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The myth of community value: the enacted curriculum function in schools in rural communities in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Using meta-ethnographic synthesis, the present article asks if schools in rural areas fulfil an educational function in the interests of rural community sustainability. It identifies some positive features and causal mechanisms, but also some conditions that seem to be destructive towards this function. They appear to be due to decentralisation, school choice and market accountability (i.e. commodification) encouraging school leaders and teachers to select and teach content to enhance the performance of individual pupils on official examinations, and by this to attract and satisfy new school consumers, even if this may work against not in the interests of local populations and rural community sustainability. The research thus questions the common understanding expressed in research about schools in rural areas as institutions that form a 'social glue' in their communities. Market accountability undermines this. Despite different possible logic-of-action towards competitive pressures, and despite working in schools with very different positions on local education markets, the logical and predominant teaching response is for content selection and delivery to enhance individual performances and meet consumer ambitions for a school system that operates through the exchange of capital and can enable an escape from local communities.

KEYWORDS

Enacted curriculum; rural area schools; community empowerment; meta-ethnography; critical realism

Introduction

Spain is a vast country with a large amount of unoccupied rural landscape and a high population (80%) concentrated in urban areas and less than 1.6% of over eight thousand geographically different municipalities. This uneven population distribution has led to vast expanses of open, unexploited natural space across 17 Autonomous Communities. These Autonomous Communities often have their own nationally recognised official language, and their schools can be different from each-other (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). Foundations for a standard definition of Spanish schools, including schools in rural areas, are absent (Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024) and schools go about the business of educating their pupils somewhat

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differently (cf. Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021; Vigo Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2015; 2020). However, there are also some consistencies, continuities and patterns (Vigo Arrazola et al., 2023; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022), and it is these that the article seeks to identify and discuss. Local adaptations of teaching to the requirements of the national curriculum (Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa; LOMCE) form one focus of interest. The national curriculum presents an educational framework that all public schools must follow, though with some space for autonomy for regional governments and local schools to adapt teaching and learning to local strength and needs.

Examples of the different types of rural schools include mixed year-group schools, schools that are the only school in their municipality, "one-room schools", grouped rural schools, and rural educational innovation schools. Despite their differences and different locations they share in common a risk of being bombarded by representations of rural area schools as "troubled institutions" with "poor" education standards and difficulties of teacher recruitment and retention in an education system organised around a metro-centric school model that reinforces the values, interests and ideology of the dominant culture as a system of ideas and ideals (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022; Walton et al., 2013). These features are familiar too in other countries of course (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Beach et al., 2018; Cuervo, 2016; Farrugia, 2015; Hillyard, 2020).

This does not mean that schools in rural places have no value for the local communities that house them. However, it does raise the question of what kinds of value they and their enacted curriculum have, for whom, and towards what (cf. Bagley et al., 2024; Corbett, 2016; Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Green, 2010; Miranda Carvajal, 2023). We know about some of these features. For instance, that local schools often house extra-curriculum and local cultural activities, adult-study activities, social- and youth-clubs and sports events, and may even provide holiday accommodation for visitors in some places (Hillyard, 2020; Lind & Stjernström, 2015). These things have obvious value to and in local communities, but how the curriculum operates as a historically localised practice that reflects and serves the needs, values, and interests, of local rural communities by responding to local dynamics, needs and demands in everyday life is another matter (Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025; Roberts & Green, 2013). A clear understanding about how the locally enacted curriculum functions and what it offers and can offer to and for local communities and their residents is minimal and often narrowly defined (Bagley et al., 2024; Beach et al., 2018; Roberts & Green, 2013).

Some things are however, quite well known, or at least suspected. One is that recent global neoliberal educational reforms may have added weight to existing uneven urban-rural power dynamics in social, economic and education politics, and may have further obstructed the cultivation of a local culturally relevant curriculum (Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Ruecker, 2020), due to structural interdependencies that have developed within the transformation of public sector education (Bagley et al., 2024; Rizvi, 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These transitions are in keeping with the idea of neoliberalism as a programme of accumulation not growth of capital (Harvey, 2007). They have re-cast the purposes and governance of education in human capital terms (Tan, 2014) and supported the growth of individual self-interests in an increasingly competitive society (Rizvi, 2017). They have led to predominant conceptions of school value in rural areas as challenged

in terms of the cost-effectiveness of their delivery of the official performative curriculum and, therefore, as always potentially unbeneficial (Bagley et al., 2024; Hillyard, 2020; Ruecker, 2020) and at risk of closure when local population levels fall (cf. Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024; Lind & Stjernström, 2015; Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021). This, despite any potentially unique cultural and geological/natural qualities in the near environment they may have, and despite research that indicates how school closures can have a significant impact on the future decline of rural communities (Bagley et al., 2024; Hillyard, 2020). They include, for instance, the secondary economic effects of school presence such as locally collected taxes, maintained property values, support for local services and stimulation of retail trade. The cultural sensitivity of the enacted curriculum towards rural variation and justice is politically, cognitively, socially and culturally important for rural communities; therefore, it also contributes to the sustainability of the context of which they are part (Roberts & Green, 2013; Ruecker, 2020; Schafft, 2016). It forms a central interest in the present article.

Schools are not just social arenas. Through the locally enacted curriculum they also act politically, intellectually and cognitively and can make a difference to communities through the explicit use of local values, venues, history and traditions that engage with local assets and contribute to social and cultural capital (cf. Beach et al., 2018; Green, 2010; Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). At the same time, however, public policy and educational practice may also work at cross-purposes towards the vitality and well-being of rural communities (Autti & Bæck, 2019; Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Palsa & Mertala, 2020). Corbett (2013), Cuervo (2016), Ruecker (2020) and Schafft (2016), among others, all identify these issues as under-analysed and under-theorised in education research. So that whilst we know that the locally enacted curriculum in schools in rural areas should operate as a culturally sensitive pedagogical device that reflects and responds to local needs and interests as well as regional and national ones together (cf. Bagley et al., 2024; Farrugia, 2015), we are less aware of whether it does this or not, and if it does, how it does so (Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Palsa & Mertala, 2020; Ruecker, 2020).

Using meta-ethnography, the present article explores the results published across a number of ethnographic studies connected to schools and schooling in rural areas and the interests they represent to inquire into how the locally enacted curriculum operates in terms of its community function. It explores how schools connect to local civil society, youth, families and communities through a broad and relevant curriculum seen from inclusion, justice and equity perspectives (cf. Allan, 2023; Corbett, 2013, 2016; Miranda Carvajal, 2023; Schafft, 2016), with this reflecting thus the UNESCO GEM report (UNESCO, 2020) recommendations on how schools and their enacted curriculum should act in ways that benefit local rural communities and sustainability.

Method and materials

The article uses meta-ethnography to drive a qualitative synthesis of the results from ethnographic research about schools and their value in and to communities in rural areas (Gordon, 2013). It has followed six of the seven steps of meta-ethnography presented by Noblit and Hare (1988):

Table 1. Primary corpus for the inductive development of new ideas and understandings.

Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020), Vigo-Arrazola and Soriano-Bozalongo (2020).
Schools in rural places are quite literally always socially, culturally, politically, and intellectually in the middle of a choreography of competing interests, the outcomes of which are never easily predictable and possible to simply read off from official curriculum prescriptions. Schools and teachers have partial autonomy and are on paper able to take different perspectives on their practice and roles within their local communities such that thus critical, genuinely enlightening and eventually even emancipatory power exists but this can only become a transformative force by overcoming and replacing established orthodoxies and demands of performativity. It requires an informed, collaborative, coordinated effort on the part of teachers, school leaders and the broad population as a coalition of action for social transformation.
Matías Solanilla & Vigo Arrazola (2020).
Developing local relevance through community involvement in rural schools requires rethinking the role of the curriculum and what it means to be educated through a critical pedagogy that can equip young people with the skills to move into the future without forsaking their class cultural inheritance and values. There is a need to understand transnational education policies in relation to the logic of national systems and local places and their socio-spatial conditions and possibilities to grasp the major requirements in the ongoing reframing of identity and teaching.
Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2020, 2022); Vigo Arrazola and Soriano Bozalongo (2015, 2020); Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste-Gracia (2020); Vigo Arrazola et al. (2023)
Place-based content and methods can be leveraged against predominant individualising discourses, and logics to *unsettle* their claims to legitimacy, land, and authority over nature and learning in schools in rural places. However, whilst this possibility exists in theory it is largely absent in practice. Schooling in rural schools broadly speaking corroborates the status quo rather than challenging power relations, and the domination and marginalisation of the class cultural capital and values of local communities.

- Step 1. Assigning a focus for the investigation: here, namely, on schools and their community value in rural areas
- Step 2. Selecting relevant articles, books, or chapters addressing the focus
- Step 3. Reading them to identify and code key themes and concepts
- Step 4. Using thematic and conceptual comparative analyses to translate codes across different research products and to search for any patterns
- Step 5. Drawing an overarching interpretation from the patterns and their details
- Step 6. Expressing this interpretation within a narrative that can be tested through comparisons with other studies

To develop an appropriate sample, we used search items such as [ethnography OR ethnographic], [curriculum], and [community], [education OR school], [environment], [participation OR involvement], and [rural] in databases such as Scopus, Eric and ScienceDirect. We used article and chapter abstracts and summaries, along with conclusions, to make the sample and finished up with 30 texts, which we organised into two batches. Namely, the primary data for the inductive development of ideas and an explanatory narrative (Table 1) and secondary data used for "checking" and developing narrative content through reciprocal and refutational synthesis (Table 2). When analysing the texts we used critical social realist theory based on Roy Bhaskar's (2008) *Realist Theory of Science* (RTS08) published in 1975, which is foundational text of critical realism according to Fryer (2022).

Table 2. Secondary corpus used in the reciprocal and refutational synthesis.

Autti and Bæck (2019); Beach and Öhrn (2019); Beach and Öhrn (2021, 2023); Gordon (2013); Corbett (2009, 2013, 2015);. Cuervo (2016); Eppley (2009); Green (2010); Hillyard (2020); Lehtonen (2021); Lind and Stjernström (2015); Miranda Carvajal (2023), Beach and Öhrn (2019); Palsa and Mertala (2020); Roberts and Green (2013).

When applied to data such as the articles listed in Table 1, a critical realist analysis will distinguish between three distinct foci. These are, namely, experiences, events, and causal mechanisms, respectively. They are for a basis for a comparative analysis of:

- The experiences, perceptions and feelings agents portrayed in research
- Descriptions and analyses of the events connected to these perceptions and feelings
- Causal mechanisms that the research associates with these the events

Critical realist analysis thus considers realities in plural not singular and as complex non-decomposable, contingent, non-compressible and time-asymmetric and partial realities. It is not only a powerful method for doing complexity-informed research but is also a complexity-informed method that involves understanding all knowledge as both fallible, subjective, and open to alternative interpretations (Bhaskar, 2008; Fryer, 2022). We developed a preliminary line of argument in this way (step 6) linked to emerging themes and concepts, which we structured under a series of side-headings as the main result from the investigation, but which we then cross-checked against research findings made by other researchers. Table 2 provides the references to these studies. Full bibliographic details appear in the reference section that follows the present article.

The article makes certain claims about the realities of schooling in rural areas based on ethnographically portrayed and meta-ethnographically synthesised details concerning relationships between entities, events, actions and outcomes across multiple individual multi-layered multi-dimensional ethnographic case-studies. These claims have, therefore, also two main evidence requirements (cf. Noblit & Hare, 1988). These are specifically (a), evidence of the presence of similar entities, agents, relationships and activities in operation in and across independently investigated settings and (b), evidence that these events and activities can comprise an explanation (explanatory mechanism) for the similar outcomes in the different settings and a basis for also understanding differences and deviations in the observable patterns of behaviour and outcome (cf. Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020).

The results from the investigation reflect this goal and appear under two main thematic side-headings relating to the identification of entities and events. These are, namely: *community connections through the curriculum* and *commodification of community value*. They summarise the findings identified related to community values and people in them from the curriculum in use in schools in rural areas. We define the curriculum as a complex, contested, and fluid pedagogical device for selecting, organising, and communicating the formal content of learning that is possible to objectivise or subjectivise for research purposes and to understand and experience in different ways (Henderson and Slattery (2009).

Community connections in the curriculum in rural area schools

Some previous research we have been involved in identified a rather strange pattern in relation to the value of local schools to rural communities, in that whilst the value appeared in data as generally high according to teachers, pupils and members of local

communities, the research was unable to identify much local value at all in the locally enacted curriculum (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Beach et al., 2018). Rather, the opposite, cultural sensitivity and a contribution to rural collective community interests seemed to be rather rare (cf. Corbett, 2013) even though this did not necessarily mean that such value cannot or does not exist (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020), or that there was nothing of value at all, in any way, to anyone, seen from local perspectives. Schools and the curriculum would be unsustainable if this had been the case (cf. Bagley et al., 2024; Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Burke & Segall, 2015; Henderson & Slattery, 2009).

The different empirical chapters in Öhrn and Beach (2019) gave some examples of what appeared to be of value to (and valued by) local community members, as did Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2022). They connected often to the value of education as a commodity where the communicated content had a direct exchange relation within the education system through examination-based performance testing connected to official curriculum content and education progression. This emphasises the importance of the external test performance in market terms (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022) and the position of the exchange value of content and test-performance determined the value of the curriculum. In most cases, this Performance and Exchange value relation (C+E) reinforced classroom authority in relation to content selection and delivery and strong classification and framing, though not always in every school. Sometimes local-community-members rather than teachers communicated some part of the curriculum to students: quite often in smaller schools in remote areas (cf. Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). An example comes from content brought to and taught in school by a pupil's mother, an expert on nutrition (From Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022).

> K's mother … brought us some materials … They were great for teaching about foodstuffs and nutrition … I can ask her again next time we do the food project.

There is recognition here for a member of the community and her individual academic knowledge, but not for local knowledge and ways of knowing (epistemology) as such, as answers to the question of how local knowledge is used and what kind of knowledge becomes part of the educational experiences of the pupils through the curriculum actually reinforce the value of official knowledge and standard academic ways of knowing and communicating it. Another example connected to content and communication by a local community member concerning a local fruit distribution company and its history provides a further example of this, though one that at first seems to be quite different to the previous example.

> Our cooperative developed in our village and has helped the village and the region to develop sustainability … . Producer cooperatives like ours act collectively to be competitive with large agribusinesses without having the goals of becoming and behaving like agribusinesses with their typical shareholder base and interests.

At first glance, this content seems to be of quintessentially local character and with a local intrinsic use value. It relates to a cooperative association, its history in a region and how its members typically own the means of production and, as expanded on later by the presenter, have power over important decisions, including over the appropriation surplus value. However, whilst the presentation emphasises these notions of local social profitability in the community and shared responsibility for decision-making,

there were important exclusions from the content too. They relate to the expansion of the business over the last decade, and how fully shared decision-making had "recently . . . . become impractical [so] decisions about production now lay more in the hands of a tightly elected group of executive post-holders".

There was, therefore, a new concentration of power over business strategy and the disposal of surplus value at the company. It was well-known locally and had been a source of tension within the company and an issue of concern for workers and their unions. It included action related to decisions about "the location and relocation of production . . . . levels of employment . . . . and the calculation of salary" for executives and other workers. This knowledge relates to conditions for maintaining the economic bearing capacity and sustainability of the village and it has a connection to specificities of the living ecosystem of the local community. It was not present in the presentation, which only related to the cooperative as a form of ownership from a historical and organisational perspective, and as a possible examination content.

The fact that the company was now "a cooperative only really by name" was uninteresting from the curriculum perspective according to staff at the school. Equally, uninteresting from this perspective was the new "make-up of the local labour force" harvesting and processing agricultural products for the company, its "lack of influence (over) and non-ownership" of the company shares, and the massively increased "income differentials" between executives, managers, and labourers, respectively, over the past decade. This knowledge is fundamentally important to the question of power and influence over community sustainability and well-being, with obvious importance to community members and excluding it renders as mythical the idea of common value from the curriculum to all pupils equally. So, whilst international research presents schools in rural areas as crucial to rural communities as a whole and as having an important "community function", the importance was very lop-sided. The content of the enacted curriculum culturally silenced the operation of power in dominant class interests and normalised rather than deconstructed and challenged the generation of private profit by means of the control of knowledge.

As written in Bagley et al. (2024), relating to the enacted curriculum and the socio-cultural and economic environment of the local community, local schools do seem to represent local interests at all. Instead, even when they work with some kind of local knowledge, they do so in service of "a placeless and abstracted neoliberal vision of education's aims in late modernity" (Corbett, 2016, p. 270) in ways that normalise community dependency on capital investment as a means of survival and preserve taken-for-granted understandings of capitalist social class relations. Therefore:

> While local populations may describe their schools as contributing to community well-being . . . . there remain seriously challenging contradictions regarding whose interests "schooling" actually serves. (Bagley et al., 2024, p. 11)

The question of interests is brought to a head in geographical circumstances, such as for instance in relation to local conditions where national and international production industries may have ravaged the local geology, poisoned the local environment, or pulled human labour-power into a town or village for economic exploitation, and then fled to seek profits elsewhere, leaving the population abandoned in a precarious and even at times unhealthy resource depleted and dilapidated place (Beach & Öhrn, 2023).

Community marginalisation and environmental degradation in these places raises the question of the creation of political, economic, and ecological sacrifice zones (cf. Rivera Andía & Vindal Ødegaard, 2019), and a role for the curriculum of normalising the right of some actors to define what can be sacrificed, and to what extent, for others (Beach & Öhrn, 2023). They may illustrate how schooling operates as a tool for the dominant class by eclipsing useful oppositional knowledge and hiding, disguising, or even sometimes justifying exploitation, marginalisation, and oppression. Yet this does not mean that education unfolds inevitably with this goal in mind.

An ethnography carried out in a small two-room school in Spain, where 80% of the parental population had migrated in from other countries, provided a variation in the theme of external involvement in curriculum delivery for enhancing a performance and exchange (P+E) curriculum relation. Coming from Vigo Arrazola and Soriano Bozalongo (2015, pp. 330–331) it connected to a language workshop for children, families, and teachers in a neighbourhood school outside a rural town where parents came in to speak and familiarise pupils with different home-languages in the community. The teacher felt that it was normal to make use of the values and interests of what was "a very multi-lingual and multi-cultural population" population in this way.

> One Chinese mother is holding a Chinese language workshop today. Children, parents and teachers participate and learn to write their name. Two Chinese girls came up with the idea of this workshop, but the teacher added that she always tries to include Chinese or other languages to try to encourage family involvement. (From Vigo Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2015)

There was no obvious exchange value relationship in terms of the accumulation of examined and exchangeable educational capital. The value was in terms of inclusion and how "to connect life in the classroom with the community and the interests, personalities, and lives of its families" (Teacher, Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020), Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2022) called these types of school "communitas schools" where teachers tried to use local agents to build educational curriculum content from the living fibre of local culture in a commitment to embrace local culture, inclusion, and the heritage knowledge of local people in the curriculum (cf. Rosvall, 2019; Thomas, 2023). According to Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2022) it involved:

- Giving local people value-recognition and significance
- Establishing and developing an intrinsic relationship with the community and organic relationality across different (sub-/cultural, racial, linguistic, national) community boundaries and relationalities
- Striving to advance collective awareness of local culture and its value, importance and forms of empowerment by using local people, artefacts and practices

Beach et al. (2018), Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020), Corbett (2013, 2016), Gordon (2013), Miranda Carvajal (2023), Nixon (2011), Roberts and Green (2013), Rosvall (2019), Thomas (2023) and Webb and Radcliffe (2015) are among the researchers and research teams that have developed similar ideas to these and described how spaces for local culture in the curriculum can innovatively challenge and change existing

dominant relations of exchange and interaction between the enacted curriculum in schools, their rural surroundings and people there that can:

- Provide alternative ways of conceptualising community and education value
- Create and sustain social networks as local intellectual resources, and
- Establish and maintain a sense of place and community as valued in school

Successful attempts to democratise and decolonialise/de-urbanise the curriculum may be challenging but examples do exist (cf. Rosvall, 2019; Thomas, 2023; Webb & Radcliffe, 2015). Urban capitalist domination of curriculum interests is not inevitable (Blackmore, 2019). Things can be different and sometimes are (cf. Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020), even though this may be rare, according to the data from the present investigation (i.e. Tables 1 and 2). For even when it is locally sourced from and delivered by local people, content is still most often largely complimentary to the examination of official knowledge, and the principle needs, interests, and ideology, of (nowadays global neoliberal) capitalist production (Bagley et al., 2024; Beach & Öhrn, 2021, 2023; Beach et al., 2018; Blackmore, 2019; Corbett, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). It largely:

- Avoids criticising the colonisation of rural space for capitalist production and how this may have ravaged the local ecology leaving geological devastation and environmental pollution in its wake and
- Evades the issue of labour-market conflict, the exploitation of labour power, and the consequences for individuals and communities when exploitative industries leave areas to seek profits elsewhere

Rob Nixon (2011) refers to the lack of curriculum attention to features of attrition such as these, and the at-times lethality of capitalist production for local ecology and people who are dependent on local ecosystems for their health and livelihood (cf. Rivera Andía & Vindal Ødegaard, 2019). As Nixon suggests, the enacted curriculum excludes these features and by extension makes critical discussions impossible about how national political decisions and the Law facilitate private ownership and the raw exploitation it leads to (Nixon, 2011). States and licenced corporations can mine under entire towns in rural areas, ripping valuable minerals from their source in the interests of profit and thereby generating economic zones of ecological sacrifice with barely a peep of recognition through school instruction about the legal enforcement processes involved and the interests they serve (Beach et al., 2018; Nixon, 2011; Rivera Andía & Vindal Ødegaard, 2019; Thomas, 2023).

Not all schools in rural areas have a marginalising enacted curriculum of this kind, where performativity demands enforce a compromised professional autonomy and restrict the critical focus and scope of lesson content (cf. Corbett, 2013; Ruecker, 2020). Some of the local cultural heritage (communitas) schools discussed in Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) and Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2022), along with some schools in Vigo-Arrazola and Soriano-Bozalongo's ethnographic sample (2015) did not, and Avilés and Harb (2022) and Webb and Radcliffe (2015) give further examples where content formed that could counter the deleterious continuation of extraction

strategies and commodification through industry, tourism, and in other activities connected or supplementary to capitalist accumulation (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Eichler, 2020).

Commodification of community value(s)

The structural antithesis to communitas schools in terms of their enacted curriculum and practiced pedagogy were the so-called "Magnet-Schools". Often operating under a brand identity, another main difference was in terms of how the different schools formed relations with the local community (cf. Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). Whilst communitas schools operated organically within rural relations, magnet school relations formed around economic interests that involved trading off identified high pupil performance levels and idealised rural values (such as tranquillity, pastoral quality, familiarity) to attract consumers. These are relations of exchange with a goal of creating an attractive market identity around representations of ideology, production and consumption (cf. Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). Magnet schools are, in this sense, quintessentially neoliberal era schools (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). They generate an adaptive entrepreneurial logic of operation to establish and maintain a good reputation on an open market by deploying practices to attract and retain mobile middle-class pupils as a mechanism for attaining distinction (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). Discussed also in Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2022), the following extracts refer to aspects of what the day-to-day running of magnet schools can involve. The comments came from the school's head-teacher and two other staff members at a school called Barural School.

> We are in a nice area close to the highway. We have a small local population and really need … pupils from outside … We need to be a bit choosy and even if we do not want to seem too selective, seeming to be able to choose can help us recruit and … maintain attractiveness and economic sustainability … .
>
> Parents who commute their children to us say that the school is a nice school with an effective pedagogy in an attractive place where pupils can be successful on important examinations … . We have to do well on tests and showing the value of the school by broadcasting its attractive features and high standard performances is important to help recruitment and retention [and] for survival. It means pointing to pastoral qualities, the value of outdoor life, and the security of being a local and familiar school to parents who largely came from other places.
>
> Most of these young people commute to the school and they are there to gain qualifications to access a lifestyle ideal, not to learn about local geographic, environmental, or historical features familiar to the local population … . They will not remain in the area after leaving school and have no value of knowing about the local community and culture as such. We try to be innovative too, but we have responsibility for providing what our parents want for their children.

These extracts illustrate forms of reasoning about leadership behaviours and strategic planning that acquiesce to the inevitability of markets, the pristine value of competition and economic rationality as guiding truths for governing different aspects of human group life and social fields and practices that were previously difficult to conceive of as belonging to the economic domain (Beach, 2010; Rizvi, 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). They reflect the consequences of the economisation of education through market

reform and speak to the introduction of techniques of governance of individuals as inherently economic beings. According to Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2020) and the reasoning about this work in Bagley et al. (2024), they highlight, respectively, how teachers and school leaders accept school sustainability as guaranteed only by positive recruitment and consequently:

- Treat parents as responsible chooser-investors in their child's education, and children themselves as objects of human capital investment
- Accept competition and new regimes of accountability that promote "teaching for tests" and create test anxiety for parents, students, school leaders, and teachers
- Promote marketing and curriculum practices that they feel will appeal to values of middle-class cosmopolitan aspirations of the external consumers
- Teach for mobility by subsuming content and curriculum messaging to performativity to secure external recruitment and guarantee sustainable income

This is what it means when schools begin to work as businesses in rural areas, with school leaders as managers of marketing, "client" recruitment, content management, and the hiring and firing of staff regardless of the consequences for local communities and other schools in them. Schools are running selfishly and on principles of subordination to the dominant curriculum by culling high performances from their pupils on tests of official knowledge. Schools and school-chains produce brochures and elaborate websites to promote their creativity, value and brand image in these respects, but not their restricted conception of knowledge, enforcement of epistemic bias, or subordination to official political doctrine (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). Rural values have no meaning in themselves in the schools. They are valuable only in a branding capacity, in terms of their exchange value and emotional affect (Eppley, 2009), which thus obstructs schools and those working and studying there from forming organic bonds with the local community (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). Subsequently, as Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) indicate, the return value from magnet schools to the local community becomes rather narrow. They provide some cultural amenities for local communities and educational opportunities to local pupils but by primarily catering to the interests of the parents of the pupil-commuter consumers and pandering to their demands they:

- Transfer and examine official knowledge
- Provide academic credentials for pupils to use in the future to improve their possibilities to leave the area and access a cosmopolitan life-style ideal
- Generate tension in the curriculum between local place-based needs and external mobility demands, marginalising the former and enhancing the latter

There is of course a clear logic of practice here. Most pupils who attend magnet schools are by definition and design external commuters who have not grown up in the local community and whose parents had no ambitions concerning the long-term sustainability of either the school or its surrounding community or of community needs in terms of a supply of educated people to live and work there. They wanted a sustainable future for their children from the perspective of the accumulation of exchangeable forms of education capital to aid their access to future educational possibilities (Corbett,

2016; Farrugia, 2015). Local empowerment effects from a culturally sensitive curriculum do not exist in these schools (Miranda Carvajal, 2023; Vigo Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2015). The opposite is the case they:

- Act as independent businesses rather than as linked up parts of a community
- Market and sell their skills to help successful pupils, including those born locally, to access education capital that will enable them advance outside the local community
- Market themselves based on a local community identity but effectively draw symbolic and material value from it, as opposed to generating knowledge to sustain a habitus of organic solidarity and community well-being

Magnet schools are parasitic rather than generative in terms of their social relations with the rural community. They are established as competitive business venture schools that although they may brand themselves as being in a rural community, they project this only is in the sense of being in an attractive, accessible, calm and peaceful rural environment, not in terms of being part of the communitarian give and take of social relationships. They:

- Exploit the symbolic value carried by a positive rural imaginary of the rural condition and use it competitively to attract economic (survival) capital and create a concentration of investment in competition with other schools in areas nearby, and thus, at their expense, despite the possible risks this can have for community sustainability in other places
- Comport notions about individual freedom, but not because such freedoms can maximise social or epistemic justice, equality and sensibility to local educational needs, conditions and community benefit, but because they benefit school survival

The presence of magnet schools thus deepens rather than lessens regional inequality and class oppression, and it does so in ways that can also be quite constricting for local communities that seek alternative ways of provisioning themselves than the purely fiscal and by means of rationalities beyond the purely economic (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). Communitas schools do the opposite. Though also subject to examinations connected to the official curriculum, they reflect and build upon communitarianism through the curriculum as a social current for strengthening the community (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022).

Discussion

The present article has used meta-ethnography to develop an analytical synthesis from ethnographies that have explored the ways in which the enacted curriculum takes form and may work for, or oppose, knowledge interests and needs related to empowerment in local schools for local communities in Spain. Like articles by other researchers such as Corbett (2013), Cuervo (2016), Green (2010), and Roberts and Green (2013), and similarly to an article by Beach and Öhrn (2023) in Sweden, its aim has therefore been to go further than simply confirming whether there is a strong community function of

schools in rural communities. Instead of this, by identifying experiences and community connections with respect to the workings and content of the enacted curriculum it has tried to:

- Suggest how the locally enacted curriculum operates in terms of its community function by uncovering causal mechanisms that the research associates with these events through the curriculum enactment, in local rural community
- Make hints towards some possibly better foundations for alternative forms of curriculum enactment, in local rural community interests

A main point here relates to what knowledge authorities of the state (and teachers) appear to consider as most worthy in relation to their particularly defined purposes of schooling and why. Is it reproduction of the disadvantages based on a cosmopolitan curriculum value and education mobility or does it involve acting as a "social glue" for the local community for serving the interests of social justice and equality (Beach et al., 2018; Farrugia, 2015). The findings indicate that schools and the enacted curriculum serve the interests of local people in different ways and that the concepts of communitas and magnet school strongly mark out these differences.

Communitas schools develop organic relationality with the local community through a culturally sensitive local curriculum that is open towards significant influences from the local community and community members and that include rather than suppress alternative cultural systems of knowledge production. They recognise that there needs to be an intention to break the dominance of official schooling and to compete with its definitions of official knowledge (cf. Allan, 2023; Bagley et al., 2024; Roberts & Green, 2013) and that there many good reasons for and ways of imparting knowledge, other than within a performance and exchange context, for formal examination purposes. Magnet schools operate in this performative context based on exchange relations. As an antithesis to communitas schools, they:

- Use local geography and ideas of heritage as a brand asset to market for attracting "outsiders" into the school
- Use imported professional educators to instruct pupils in the content of the official curriculum and convey value through exchange relations and performativity
- Mediate official knowledge as a potential rural competence drain that supports the development of mobility and exit strategies from rural places for successful learners
- Obstruct the development of local sources of value and an empowering local culturally relevant curriculum

Magnet schools school pupils for mobile modernity by imposing the content and values of the cosmopolitan curriculum on local people (cf. Bagley et al., 2024; Miranda Carvajal, 2023) and they generate ways for successful individuals to leave an area, rather than creating foundations for helping them to develop organic long-term sustainable relationships to it (Beach & Öhrn, 2021, 2023; Hillyard, 2020). And even when local content contributes to the enacted curriculum it does so for reinforcing knowledge about official content (cf. Allan, 2023; Erlandson & Kjellsdotter, 2025). The

enacted curriculum essentially compliments the presentation and examination of official knowledge rather than empowering the population and developing local knowledge. Teachers control the selection of topics and presenters to fit these aims as a pedagogical device to enable "successful" individuals to accumulate educational credentials, even if this may in the end drive the depopulation of rural places (Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024). This is one reason why the presence of a school does not on its own imply a positive relationship between school and the community in which it resides (Bagley et al., 2024; Hillyard, 2020). Its enacted curriculum is toxic towards local community sustainability and well-being and draws value from the local host (Beach & Öhrn, 2023; Corbett, 2013; Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024; Thomas, 2023) rather than providing foundations for stability, access to tools for redefining what kinds of knowledge are or are not powerful and why, and replacing parts of the official curriculum as a way of challenging dominant patterns of knowledge production in schools (Allan, 2023; Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020; Green, 2010; Miranda Carvajal, 2023; Roberts & Green, 2013). A curriculum for empowerment in rural areas for rural communities and their members would do this. It would develop and share alternative, culturally sensitive content, to challenge the reproduction of dominant relations of power as the primary ideological and material function of official schooling and the official curriculum (cf. Green, 2010; Roberts & Green, 2013).

Bagley et al. (2024) came to similar conclusions to these when they indicated how the schooling of rural populations through a normative curriculum will often reflect and support the interests of the dominant class hegemony for social accumulation and domination by the capitalist class and that schools in rural places exist and function primarily in hegemonic, metro-centric, and largely urban capitalist interests through an enacted curriculum that marginalises critical local knowledge, language and voice (Beach et al., 2018; Thomas, 2023). Magnet schools are the archetype for this development (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). As described in the article, they bring neoliberal governance into rural education spaces, deepen rather than lessen inequality, and constrict local communities that seek alternative ways of positioning themselves than ones that involve adopting an economic rationality and a performative relationship to the official curriculum (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2023). Thus, although there are no foundations for a standard definition of schools in rural areas in Spain and evidence that schools go about their business differently (cf. Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024; Lorenzo Lacruz & Abós Olivares, 2021), there are some clear patterns, including obvious challenges towards the chances of local schools working for community well-being and sustainability (Vigo Arrazola et al., 2023; Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022).

A significant challenge towards local schools working for community well-being and sustainability derives from the investments driven by the myth of the value of neoliberal capitalism and the importance of economic growth for supporting rural populations and ultimately rural sustainability. This myth exists despite evidence. It is ideological. There is no material evidence of net growth through neoliberalism anywhere, either generally, or in relation to formal education systems (cf. Beach, 2010; Rizvi, 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). On the contrary, productivity growth rates indicate that the neoliberal economic model has generated a slower rate of growth than capitalism's previous post – World War II economic model, and that both as a philosophy, a theory, a practice, and in effect, it is a project about net-

accumulation of capital, not net economic growth (cf. Beach, 2010; Harvey, 2007). This pattern of investment and accumulation is a characteristic too of the quintessentially neoliberal Magnet School (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). Magnet schools are quintessentially a neoliberal political product the running and effects of which helps corporations, banks, and individual investors to accumulate assets from the public sector, by moving and exploiting social goods as private property (Beach, 2010).

Conclusion

In Spain, different local adaptations of teaching to the requirements of the national curriculum (Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa; LOMCE) predominate due to the presence of space for autonomy for regional governments and local schools to accommodate the curriculum to local strengths and needs. Teaching in schools in rural communities can thus on paper engage with local communities in various ways, yet according to the article, due to the prevalence of neoliberal education politics and the demands of competition and performance assessments, it tends not to and will often work at cross-purposes with the sustainability and well-being of rural communities (Corbett, 2016). This is also suggested in the main message of the present article in connection to the operation, ideology and effects of communitas schools and magnet schools, respectively, in rural areas and for rural communities.

Communitas schools exist in organic relationships with local communities. Sometimes they simply must and in other cases it is a value-based choice (cf. Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). However, regardless of this, there is space for teaching staff to influence content by introducing local knowledge and values and to respond more to community members and their values as well as community heritage and sustainability (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020). This is not the case for magnet schools.

Magnet schools exploit the symbolic value carried by a positive rural imaginary of the rural condition and use it competitively to attract consumers and investment for school survival and profit. Under the mantle or guise of entrepreneurialism, they create a concentration of investment in this way in competition with and at the expense of other schools, both ones in the same area and in areas nearby, simply for school status, survival and economic returns, and despite the possible risks for community sustainability. So, although local populations may almost always describe local schools as contributing to community well-being there are contradictions regarding whose interests the different types of school that form under neoliberal conditions can and do serve. By feeding off the local economy to further private accumulations of capital magnet schools tend to extract value from, rather than give it to, the local community. Communitas schools represent and offer an alternative.

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