in order for them to progress following the same curriculum and pace [7].

- Unitary school: In these schools there is only one classroom with students of different ages, grades and needs who learn together with a single teacher, who is in charge of all the functions of the center [6]. Depending on the unitary school, it may or may not belong to a Grouped Rural Center and have more than one teacher if there are more than 12 students in class [1].
- Grouped Rural Center: It is a single center that groups together certain units that are distributed in different localities. They were created with the aim of improving the conditions and quality of education in rural areas [8]. Depending on the Autonomous Community in which the center is located, it receives different names, among which the following stand out: *Colegios Rurales Agrupados* (CRA) in *Madrid, Galicia, Asturias, Aragón, Castilla la Mancha* and *Castilla y León*; *Zonas Escolares Rurales* (ZER) in *Cataluña* or *Colectivos de Escuelas Rurales* (CER) in the *Islas Canarias* [9].

As can be seen, there is a wide variety of rural schools throughout Spain to which an educational response must be given. That is why the teachers of these schools, who have the challenge of attending to such small and diverse classrooms because they are multigrade classrooms (characterized by a very small and heterogeneous group of students in terms of age, needs, course...), must be innovative and enterprising teachers who know how to attend to diversity through the application of active methodologies to respond to the challenges posed by rural schools.

### 1.1.1 Active methodologies in rural schools

It is worth highlighting the great importance of introducing active methodologies in rural schools, and more specifically, in multigrade classrooms, where children of different ages coexist and learn together. These classrooms, so present in "Empty Spain", are an opportunity to address diversity through active methodologies, to offer content in an interdisciplinary way, to encourage work among equals thanks to cooperative work and project work, or to learn from the context surrounding the students [1,6]. Therefore, it is necessary to take advantage of the heterogeneity within the classroom, whether unitary or multigrade, as this will help to achieve meaningful learning.

There are many methodologies that can be followed in multigrade classrooms. In fact, it would be a mistake to always use the same one, since these have to be adapted to the context and characteristics of the students with whom we work if we want quality learning [10].

It should be emphasized that one of the great riches of rural schools is that we learn from each other based on the experiences and interests that arise in the classroom, and not those marked by a textbook. Therefore, in rural schools it is recommended to use active methodologies focused on the characteristics of the students that have favoured the participation of the educational community (teachers, family members, students, management team...) and the relationship with the surrounding environment [11].

Likewise, there is a wide range of methodologies that can and should be used in rural areas such as Project Based Learning (PBL); cooperative work; thinking routines; challenge-based learning (CBL), collaborative work or by corners that also favour learning within rural schools, learning mathematics, English... and the connection with Service-Learning.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This project arises from the problem of echoing the rural schools and repopulate them with teachers in training to provide an educational response to the needs of these schools. The project is the result of a collaboration between 29 Spanish universities, Faculties of Education, including Comillas Pontifical University, and the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* (FPdGi). This initiative focuses on the professional development of preservice teachers and offers them the opportunity to engage in four-month curricular practices in rural schools.

In order to address and respond to this main need of "Emptied Spain", in 2013, the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* created the *Generación Docentes* program, thanks to which they offer university students of the Primary and Early Childhood Education degree the possibility of a 4-month intensive curricular internship in a rural school in the rural areas of Spain. In the schools, the Preservice Teachers have offered a service to the educational community in which they were, at the same time that they themselves learned from a very enriching experience. Therefore, the schools have shown the project

their way of working in rural schools and have learned from different methodologies, workshops, activities and dynamics that the Preservice Teachers have given them.

Through the *Generación Docentes* program, the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* offers 10 months of training to the preservice teachers selected to go to rural schools, including a Virtual Campus of 70 hours of training with experts in educational innovation and soft skills, an educational laboratory to develop socio-educational entrepreneurship projects, along with other teachers, mentors and ed-techs, a 30-hour training on programming (code.org) to learn how to program in the classroom, in a dynamic and participatory way, as well as a four-month internship experience in rural centers and a pedagogical expedition that allows them to visit and discover a large number of innovative centers throughout Spain.

This project is mainly developed within the framework of Service-Learning, thus covering several needs. The first one is to **make visible the invisible**, that is, the rural schools that make up what is called "The Empty Spain" [7]. And the second, covering the demands that in each of the schools that the Preservice Teachers attend ask of them. This is how with this project we have offered a service to the community at the same time that we have carried out professional apprenticeships in a practical way.

Through this methodology, the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* (FPdGi) has allowed Spanish universities to connect student teachers with rural schools so that they can put into practice the learning acquired in their studies, at the service of the community to meet the needs detected, while they learn about the way of teaching and the methodologies used in each of the rural schools.

In addition, in this project we have created new scenarios where students in rural schools have learned from the environment as for example with project methodologies or Service-Learning [12,13]. In fact, Service-Learning is an incredibly good methodology to work in rural environments because:

This brings together pedagogical intentionality and intentionality of social transformation as basic elements that stimulate the cohesion of the different educational agents of the community and the territory. The pedagogical features of the rural educational community and its capacity for territorial structuring constitute a suitable means to initiate and promote Service-Learning educational proposals. [14] (p. 33).

Some of the main components of Service-Learning that have been used in this project are: The community of learning and of those who receive the service, the critical learning of the students, and the transformative and justice-seeking intentionality [15].

It should be noted that all the mechanisms of the Service-Learning methodology [16] have been carried out: an observation, cooperative work, research, direct experience and participation in practice by both the teacher (in practice) and the students. These interventions they have carried out are the ones that give full meaning to the word Service of the Service-Learning methodology.

### 3 RESULTS

Since 2020, 30 student teachers have participated in this program each year. Therefore, over the course of four years, 120 student teachers from 29 different Spanish universities have carried out their educational internships in Teacher Training studies in 29 rural centers located in the areas known as "Empty Spain". These Service-Learning experiences have reached more than 2,500 children.

With all these data just mentioned, it is important to insist that education must be promoted as a fundamental element that helps to confront the depopulation of rural areas by reducing territorial inequalities [17]. Due to this need to repopulate the depopulated Spain, every year the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* offers 30 scholarships to students of Primary and/or Infant Education in Spain to have the opportunity to carry out their internships in rural areas of the Autonomous Communities of Spain such as *Galicia, Aragón, Extremadura and Castilla y León*. This experience allows education students who are on the verge of finishing their university studies to get to know this reality and contribute their knowledge acquired during their academic training to these disadvantaged areas, which are so necessary to attend to.

The program has 60 mentors, more than 50 experts, 629 connected teachers, 30 social impact projects, internships in 29 rural schools, more than 20 collaborating companies such as "Art House Academy", "UNESCO", "Accenture", "Samsung", "Imagine Creativity Center" or "NASCO Feeding Minds" and an agreement with 29 Spanish universities.

The Spanish universities and rural schools that have participated in the project are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1. Rural schools involved in the project.

	<i>Aragón</i>	<i>Galicia</i>	<i>Extremadura</i>	<i>Castilla y León</i>
<b>N.º of rural schools</b>	8	10	6	5
<b>Names of rural schools</b>	CRA Martín del Río CRA Somontano Bajo Aragón CEIP Ramón y Cajal (Alpartir) CRA A Redolada CRA Enebros CRA Montesnegros CRA Pablo Antonio Crespo CRA Monegros Norte	CRA Nosa Sra Do Faro CRA Bergondo CRA Monterrei CRA Coristanco /Atarandeira CRA Vilaboa CRA Mestra Clara Torres CRA Rianxo CRA De Oroso CRA Valga CRA Amencer	CRA Esparragosa De La Serena CRA Gloria Fuertes CRA Sierra De San Pedro CRA Almenara CRA La Espiga CEIP Máximo Cruz Rebosa (Piornal)	CEIP La Pradera CEIP De Toral De Los Bados CRA Pinar Grande CEIP Nuestra Señora De La Piedad CRA María Moliner

Table 2. Spanish universities, companies, trainers, mentors, program advisors and public entities.

<i>Spanish universities with agreement</i>	<i>Names of the companies involved in the project</i>	<i>Campus trainers</i>	<i>Edu lab challenge mentors</i>	<i>Program advisors</i>	<i>Public entities</i>
Universidad Pontificia Comillas CEU Fundación San Pablo Andalucía Cardenal Spínola Universidad a Distancia de Madrid Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona Universidad Autónoma de Madrid Universidad Cardenal Herrera-CEU Universidad Complutense de Madrid Universidad de Alicante Universidad de Barcelona Universidad de Burgos Universidad de Cantabria Universidad de Córdoba Universidad de Extremadura Universidad de Granada Universidad de Jaén Universidad de La Laguna Universidad de La Rioja Universidad de León Universidad de Loyola de Andalucía Universidad de Murcia Universidad de Navarra Universidad de Oviedo Universidad de Sevilla Universidad de Valencia Universidad de Valladolid Universidad de Vigo Universidad de Zaragoza Universidad San Pablo-CEU (Cardenal Spínola CEU) Universitat Jaume I	Accenture Samsung UNESCO Aprendices Visuales Art House Academy Banco de España Code.org Comisión Nacional del Mercado de Valores Deloitte Edunexis eTwinz Fundación Bertelsmann Harbour.Space Ibercaja Imagine Creativity CenterKPMG La Granja León Startup NASCO Feeding Minds Navantia Saint Kolbe University Zurich	Pilar Abós Maria Batet Roser Bois Mónica Galán Cristina Gutiérrez Juan Hernández Isaac Lloveras Esteve López Miquel Martínez Diana Miguel María Palacín Belén Quirós Miriam Reyes Josep Rius Carmen Salcedo Ousman Umar Xavier Verdaguer	Xavier Verdaguer Víctor Árias Noemi Barrientos Ricard Gras Luz Olmos Belén Quirós	Pilar Abós Roser Boix Juan Hernández Miquel Martínez Josep Rius Carmen Salcedo	Ministerio de Asuntos Económicos y Transformación Digital Ministerio de Educación Gobierno de Aragón Xunta de Galicia Consejería de Castilla y León Consejerías de Extremadura

With all these data that we have just mentioned, it is important to insist that education should be enhanced as a fundamental element that helps to address the depopulation of rural areas by reducing territorial inequalities [13]. Because of this need to repopulate depopulated Spain, the *Fundación Princesa de Girona* offers 30 scholarships each year to student teachers of Primary and/or Early Childhood Education in Spain so that they have the opportunity to carry out their internships in rural areas of the Autonomous Communities shown in Table 1: *Galicia, Aragón, Extremadura* and *Castilla y León*. This experience allows future teachers who are about to finish their university studies to get to know this reality and to contribute their knowledge acquired during their academic training to these areas that are so disadvantaged, but so necessary to take care of.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The alliance created in this project has made it possible to address the needs identified and to work for society, with society and in society:

- For society. The universities, FPdGi, and preservice teachers address the pressing issue of rural depopulation, which is of increasing concern nationally.
- With society. Collaboration and commitment from all educational stakeholders are vital. University agents, including teachers, tutors, curricular practice supervisors, and Final Degree Project directors, facilitate preservice teachers' combination of university studies with the experience in rural areas. This engagement extends to the local inhabitants (children, families, teachers, mayors, etc.), encouraging students to gain insights into different realities and reflect on the societal role of their professional practice.
- In society. Preservice teachers spend four months away from their primarily urban origins, immersing themselves in rural communities. They learn about, understand, and meet the genuine educational needs of rural schools. Additionally, they develop their Final Degree Projects in multi-grade classrooms (where children of different ages and educational needs are found), applying the knowledge and skills gained during their academic training and project involvement.

In conclusion, when universities embrace new experiences that expose their students to different and relatively distant realities like rural education, everyone benefits. The learning process is enriching for all involved stakeholders.

### 4.1 Lessons learned

There have been many advantages with this project and many lessons learned. Among them we highlight the following.

- 1 This project allows faculties of education to engage with the reality of rural schools, which often go unnoticed in contemporary societies. In the case of Comillas Pontifical University, the success of the project is evident in the increasing number of students participating in the *Generación Docentes* program.
- 2 Collaborations between universities and the FPdGi expand the network of internship centers, enabling students to engage in educational internships in rural areas and support these regions with trainee teachers.
- 3 Media and social network exposure of the project raises awareness of the issue of rural depopulation and the need for solutions. It highlights the potential influence of young people when given opportunities and tools to effect change.
- 4 For preservice teachers, this project represents a comprehensive learning journey. It enhances their autonomy, practical skills, and understanding of multi-grade education. It allows them to connect with school management and staff, apply their university knowledge in practice, and focus on their Final Degree Projects related to rural schools.

### 4.2 Challenges and Questions

Throughout this project there have been many challenges that we have encountered. Here we define some of them and show the solutions found so that everyone could continue rowing in the same direction.

The Universities face two primary challenges: enabling students to undertake four-month curricular internships in rural areas outside their university's autonomous community and contextualizing Final

Degree Projects within these rural internships. Flexibility in syllabi and regulations is required, with cooperation from heads of studies, internship coordinators, Final Degree Projects coordinators, academic vice-deans, and deans. Some universities, such as Comillas, needed to adapt rules (justifying non-attendance, favouring online tutorials, making deadlines for handing in work and exams more flexible, etc.) to accommodate students combining rural internships with distance studies.

On the other hand, the Preservice Teachers must balance their regular studies, *Generación Docentes* program requirements, and intensive rural school internships. They must also adapt to rural life for four months, often far from their families and urban comforts. Furthermore, they need to adjust to the unique nature of rural schools, which may include multi-grade classrooms and diverse student populations, including migrant children. Collaboration between rural schoolteachers and university teachers is crucial to address the special educational needs of these students.

Finally, the Foundation must identify suitable rural schools in depopulated areas to host trainees and establish partnerships between these schools and universities. Additionally, the Foundation manages the application and selection process for preservice teachers and updates training programs in educational management and innovation.

As a result, it is worth mentioning that all the work done by the Preservice Teachers has been valued and seen by many people.

First of all, it is worth mentioning that it has given a lot of visibility to the rural school in general and in particular, to spread the work carried out in the different rural schools to which the Preservice Teachers have gone. Both the universities, the Student Teacher and the foundation itself have disseminated through educational forums and different media the Teacher Generation Program and the scholarships for intensive curricular internships of 4 months in a rural school.

This has not only been achieved thanks to the different social networks like twitter or instagram of the parties involved, but also thanks to the publications in magazines such as "Journal of Parents and Teachers" [18], newspapers such as "*El periódico de Aragón*", "*20 minutos*", "*El País*" or "*Heraldo*" and media like the Spanish television channels, "*24 horas*" or "*la 1*" that have allowed echoing the rural schools and all that great teachers have managed to do. Likewise, the project has been presented in television programs such as "*La Sexta escucha*" and to relevant and influential people in the political and educational panorama such as the Minister of Education or the King and Queen of Spain, King Felipe, and Queen Letizia.

Finally we would like to offer a number of questions related mainly to teacher training and educational policies to which we try to respond with the project presented in this article, to invite the reader to a deep reflection on the situation in relation to rural schools in their country and the measures that other parts of the world have to promote this type of education, which although it is unknown to many, it is essential to know and give it the importance it deserves.

Are your countries facing a situation of depopulation of rural areas? What are the challenges facing education in rural areas in your countries?

How can universities work with rural schools to develop and implement innovative teaching methods that address the unique needs of rural students? What specific initiatives or programs have your universities implemented to engage students in addressing rural depopulation and revitalizing rural communities?

Are there successful case studies in your countries where universities have effectively partnered with rural communities to combat depopulation? Could you name any best practices?

Given that European universities favour exchange programmes with other countries, do your universities consider the possibility for students to carry out curricular internships in rural areas of the country?

Does your university participate in any Service-Learning project that allows students to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in their academic studies to solve real problems in rural areas? Are your universities advancing in the process of institutionalizing Service-Learning as a teaching methodology that favours and promotes university social responsibility?

What measures can be taken in national policies to promote "good practices" that encourage student teachers to consider the possibility of becoming "rural teachers"?

How can universities collaborate with local governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders to create a comprehensive approach to rural development, beyond just education? In what ways can universities

promote and support research projects that focus on the challenges and opportunities in rural areas, contributing to evidence-based policymaking?

Are there examples of universities partnering with rural businesses or industries to create job opportunities and economic incentives for students to stay and work in rural regions after graduation? How can universities help foster a sense of pride and identity in rural areas to retain young talent and prevent the migration of youth to urban centers?

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