





Troubling rurality and rural schooling: a qualitative meta-synthesis of research in rural schools in three European national school systems

Carl Bagley ^a, Dennis Beach ^{b,c}, Montserrat Fargas-Malet ^a and Begoña Vigo-Arrazola ^d

^aSchool of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK; ^bFaculty of Library, Education and Information Science, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden; ^cDepartment of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; ^dFaculty of Education, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

ABSTRACT

This qualitative meta-synthesis collects and analyses the multiple and many-faceted understandings, experiences, practices, and school to community or individual relationships described in qualitative research on rural education and schooling in three European national contexts (Sweden, Northern Ireland, and Spain). Our aim was to generate and present a simplifying analytic synthesising narrative about the politics, practices and outcomes for and in schools in rural areas. In all three countries, the lack of specific relevance of the school to its community through the curriculum is palpable. Instead, the curriculum tends to be performative and to transmit primarily 'official metro-centric knowledge', rather than a more local culturally sensitive knowledge with intrinsic value to local communities. That said, the relationship between rural schools and the communities they serve, and the space and place they occupy, still has the potential to be important, meaningful, powerful and disruptive toward dominant power relations and official knowledge.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 22 November 2023
Accepted 19 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Qualitative meta-synthesis;
rural schools; knowledge
production; curriculum;
Europe

Introduction

Throughout Europe, as is the case in other contexts like Australia (e.g. Cuervo, 2020), capitalist industrial development and population movement from rural to urban areas has led to urban growth and a neglect of rural areas, as tangibly belonging to and characterising places that are peripheral to – and exist – beyond the urban (Gristy & Hargreaves, 2020). There is a slanted one-dimensional representation of the countryside as a result, as existing for urban interests (e.g. Corbett, 2013; Forsberg et al., 2012; Gristy & Hargreaves, 2020). In addition, the in-depth knowledge about what values rural areas have in and for themselves and members of rural communities is not just lacking; it is

CONTACT Carl Bagley  carl.bagley@qub.ac.uk  School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

absent (Areschoug, 2022; Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Björkum & Basic, 2024; Parkinson, 2015). Similarly, clear understanding in relation to schools and schooling in rural areas and what this can offer to and provide for communities and their residents is minimal and often narrowly defined (Beach & Öhrn, 2023). Informed by the dominant neo-liberal metro-centric/urban economy of scale arguments, low pupil numbers in small rural schools are perceived as neither cost-effective nor – based on scant academic evidence – pedagogically beneficial, and these small schools are therefore often closed (Slee & Miller, 2015). Indeed, rural schools come under threat of closure when local population levels fall, and this happens despite research that considers how these school closures impact the future growth or decline of rural communities (Sageman, 2022).

Predominant neoliberal thinking and ideas are open to challenge (Slater, 1998), and there are good reasons to do so (Björkum & Basic, 2024; Clarke, 2014; Forsberg et al., 2012; Lim, 2015). For example, the relatively little research that has been undertaken on school closures suggests how such closures result in children needing to travel long distances to school, which in turn has been shown to have an impact on their educational and emotional wellbeing and the sustainability of local communities (Sageman, 2022; Slee & Miller, 2015). In addition, despite a general scarcity of research in this area, a good number of authors have highlighted the importance of rural schools, and the potential they have for adding educational value and building of community engagement (Gill, 2017; Hargreaves, 2009; Raggl, 2020), as well as social cohesion for sustainable change (e.g. Moreno-Pinillos, 2022; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022).

The size of the school and the low number of pupils has also been found to entail some benefits. For instance, smaller-sized rural schools have been acknowledged as giving teachers the opportunity to develop closer relationships with their pupils, to attend to their individual needs, provide unique and innovative educational opportunities and involve the local community in curriculum content and school practices (Autti & Bæck, 2021; Raggl, 2020; Rothenburger, 2015). School size then cuts both ways. On the one hand, small schools are economically inefficient according to neoliberal ideology. On the other hand, small schools are efficient and effective due to familiarity between teacher and pupil and the closeness of community according to older progressive educational ideologies (Broadfoot et al., 1988).

Being locally accessible and environmentally sustainable are other arguments used in support of keeping schools open in remote rural areas (Gristy & Hargreaves, 2020; Jones, 2009). Rural schools are said to play a critical role in the local economy (Halsey, 2011; Sipple et al., 2019); enhance residents' involvement in community life (Álvarez-Álvarez et al., 2020; Villa & Knutas, 2020); serve as a meeting place and ground for network building; and be the 'social glue' that keeps the local community together (Kearns et al., 2010). Thus, research presents schools as crucial to rural communities as a whole and as having an important 'community function' (Lethonen, 2021). However, this is despite an absence of knowledge and research relating to the operative curriculum, individual pupil learning, and the socio-cultural and economic environment of the local community (e.g. Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Moreno-Pinillos, 2022; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022).

Schools in rural places in European societies generally teach the same content and perform as adequately as urban schools do on national tests and international comparison assessments, such as PISA, when factors such as social class are controlled for (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019). However, by doing this, they may also

marginalise local rural knowledge and expose rural populations to a, for them, culturally insensitive curriculum. There is untapped potential for a curriculum that can operate in local community interests, instead of primarily contributing to cultural domination and marginalisation of rural consciousness and interests (Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Parkinson, 2015). It is ideology, and the power of ideology, that appears to make the difference in educational decision-making (Björkum & Basic, 2024; Pais & Costa, 2017), not least, regarding the value of schools in rural communities and whether to keep them open or not (Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Parkinson, 2015; Roberts et al., 2024).

In this paper, through a qualitative meta-synthesis of research in rural schools in three European national school systems, we explore the multi-faceted understandings, experiences, practices, and relationships, to present a simplifying analytic narrative about the politics, practices and outcomes for and in rural schools.

Researching rural schools in three countries: a qualitative meta-synthesis

The data for the paper came from rural ethnographic research projects in Spain and Sweden (Beach & Johansson, 2019; Beach & Öhrn, 2019, 2021, 2022; Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Beach et al., 2018, 2019), and the outcomes from a sequential mixed method ethnographically informed investigation (questionnaire and five in-depth case studies) in Northern Ireland (Bagley & Fargas-Malet, 2023; Fargas Malet & Bagley, 2023; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). We acknowledge that while these projects are not suitable for a conventional comparative analysis of rural schooling, such an analysis was not our intention. Conventionally, comparative analysis compares two or more variables from independent studies. Our meta-synthesis approach does not make this kind of comparison. It integrates qualitative research about a particular phenomenon as data by means of cross-case translational synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

The method consisted of four steps: 1. Selecting the studies (in this case, the total publications from our original research projects); 2. Detailed reading of the selected texts to identify the main outcomes and key concepts; 3. Individual analyses contrasted with each other to find common patterns related to the main focus; and 4. Reciprocal and refutational analysis and description of outcomes in narrative synthesis. In the present article, we compared statements found in a body of research relating to rural schools and their community value and function in three different countries. Using an inductive approach to the generation of initial codes and an identification of their specific premises and preeminent ideas, there were two analytical aims. The first was to explore the statements to identify common patterns and grounds for an eventual generalisation of different ethnographically informed research accounts produced in different times and places. The second was to develop a simplifying meta-synthesising narrative about the different statements relating to possible common discursive threads and a possible common explicit logic of association between them (Beach & Öhrn, 2022). We discuss these issues in the next section under notions of rural character and sense of place and structuring rural schooling and the curriculum. However, prior to this, we will first briefly outline the three national contexts of Sweden, Northern Ireland and Spain.

Sweden

Some 95% of Sweden's geographic area was officially rural in 2023, but only 11% of its population reside in geographically defined rural areas, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators. Within this context, the Swedish research draws from a Swedish Research Council Project (VR 2014–2017) about young people's conditions, participation, and influence in school in different types of rural environments in both Northern and Southern Sweden, from both inland and coastal areas. It involved participant observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers, head-teachers and pupils from the schools, some of which were in areas of economic restructuring and depopulation, and others were in sparsely populated areas or 'boomtown' communities with rapid infusions of wealth and new populations.

Market reforms have prompted an increase in the number of schools in and near municipal areas over the last 20 years and a decrease in sparsely populated areas and rural municipalities more than 45 min by car from an urban area. The number of small schools with fewer than 50 pupils has decreased proportionally the most (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020). This is especially true for very sparsely populated municipalities, where the number of pupils in these schools fell by a third between 1998 and 2018. The schools in the sample were mixed sex and secular State schools. Some private schools are organised along religious grounds.

Northern Ireland

According to official figures, Northern Ireland's territory is 80% rural, and one-third of the population lives in rural areas (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs [DAERA], 2020). Of 796 primary schools in 2021/22, 435 are officially considered to be rural. These are schools located in settlements with a population of less than 5,000 and areas of open countryside. This is how the 'rural' is defined in the review of the settlement classification carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2015. These rural areas can differ greatly geographically, socially and economically. Due to social and historical factors, the schooling system in NI is also divided along ethno-cultural religious lines (and academic selection at post-primary level). Hence, there are Catholic Maintained schools, Controlled schools (attended predominantly by pupils of a Protestant background), a small number of Integrated schools and Irish-medium schools.

In practical terms, neo-liberal education policy, as in Sweden, manifests in the devolution of control over budgets to schools, determined largely by pupil numbers, which are dependent on parental school choice, structured within a centralized regulatory framework based around performativity and standardized notions of inspection, testing, and attainment. All primary schools follow the same curriculum.

In Northern Ireland, we draw data from the Small School Rural Community Study, which focused on the relationship between small rural schools and their local communities. The study employed both quantitative methods (i.e. a survey of principals) and qualitative methods (five qualitative case studies). The data we draw from here are the qualitative data from the case studies. The schools were primary schools (school grades 1–7, pupils aged 4–11). Research in these schools involved interviews with

headteachers, teachers and Governors, focus groups with parents, discussion groups and draw-and-tell technique with pupils in their classrooms.

Spain

Like Sweden, Spain is a rurally vast nation. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), of 50 provinces, there are 15 that are predominantly rural. These occupy 41% of the surface area and are home to 11% of the population. Spain has been one of the European countries most affected by rural depopulation, especially in the second half of the twentieth century (Collantes & Pinilla, 2020; Collantes et al., 2014; Pinilla & Sáez, 2017). The National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2010) uses a demographic criterion to define extreme rurality as being towns with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. Although official regulations do not define rural schools, the Education Act (2013) identified them as located in isolated or inaccessible areas, due to their surrounding geography, or with very small population centres. In other cases, rural schools are considered schools located in towns with less than 2,000 inhabitants.

The Spanish State is responsible for education and the provision of free compulsory education for all pupils from 3 to 16 years of age, with central administration undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. The provision of public education takes place in public and publicly funded private schools. In neo-liberal terms, schools have pedagogic, organisational and managerial autonomy and control over how they are run.

In Spain, the data are drawn from four major case study research projects, encompassing a total of six rural schools. The projects sought to explore 'good' teaching practices that facilitated the participation of students, families, and community in schools.

Rural sense of place

Rurality is generally represented in terms of measures of population density and distance from an urban area. These types of representations present a metrics of distance and density that is insufficient for capturing any sense of what being rural really means to – and for – people in rural places (Thibaut & Carvalho, 2022), because rurality is not just a geographic metric. Moreover, rural conditions in most countries are the predominant national standard condition, not something that is atypical to the standard. Therefore, defining urban and rural in terms of centre and periphery undermines their complexity and their structural and other socio-cultural interrelationships (Massey, 1994/2013).

Outside of the dominant ideological power of metro-centricity, rural character and identity do not only concern simplified quantitative properties – such as geographic distances of settlements from urban centres, population size of settlements, and distances between individuals within them. They also concern the cultural identities and social relations, connected to and expressed historically and materially, through interactions between residents in and between different geographic contexts (Beach & Vigo-Arazola, 2020; Burnasheva, 2019). Rural identity is a cultural phenomenon, where contextual cultural differences – such as socio-economic status and community links – affect what

goes on in schools, how activities can be undertaken and supported, and what outcomes tend to form (Burnasheva, 2019; Roberts et al., 2022).

In terms of the quantitative properties, as described previously, Sweden, Spain and Northern Ireland's ruralities differed considerably. Within the same country, rural contexts were also diverse. Rurality is diverse. It varies in relation to local forms of production, the diversity of economic status, and social relations in the environment/community. It varies too in relation to levels of access to different kinds of facilities, and the attitudes, experiences, aspirations, and expectations on and of local populations and their different social and cultural fractions.

In Northern Ireland, case study schools were located in villages or hamlets. One was very close to a large urban area and the border with the Republic of Ireland. The different rural contexts had profound implications and affected the schools and the communities around them. In Spain, participating schools were situated in three different types of rural settings, including intermediate rural areas with low-to-medium population density and diversified employment in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors; rural areas close to towns and their peripheries; and sparsely populated areas with small settlements and lower economic activities that are principally confined to the primary sector and tourism. In Sweden, the six case study schools were also located in different types of rural areas, including villages, small towns, or sparsely populated areas.

In Spain, rural schools tend to be stereotyped within each geographical area of the country and bound up with references to the past with distinct political dimensions, especially in nationalist discourses (Paniagua & Hoggart, 2002). In Spain, study participants gave an account of this perceived social construction of the rural environment, in relation to the advantages on the one hand, and the disadvantages on the other. This is expressed in the following quote from one of the mothers interviewed, which highlights this dual consideration:

[...] What I see as the worst thing about rural life [...] now is that/.../we are a bit abandoned, that they should support us a bit more. And I see that on the other hand there is a tranquillity of taking your girl and getting to school without rushing, of leaving school without rushing because you'll be there in a moment. That quality... the rural has many good things. ... I like the relationship with the community, it's very good. There is a lot of involvement from everyone. (Mother, Spain)

In Northern Ireland, participants in the case studies displayed a sense of belonging and pride in their rural communities. They generally talked about the rural character of their communities in a positive light, emphasizing its smallness, cohesiveness, and supportive character. It could be argued that they constructed 'a homogenous, and probably romantic, view of' rural life (Cuervo, 2014, p. 649). They often compared it with urban areas or bigger schools where individual pupils' needs were missed, or people were not as supportive of each other.

... so my children went to that school and they knew all the neighbours ... they knew all the farmers going by ... [...] they are very, very proud to have come from where they have come from. [...] there is a great camaraderie there. (Governor, Northern Ireland)

People assist each other as if they were family. You know, so I watched my father-in-law last week taking a digger and heading out down a field to dig out a fence post for a fella who I wouldn't have [...] known that there was any connection. [...] He was there for about four

hours digging out a concrete post for somebody and that's just the way this area would be . . . it's very much people help each other in the way that you wouldn't get it in the cities or the towns. (Parent, Northern Ireland)

Similarly, in Spain, a father also commented on the 'family-like' character and value of the place and the school.

I think it's the ideal place because it's a small school, because we're with the family, because everyone knows everyone. I think it's perfect . . . the school is always open to anyone. In fact, the kids see that anyone can come in, even the person who brings the parcels. (Father, Spain)

However, negative situations were also highlighted in the context of some schools in Spain. For instance, an inspector of education in charge of different schools talked about the perceived implications of migration in rural areas.

The school has a high percentage of students from families of foreign origin and ethnic minorities. This means that families of Spanish origin decide to enrol their children in other schools in the area with fewer students of foreign origin. (Education Inspector, Spain)

In Spain, Sweden and Northern Ireland, the main differences in reports on lived experiences of rural life and opportunities depended on who was asked, what their experience was, and which tools they had at their disposal for deconstructing the social constructions of reality they form and are part of. This is exemplified by the following quote from a parent living in a rural area in Sweden that had been ravaged by post-industrial economic and ecological decay:

My husband and I came here for work and brought up our children here. . . Now the jobs and the people that can have gone. We're stuck in a rotting place with poor schools, where public transport is sporadic, a home we can't sell, few local prospects and little chance of getting out . . . and kids in schools with no future . . . and schools . . . stayed silent on the local conditions and problems. (Rural Parent, Sweden)

The emerging discourse in the quote above is very different to that in 'naturally attractive' rural spaces and places. Moreover, as the respondent observed in terms of the way the schools 'stayed silent' on these matters, crucial and important aspects of the lived experiences of local place were limited or 'washed' from the 'official' school curriculum (Beach et al., 2019). An observation we unpack further in the next section.

Structuring rural curriculum and schooling

Despite the existence of extreme diversities, both within and between rural places in Sweden, Spain and Northern Ireland, comparably little variation was noted in terms of the most common social institution in them, namely school, and their predominant function, namely social integration and advancement through non-localised curriculum content and performance-based schooling processes. The involvement of aspects of local place in local schools was found to be relatively scant, with national curriculum content prevailing over local variations (Beach et al., 2019); a curriculum situated and delivered within a standardised and formal approach to schooling.

In Spain and Sweden's sample of schools in particular, informants at all levels of the education system (pupils and teachers, politicians, inspectors, families and other

community members) identified the school's task as organising and transmitting official knowledge, not local content.

In our school meetings, among other issues, the Evaluation and Promotion Criteria are made known, informing about the qualification criteria necessary to obtain a positive evaluation, as well as the essential assessable learning standards in each area. (Headteacher, Spain)

In general, schools did not make much use of local forms of knowledge, which when it was incorporated into the curriculum tended to be non-controversial. For instance, in Spain, each school drew up an Education Project, taking into account the environment and the members of the educational community and including the priority purposes of the school. This sometimes meant the involvement of families in the delivery of this local content:

As part of the cultural week, the grandparents of the 4th graders come in and do activities. Last year, the grandmothers came to make soap. When we did the mining project, there was a grandfather who had worked in a mine. And this reaches the children because our usual teaching discourse is always the same, to hammer them with the standard curriculum. (Teacher, Spain)

Thus, there were some examples of how features of local conditions formed content around which to develop pupils' analytical capacities and global understanding. However, content purely in the interests and reflecting the values of a uniquely local community was largely absent. In essence, the standard national curriculum content prevailed over local variations (Vigo & Soriano, 2020) and local knowledge.

There is a certain logic to this. Teachers in rural schools may attribute significant interest and value towards local knowledge and local culture. However, they are not able to include this local knowledge, as it does not count on the official curriculum or contribute to elevating or maintaining high levels of performativity in national comparisons. In this way, the standard curriculum was seen as a way of imparting official knowledge for formal examination and differentiation of students based on their achievement (Beach et al., 2019; Parkinson, 2015). For example, in Northern Ireland, teachers and teaching headteachers often measured their schools' successes based on how pupils did academically in school transfer tests. Transfer tests are literacy and numeracy tests that pupils take in their last year of primary school to be able to enter grammar schools (as opposed to all-ability post-primary schools). The tests are not compulsory but pupils who wish to apply to go to a grammar school need to score within a certain grade band to be successful applicants.

I suppose the biggest achievement we would have each year would be how well our children do. So a lot of our children go to some of the top secondary schools in the city. Year in year, out we'll have high academic achievement. And for us, we pride ourselves in that because we are a small school and still are able to provide a high level of education. (Headteacher, Northern Ireland)

In Northern Ireland, parents, pupils and staff, operating under a selective system of education, emphasised the role of their schools in providing them with the symbolic capital (i.e. the credentials, qualifications, etc.) to enable them to succeed in life.

All I would say is the school does what a school is supposed to do, it educates people. Everything else is great but primarily you send your children to school to be educated and it's the way out. As much as we want then to learn how to play football if you don't get the academic knowledge, you are going nowhere. (Parent, Northern Ireland)

In critiquing the absence of local knowledge in the rural school curriculum, in the socio-cultural historical context of Northern Ireland, it needs to be acknowledged that the acquisition and equal access to official knowledge was deemed critically important, especially to the working-class Catholic community. Education was perceived as a means to socially advance within a segregated society, in which Catholics were previously discriminated against and socially disadvantaged because of their religious background (Gallagher, 2004). Such an observation is not to justify or overlook the absence of local knowledge in the rural school curriculum nor its potential importance. As an unemployed rural factory worker and parent in Sweden observed:

The school kept things from our kids about actual social conditions. This is kept out of the curriculum . . . And now it is too late. We're stuck here in a rotting place with poor schools, few local prospects and little chance of getting out. Knowing this is more important than the rubbish taught in schools. (Parent, Sweden)

We discovered a real belief in education in rural communities in all three countries, but it is generally a belief grounded in a particular neo-liberal performative conceptualisation; one which downplays or marginalises the importance of local knowledge. Schools and the curricular exchanges within them can be sites of cultural and social contestation through a critical pedagogy that disrupts and challenges the emotions (Zembylas, 2013). They can also trouble and transform urban cultural domination through meaningful situated learning that empowers populations about the historical socio-cultural and economic conditions of their locality and nation and the conflicts within it (Chan, 2012).

Previous research has highlighted the way in which community engagement can give a particular sense and meaning to a rural school (e.g. Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Howley & Howley, 2006). The nature of this wider curriculum engagement manifests itself in different and important ways, with the caveat that these were found primarily in the context of Spain and especially Northern Ireland. For example, in Northern Ireland, participants in the five case studies referred to a range of daily practices, such as parents meeting at the school gates, religious organisations coming to the school, and school premises being used by community organisations.

We would class ourselves as being at the heart of this community. We are used by the local yoga club. We hold a clothes bank on the property that the local community comes and donates to. We're a polling centre for everybody in this local community. (Headteacher, Northern Ireland)

These community engagements were perceived by school headteachers and teachers as a key part of the wider curriculum activities of the school, and as bringing an added value to the educational and socio-cultural experiences of the students. Thus, in the Northern Irish context, there was a deep embedment of the rural school in the local community, occupying and undertaking a role beyond the facilitation of standard teaching and the inculcation of an official knowledge-based curriculum. A similar situation in terms of wider curriculum activities and their perceived educational significance took place in the

Spanish schools. In the different schools, we observed daily encounters between teachers, families and other members of the community. Community celebrations, meetings in the library, outings to explore the environment or excursions outside the village were a common part of the school agenda, sometimes planned and sometimes improvised:

Two weeks ago we went to Betato, the mountain you can see from here. All the children from the school and all the families went. It's very nice because the families are from the area and they know all the flora and fauna in depth. It is a very nice day. (Teacher, Trarural)

Community involvement has been defined as referring to 'connections between schools and individuals, businesses, and formal and informal organizations and institutions in a community' (Sanders, 2003, p. 162). A role evidenced in the following example from Spain:

Pupils' families have the opportunity to participate in the Reading Group to help develop literacy of pupils and promote reading in the village. (Mother, Spain)

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, there was an array of connections that schools had forged with parents and families, businesses and institutions. We find this too in the research from Spain and Sweden, where curriculum activities on shared educational activities seek to bring ethno-culturally religiously divided communities together. In Northern Ireland, the case study schools were situated within either mostly Protestant or mostly Catholic areas, which determined the social structures within those localities, and the types of spaces where people interacted with each other. Thus, there were a number of examples of people crossing identity borders, either through children from two community backgrounds being educated together (e.g. the case of the Integrated school) or more likely schools engaging in shared education activities (where pupils of different school types come together) or with staff working in schools that do not represent their community background:

What you will find is a lot of our Protestant or other children want to attend the Communion or the Confirmation to see their friends. They do their learning separately, but they still want to be part of it on the day. So it's completely cross community even right up to the parents who want to go along. (Teacher, Northern Ireland)

There's a crocheting and knitting group in the community and they made a huge model of the whole village of X, they knitted it and crocheted it. [...] that took place in the Orange Hall.¹ [...] I wanted the boys and girls to see this ... because it had been on the news and it was all very relevant ... no children from Village School [Catholic school] had ever been in the Orange Hall before, so [...] ourselves and [local Controlled School] got together, and we went down and we visited the Orange Hall together. [...] and I can't imagine that there are many Catholic primary schools visiting the local Orange Hall. (Headteacher, Village School)

This is not to contend that, through these curriculum activities, small rural schools in Northern Ireland had the power to overturn the status quo of sectarian Protestant and Catholic division within communities (both rural and urban); not least, as these communities continue to maintain separate schools, separate churches, separate community organisations, separate housing and separate rituals and celebrations. Rather, it is to acknowledge that they provide an opportunity for students to acquire local knowledge and an awareness of socio-cultural religious divisions. And in so doing, they can potentially plant the seed to ultimately question and challenge them in systems in

which there is relative autonomy at different levels of collective decision-making (Chan, 2012; Latham, 2022).

Concluding discussion

The inductive approach taken in this article has revealed the importance of rural character and sense place and rural curriculum structuring and schooling within these three different European contexts. In terms of rural character and sense of place, our research suggests that variations need to be understood materially in relation to local forms of production, the diversity of economic status, social relations in the environment/community, and the degree of access to different kinds of facilities (Lim, 2015). Attitudes towards and perceptions of rurality and place and the opportunities or lack of opportunities they afforded were found to depend on who was asked, what they had experienced, and the different social and cultural fractions to which they belonged. Further, the research found that the official curriculum provided limited access to aspects of the lived experiences and local knowledge of place (Beach et al., 2019), by which to deconstruct, challenge and disturb the social constructions of reality individuals form and are part of (Zembylas, 2013).

The study found little evidence to suggest the production of a local curriculum based on local knowledge. As such, we cannot really talk about a rural school and a rural pedagogy in these schools. Schools and schooling processes tended to preserve taken-for-granted understandings of particular social class relations and urban cultural domination of 'common' values (Keddie et al., 2008). Therefore, while local populations may describe their schools as contributing to community well-being (Areschoug, 2022; Bagley & Hillyard, 2011; Hillyard, 2020), there remain seriously challenging contradictions regarding whose interests 'schooling' actually serves (Keddie et al., 2008).

In addition, as predicted by Musgrove (1978), there was no sense of the presence of a curriculum content capable of empowering pupils to generate and apply critique to things that really matter in and to rural communities as such. There was, in other words, no examples in any school in any country of curriculum content addressing the exploitation of rural spaces, places, and populations in the interests of profit; the consequences of the abandonment of rural areas when profit levels fall; or concerning how national political decisions and the law have facilitated private ownership and exploitation of these kinds. These things are in every country in the three-country sample, part of what Wilkinson (2014) referred to the *null curriculum* at the level of national policy, the *unselected curriculum* at the level the school, and the *un-enacted curriculum* at the level of teacher delivery. They obtained zero representation. There was, therefore, little evidence of a local culturally sensitive curriculum or any kind of radical pedagogy (Beach & Öhrn, 2019, 2021, 2023).

Educational research will often describe schools in less densely populated remote regions away from tight urban populations as fulfilling a stronger local community-facing function, beyond solely the traditional delivery of subject teaching (Hillyard, 2020). In this sense, rural schools have been identified as important for communities in relation to socio-cultural activities such as breakfast clubs, after school clubs, seasonal fayres, hosting sporting activities and social meetings, etc. This was certainly the case in Spain and Northern Ireland, with

members of local communities expressing an appreciation of the value they added to their community. At one level, these activities had nothing to do with the official curriculum function and the role and content of the taught curriculum and, as such, in so far as they were simply providing a local physical space, such activities could arguably happen in any other available building or centre. At a different level, this argument neglects the potential ways in which the rural school may occupy a powerful symbolic, cultural and temporal spatial position in and for the community it serves (Bagley & Hillyard, 2011). As discovered in Spain and Northern Ireland, in those rural settings with a long-standing community, in which out migration had not featured; where many, if not most residents, were educated in the local school and, as a result of those formative relationships, had developed strong social ties and a sense of place, the school was so much more than simply bricks and mortar. In those communities, the utilisation of the local rural school for community-facing activities was indicative and reinforced the symbolic, cultural and temporal spatial position of the school (Bagley & Hillyard, 2011); a position impossible to replace with any other available building. Thus, rural schools can play a critically important role in facilitating and enabling community spaces ‘where social, cultural, political and intergenerational activities are developed and recreated’ (Cuervo, 2014, p. 645).

Moreover, in relation to neo-liberal individualized competitive drivers ‘that homogenize education aims towards the production of human capital through competition rather than cooperation’ (Cuervo, 2014, p. 645), this community function of rural schools arguably has the potential to disrupt the official knowledge inculcated in schooling and present an alternative vision that moves towards ‘a communitarian ethos constructed from the idea that education is a relational process’ (Cuervo, 2014, p. 645). Perhaps, none more so than in the example from Northern Ireland, whereby in seeking to bring two segregated ethno-cultural religious communities together, schools were working not only within but across communities towards shared awareness and understanding and the long-term goal of peace and reconciliation. In this sense, while our analysis found little evidence of a local culturally sensitive curriculum, what it did identify, certainly in the context of Northern Ireland, was the adoption of curriculum activities committed to highlighting and engaging directly in the generation of local knowledge on the extremely sensitive political issues around sectarian division. This is not to claim that such activities in any way compensate for the need for much stronger local knowledge. Rather, it suggests that, in complex and differentiated socio-cultural political rural schooling contexts, it is possible for curriculum activities to be identified and generate local knowledge that may disrupt the current prevailing de-politicization of rural (and urban) schooling and education (Chan, 2012). Further, in terms of connecting with broader debates, the qualitative meta-synthesis aligns embryonically and tentatively to current educational discussions around the prevailing intractable weaknesses of schooling (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024). It speaks of the potential to move away from ‘the organisational form and non-space we call school’, to build on and harness the kind of curriculum activities that can help inform a new ‘educational episteme oriented to the care of the self, others, community and environment’ (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 3).

Note

1. The Orange Hall is a venue for meetings of the Orange Order, a strongly committed Protestant fraternal organisation based in Northern Ireland.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by: Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación. Agencia Estatal de Investigación. MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033. Ref. PID2020-112880RB-I00. - Challenging stigmatisation. Creative and inclusive educational discourses and practices with digital media in schools of special complexity. Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad. Subprograma. Proyectos de investigación fundamental. Ref. EDU2012-32657 - 'Families and schools. Discourses and everyday practices on the participation in compulsory education' (EDU2012-32657) 2012–2015. Sub-program. Fundamental Research Projects MEC 2 rural and 6 urban school (2012–2015) Diputación General de Aragón (D.G.A.) Ref. 262103 - 'The improvement of teaching and learning in a rural school from a creative perspective inclusive' Diputación General de Aragón (D.G.A.) Ref. 262101 - 'Evaluation and methodology: Bases to improve teaching in an inclusive rural school'.

Notes on contributors

Carl Bagley is Professor of Educational Sociology at the Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast, and previous Head of School (2017–2023). Prior to joining Queen's he was Head of the School of Education at Durham University (2013–2017). His current research interests reside in the areas of rural education and critical ethnography.

Dennis Beach is Professor of Education at the Department of Education and Special Education at the University of Gothenburg and at the Faculty of Library, Education and Information Science at the University of Borås. His main research interests are in sociology and ethnography of education and education policy research. He has published widely in the fields of justice and equity in education, rural education, teacher education and educational research methodology.

Montserrat Fargas-Malet is Research Fellow at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. Her background is in Sociology (BSc), Women's Studies (MA), and Education (PhD). She has over 15 years of experience in social science research and an excellent publication record.

Begoña Vigo-Arazola is Associate Professor at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). PI of the research groups 'Education and Diversity' S49_23R of the Government of Aragón and 'Educational Inclusion in Rural, Periurban and Urban Areas' belonging to the Campus Ibero consortium of universities. She has led different education projects at regional, national and international level. She has published different articles and chapters in national and international journals and editorials of recognised prestige. Her lines of research are rural schools, inclusive schools, teacher education and ethnography.

ORCID

Carl Bagley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3547-0876>

Dennis Beach  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5970-5556>

Montserrat Fargas-Malet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1154-3321>

References

- Álvarez-Álvarez, C., García Prieto, F. J., & Pozuelos Estrada, F. J. (2020). Posibilidades, limitaciones y demandas de los centros educativos del medio rural en el norte y sur de España contemplados desde la dirección escolar. *Perfiles educativos*, 42(168), 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.22201/iisue.24486167e.2020.168.59153>
- Areschoug, S. (2022). *I den moraliska periferin: Ungdomskultur, värden och politisk subjektivitet i rurala rumsligheter* [Academic thesis]. Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Child and Youth Studies.
- Autti, O., & Bæck, U. D. K. (2021). Rural teachers and local curricula. Teaching should not be a bubble disconnected from the community. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65(1), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1659399>
- Bagley, C., & Fargas-Malet, M. (2023). (Re) contextualizing the field. A Bourdieuan analysis of small rural school principal leadership in a post-conflict society. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2260336>
- Bagley, C., & Hillyard, S. (2011). Village schools in England: At the heart of their community? *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500105>
- Beach, D., From, T., Johansson, M., & Öhrn, E. (2018). Educational and spatial justice in rural and urban areas in three Nordic countries: A meta-ethnographic analysis. *Education Inquiry*, 9(1), 4–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1430423>
- Beach, D., & Johansson, M. (2019). Education politics and rural secondary schools. In E. Öhrn & D. Beach (Eds.), *Young People's life and schooling in rural areas* (pp. 121–138). The Tufnell Press.
- Beach, D., Johansson, M., Öhrn, E., Rönnlund, M., & Per-Åke, R. (2019). Rurality and education relations: Metro-centricity and local values in rural communities and rural schools. *European Educational Research Journal*, 18(1), 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904118780420>
- Beach, D., & Öhrn, E. (2019). Closing discussion. In E. Öhrn & D. Beach (Eds.), *Young People's life and schooling in rural areas* (pp. 139–153). Tufnell Press.
- Beach, D., & Öhrn, E. (2021). Using rural frameworks and research to develop understandings of educational justice and equity across socio-spatial settings. In P. Roberts & M. Fuqua (Eds.), *Ruraling education research* (pp. 77–90). Springer.
- Beach, D., & Öhrn, E. (2022). Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden. Den lokala kontextens relationer till metrocentrisk skolpolitik. *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik*, 30(3), 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.48059/uod.v30i3.1581>
- Beach, D., & Öhrn, E. (2023). The community function of schools in rural areas: Normalising dominant cultural relations through the curriculum silencing local knowledge. *Pedagogy Culture & Society*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2298466>
- Beach, D., & Vigo-Arazola, M. B. (2020). Community and the education market: A cross-national comparative analysis of ethnographies of education inclusion and involvement in rural schools in Spain and Sweden. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 77, 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.05.007>
- Björkum, K., & Basic, G. (2024). Conditions for higher education study: The perspectives of prospective students from rural areas. *Educational Research*, 66(4), 448–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2024.2382111>
- Broadfoot, P., Osborn, M., Gilly, M., & Paillet, A. (1988). What professional responsibility means to teachers: National contexts and classroom constants. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(3), 265–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569880090302>
- Burnasheva, D. (2019). Arctic identity: Between frontier and homeland. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 58(4), 271–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2019.1786978>

- Cedering, M., & Wihlborg, E. (2020). Village schools as a hub in the community-A time-geographical analysis of the closing of two rural schools in southern Sweden. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80, 606–617. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.09.007>
- Chan, J. K. S. (2012). Curriculum policy implementation: How schools respond to government's 'soft' policy in the curriculum reform. *The Curriculum Journal*, 23(3), 371–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2012.703378>
- Clarke, M. (2014). 'Knowledge is power'? A Lacanian entanglement with political ideology in education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56(1), 71–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2015.977315>
- Collantes, F., & Pinilla, V. (2020). La verdadera historia de la despoblación de la España rural y cómo puede ayudarnos a mejorar nuestras políticas [The true history of the depopulation of rural Spain and how it can help us improve our policies]. *AEHE, Asociación Española de Historia Económica*, 2001, 1–25.
- Collantes, F., Pinilla, V., Sáez, L. A., & Silvestre, J. (2014). Reducing depopulation in rural Spain: The impact of immigration. *Population, Space and Place*, 20(7), 606–621. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1797>
- Collet-Sabé, J., & Ball, S. J. (2024). Without school: Education as Common(ing) activities in local social infrastructures – An escape from extinction ethics. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72(4), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2298776>
- Corbett, M. (2013). Improvisation as a curricular metaphor: Imagining education for a rural creative class. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 28(10), 1–11.
- Cuervo, H. (2014). Problematizing the relationship between rural small schools and communities: Implications for youth lives. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 60(4), 643–655. <https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/ajer.v60i4.55975>
- Cuervo, H. (2020). Rethinking teachers' production of social justice in rural schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(13), 1357–1371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1526338>
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. (2020). *Key rural issues - 2020*. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20-%20Final.pdf>
- Echazarra, A., & Radinger, T. (2019). *Learning in rural schools: Insights from PISA, TALIS and the literature (OECD education working Papers, No. 196)*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/8b1a5cb9-en>
- Fargas Malet, M., & Bagley, C. (2023). Conceptualising small rural school-community relationships within a divided society: People, meanings, practices and spaces. *Oxford Review of Education*, 50(4), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2262383>
- Fargas-Malet, M., & Bagley, C. (2023). Serving divided communities: Consociationalism and the experiences of principals of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 71(3), 285–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2022.2110857>
- Forsberg, G., Lundmark, M., & Stenbacka, S. (2012). *Demografiska myter. Föreställningar om landsbygden – mer myter än faktiska fakta*. Öhrlings Pricewaterhouse Coopers AB.
- Gallagher, T. (2004). *Education in divided societies*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gill, P. E. (2017). A case study of how an Irish island school contributes to community sustainability, viability and vitality. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 27(2), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v27i2.127>
- Gristy, C., & Hargreaves, L. (Eds.). (2020). *Educational research and schooling in rural Europe: An engagement with changing patterns of education, space and place*. IAP.
- Halsey, R. J. (2011). Small schools, big future. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 5–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500102>
- Hargreaves, L. M. (2009). Respect and responsibility: Review of research on small rural schools in England. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.02.004>
- Hillyard, S. (2020). The enduring insignificance of a school for its village: An English case study. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80, 618–625. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.09.006>

- Howley, A., & Howley, C. B. (2006). Small schools and the pressure to consolidate. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(10), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v14n10.2006>
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (2010). *Demografía y población*. <http://www.ine.es/nomen2/index.do>
- Jones, J. (2009). The development of leadership capacity through collaboration in small schools. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(2), 129–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430902775509>
- Kearns, R. A., Lewis, N., McCreanor, T., & Witten, K. (2010). School closures as breaches in the fabric of rural welfare: Community perspectives from New Zealand. In P. Milbourne (Ed.), *Welfare reform in rural places: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 219–236). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Keddie, A., Mills, C., & Mills, M. (2008). Struggles to subvert the gendered field: Issues of masculinity, rurality and class. *Pedagogy Culture & Society*, 16(2), 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360802142161>
- Latham, D. (2022). Organizing anticapitalist internationalism in contemporary and historical perspective. *Rethinking Marxism*, 34(4), 449–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2022.2139077>
- Lehtonen, O. (2021). Primary school closures and population development—is school vitality an investment in the attractiveness of the (rural) communities or not?. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 138–147.
- Lim, L. (2015). Critical thinking, social education and the curriculum: Foregrounding a social and relational epistemology. *The Curriculum Journal*, 26(1), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2014.975733>
- Massey, D. (2013). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press. (Original work published 1994)
- Moreno-Pinillos, C. (2022). School in and linked to rural territory: Teaching practises in connection with the context from an ethnography study. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 32(2), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v32i2.328>
- Musgrove, F. (1978). Curriculum, culture and ideology. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 10(2), 99–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027780100202>
- Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies*. Sage.
- Organic Act 8/2013. (2013, December 10). *On the improvement of the quality of education (LOMCE. Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 295.
- Pais, A., & Costa, M. (2017). An ideology critique of global citizenship education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1318772>
- Paniagua, Á., & Hoggart, K. (2002). Lo rural, ¿hechos, discursos o representaciones?: una perspectiva geográfica de un debate clásico. *Información Comercial Española, ICE: Revista de economía*, 803, 61–72.
- Parkinson, C. (2015). Australian curriculum implementation in a remote Aboriginal school: A curriculum leader's search for a transformational compromise. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 14(3), 94–105.
- Pinilla, V., & Sáez, L. A. (2017). La despoblación rural en España: génesis de un problema y políticas innovadoras. *Informes CEDDAR*, 2, 1–24.
- Raggl, A. (2020). Potentials and challenges for school development in small rural primary schools in Austria. *Zeitschrift für Grundschulforschung*, 13(2), 261–275. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42278-020-00084-6>
- Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Reid, J. A. (2022). Engaging rurality in Australian education research: Addressing the field. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 51(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00587-4>
- Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Reid, J. A. (2024). Engaging rurality in Australian education research: Addressing the field. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 51(1), 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00587-4>
- Rothenburger, C. (2015). Towards a territorialised professional identity: The case of teaching staff in rural schools in France, Spain, Chile and Uruguay. *Sisyphus Journal of Education*, 3(2), 78–97.

- Sageman, J. (2022). School closures and rural population decline. *Rural Sociology*, 87(3), 960–992. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12437>
- Sanders, M. G. (2003). Community involvement in schools: From concept to practice. *Education & Urban Society*, 35(2), 161–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124502239390>
- Sipple, J. W., Francis, J. D., & Fiduccia, P. C. (2019). Exploring the gradient: The economic benefits of ‘nearby’ schools on rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 251–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.02.018>
- Slater, D. (1998). Post-colonial questions for global times. *Review of International Political Economy*, 5(4), 647–678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/096922998347417>
- Slee, B., & Miller, D. (2015). School closures as a Driver of rural decline in Scotland: A problem in pursuit of some evidence? *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 131(2), 78–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2014.988288>
- Thibaut, P., & Carvalho, L. (2022). School design and learning: A sociomaterial exploration in rural schools in Chile. *Pedagogy Culture & Society*, 32(5), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2150279>
- Vigo, B., & Soriano, J. (2020). Development and research of the rural school situation in Spain. In K. En Gristy, L. Hargreaves, & S. Kucerova (Eds.), *Educational research and schooling in rural Europe. An engagement with changing patterns of education, space and place* (pp. 175–197). Age Publishing Inc.
- Vigo-Arrazola, B., & Beach, D. (2022). Las escuelas rurales ante las políticas de mercado: Un análisis meta-etnográfico. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30, 173–173. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.6962>
- Villa, M., & Knutas, A. (2020). Rural communities and schools—valuing and reproducing local culture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80, 626–633. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.09.004>
- Wilkinson, M. (2014). The concept of the absent curriculum: The case of the Muslim contribution and the English National curriculum for history. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46(4), 419–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.869838>
- Zembylas, M. (2013). Critical pedagogy and emotion: Working through ‘troubled knowledge’ in posttraumatic contexts. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.743468>