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Teaching for Community Sustainability: Opportunities and Limitations as Seen from a Cross-analysis of Teachers Teaching in Schools in Rural Areas in Spain and Sweden

Begoña Vigo-Arazola¹ , Dennis Beach²  and Elisabet Öhrn² 

¹Education Sciences, University of Zaragoza, Spain and ²Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
Corresponding author: Begoña Vigo-Arazola; Email: mbvigo@unizar.es

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Abstract

Education policy is always at risk of working at cross-purposes toward education goals. Using a meta-ethnographic methodology and Massey's geometry of space theory, the present article addresses this in relation to a particular policy realisation problem of teaching for sustainability in schools in depopulated rural areas with identified population challenges. Specific attention has gone to research addressing the enacted curriculum and teachers' experiences of working with sustainability goals. The results highlight features for goal realisation such as the presence of and attention to rural natural and cultural environmental heritage, having local access and giving curriculum attention to local employment and sustainable vocations and professions, and having community support from the local community and engagement of the school in the community. Working against sustainability were global epistemic rural marginalisation, performative curriculum relations, market competition and competitive exclusions from market participation, tepid community involvement in schools, and socially isolated schools insulated from the local community.

Keywords: Community; rural school; space; sustainability; meta-ethnography

Introduction

When considering the challenges of policy attainment in education and its relationship to research Byrne and Osga (2008) looked at differences between applied, basic, and strategic research and policy, and the meanings of research and policy in a historical and contemporary policy-making context. A conclusion was that education policy, practices and research are always at risk of working at cross-purposes, which forms one starting point for the present article along with how and why different approaches to education and curriculum policy and practice may contribute to, challenge, or even undermine rural sustainability (Roberts & Downes, 2016). They come together in the overarching purpose of the present article, which is to meta-ethnographically explore and analyse research on teaching for sustainability in rural areas in an attempt to identify what teachers identify as of key importance for preparing their pupils to contribute to a sustainable future for themselves and their community.

Publications from five ethnographic research projects, three from Spain and two from Sweden, have provided the data and questions for the article relating to teacher's views and experiences of opportunities and challenges for educating for sustainability. They form the basis of our analysis,

which we hope can provide new knowledge and insights to stimulate further debate around rural- and de- and repopulation for community sustainability and how teaching can influence definitions, histories, policies, attitudes, values, ideologies, policies and practices that can positively affect sustainability and community resilience (cf. Roberts & Downes, 2016).

Previous research

Research on the sustainability of rural areas often highlights the progressive loss of local knowledge and cultural assets (García-Esparza *et al.*, 2024) and the value of proactive participation in curriculum development for the inclusion and preservation of local heritage knowledge and incorporating students' culture in curriculum activities (Ichinose, 2017; Morais *et al.*, 2024). Joint activities involving families, teachers and community members form positive features (Carrete-Marín & Boix-Tomàs, 2024; Villa & Knutas, 2020). The United Nations (UN), through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlight setting benchmarks for Sustainability Education for schools from primary to upper-secondary levels as important (cf. UNESCO, 2016), along with conflicts and compromises between public rights and private interests from community and non-community actors (Paniagua & Moyano, 2007; Yu *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, our ambition is to contribute to understanding how teachers and others have devised and employed strategies to address them, and what feelings of support and opposition they have experienced toward their successful realisation (Obi & Ojo, 2026). This has involved us in:

- Jointly examining what the selected research says about educational policy and practices, curriculum content and interactions and the implications and effects of power relationships between different actors for families in/and communities and community sustainability and
- Analysing places not so much as bounded areas, but as open and porous networks of social relations that are constructed through the specificity of their interaction with other places rather than by counter position to them

The theoretical framework informing and supporting the analysis comes from Massey's relational theory of place and power (cf. Massey, 1994/2013).

The theoretical framework and its methodological implications

Massey (1994, 121) makes the point that spatial identities are multiple and contested, that different social groups are differently located in relation to the overall complexity of social relations and their reading of those relations (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2025), and that place identities are, because of this, differentially manifest in local contexts (Bagley *et al.*, 2026; Price Azano *et al.*, 2020; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano Bozalongo, 2014). However, there is a caveat here, as no system or theory exhausts the situation of either its origins or its destinations (Said, 1994/2000). So, when applying theories across different contexts there is a need of making theory transgressive, to avoid succumbing to a facile over-general totalising universalism and power-laden attempts to impose certain perspectives onto the world (Said, 1994/2000, p. 452) and we have developed our methodology, critical meta-ethnography (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2025; Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020, 2024), from within this transgressive theoretical position. Based on ethnographic research, it synthesises long-term and in-depth situated research results from historical and contextually detailed investigations to create analytical descriptions of social and cultural relationships, events, and interactions, and to describe and understand the complexity of educational practices, cultures, interactions, and learning environments across different contexts. It does this by:

- Synthesising findings from research that has observed and analysed the effects of educational policy on and in educational practices, and developed contextual theories about local educational structures, policies and experiences and their effects
- Describing how these structures, policies and experiences affect those working in the field of education in different contexts and have contributed to social and cultural development and/or social and cultural reproduction through daily activities
- Identifying structural deformations in the misrecognitions of communicative consensus formation
- Embracing and enacting a theory of ideology and social practice within a theory of social ontology and practice for social change

Applying these points in research using Massey's spatial geometry theory involves hence an attempt to identify possible spatial injustices and propose ways to challenge previous political failures to eliminate them. A second intention is to provide fuel, reasons, and motivation for people to produce perceptual shifts in their understanding of their underlying social relations and struggles against them. We have adopted critical meta-ethnography to these ends.

Meta-ethnography and critical meta-ethnography

Noblit and Hare (1988) describe meta-ethnography as comprising seven phases (see Table 1) that draw together data from multiple studies and collectively strive to reach an enriched understanding of people's experiences to inform future research and future policy (cf. Noblit, 2019). We have applied these seven stages in our methodology.

We have used meta-ethnography in previous research, such as in Bagley et al. (2026), Beach and Öhrn (2025) and Beach and Vigo-Arrazola (2020, 2024, 2025) where our intention has, as now, been to interpret the results from research and make cross-translational syntheses. We applied a dialectical methodology (cf. Lukács, 1923/1971, p. 230).

Data and analysis

Ethnographic accounts, in the form of book chapters, edited or authored books and research reports, and published peer-reviewed research articles form the data for meta-ethnography. Table 2 presents the published research results that have formed the basis of our meta-ethnography. They have rarely investigated teaching for sustainability directly but rather create a basis from which to explore this feature indirectly and contextually in relation to research on other issues.

The ethnographic and critical ethnographic research behind the research products in the research sample (Table 2) took place in different rural contexts. Table 3 presents the schools involved in the research and brief details about their surroundings. Schools 1–4 are from Spain, and schools 5–10 from Sweden. The results from the analysis follow in the next section of the article.

Results

The analysis allowed us to develop different themes, presented in Table 4 below, related to teachers' experiences of teaching for pupils for community sustainability and what seems to work for and against this goal. Table 4 represents thematic perceptual features of teachers' experiences.

Table 1. Noblit and hare's (1988) seven phases of meta-ethnography

1. <i>Identifying an intellectual interest or problem</i> and specifying a research question connected to it to form an area of exploration, such as teachers' experiences of teaching in schools in rural spaces in relation to families and community sustainability.
2. <i>Deciding what studies are relevant to that interest</i> using explicit search criteria and a stated reduction process to create a manageable number of studies for the research.
3. <i>Reading the selected studies</i> closely and repeatedly to facilitate the development of a "third order" cross-case interpretation of the body of primary studies by
4. <i>Determining how the studies are related</i> they may (explicitly and implicitly) share.
5. <i>Translating</i> and listing the themes that are shared across the studies to create a possible foundation for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reciprocal translations for studies in which the storylines are commensurate • Refutational translations for studies that contradict each other in key ways • Line of argument translations for studies with points of overlap but that are actually addressing somewhat different areas/sub-topics
6. <i>Synthesising outcomes from the translations</i> in terms of what they together may suggest about the research question or phenomenon.
7. <i>Expressing the synthesis</i> in narrative form for enhancing communication purposes.

Teachers recognising the value of the environment

In *AlSchool*, where 40% of the students are of foreign origin (mostly Moroccan), as part of a project on the roots and origins of the village in collaboration between the school and the community as a broader educational collective community was conducted by involving local families and other community members in the *design and delivery of the local enacted curriculum*. Examples included contributions from a local chef who designed a recipe book for the school and taught teachers to teach pupils how to cook various dishes with their families using vegetables and products from the school solar garden and near-environment. Teachers and head-teachers emphasise the importance of learning about the local area through projects such as these that invite and help pupils to identify value in things in and around their village and, as one head-teacher put it, *fostering a sense of belonging and contributing to sustainability* (Moreno-Pinillos, 2022). The learning process takes place through interaction and incorporates the life experiences of community members and includes learning from an intergenerational perspective *when teaching incorporates elements of the local environment* and reinforces the possibility of sustainability of the rural territory in educational practices.

Examples of these kinds of inclusive learning exhibit tendencies toward *weakening boundaries of insulation of the school from the community* (of overcoming a challenge in other words). They include local artists helping teachers to teach how to depict the local landscapes and images of local spaces through art, including digital art, and similar activities, the curator from a regional museum presenting *cultural historical events that connect the local area to national and global events*. They may come from the civil (in Spain) and Second World War (in Sweden) shown also through large glass display cases in the hallways to exhibit the features or features about other issues. They explicitly positioned schools and community members' local history in the local geography and profiled natural and cultural historic features, social and cultural activities, and even, in some few cases, social labour relations. As well as physical displays were displays on webpages.

Experiences of promoting interaction with the natural environment

OlbSchool made use of collaboration between families, teachers and pupils in different ways on various projects, particularly geological projects on rock and alluvial formations. They involved visits into the local landscape to collect stones and later working with identifying them as

Table 2. The ethnographic basis (publications) for the meta-ethnographic analysis

<p><i>From Spain</i></p> <p>Matías-Solanilla, E. and Vigo-Arrazola, B. (2020) El valor del lugar en las relaciones de inclusión y exclusión en un colegio rural agrupado: un estudio etnográfico. <i>Márgenes: Revista de Educación de la Universidad de Málaga</i>, 1(2), 90-106.</p> <p>Mendivil, A. and Lasheras, P. (2024) Comunidad y escuela a través de los medios digitales. In Vigo-Arrazola B (ed.) <i>Desafíos ante la estigmatización en la educación: Prácticas creativas e inclusivas con medios digitales</i> (pp. 137-152). Síntesis.</p> <p>Moreno-Pinillos, C. (2022). School in and linked to rural territory: Teaching practices in connection with the context from an ethnographic study. <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i>, 32(2), 19-35.</p> <p>Moreno-Pinillos, C. (2024) Sobre la presencia de las voces a través de las prácticas de enseñanza con medios digitales. In Vigo-Arrazola B (ed.) <i>Desafíos ante la estigmatización en la educación: Prácticas creativas e inclusivas con medios digitales</i> (pp. 103-120). Síntesis.</p> <p>Vigo-Arrazola, B., Dieste, B., Blasco-Serrano, A.C. and Lasheras-Lalana, P. (2023) Oportunidades de inclusión en escuelas con alta diversidad cultural: un estudio etnográfico. <i>Revista Española de Sociología</i>, 32(2), 167.</p> <p>Vigo-Arrazola, M. B. (2021) Desarrollo de prácticas de enseñanza creativa e inclusiva con medios digitales. In Latorre C and Quintas A (Coords.) <i>Inclusión educativa y tecnologías para el aprendizaje</i>. (pp. 129-143). Octaedro.</p> <p>Vigo-Arrazola, B., & Moreno-Pinillos, C. (2025). Creative and inclusive teaching practices in multigrade schools. An ethnographic study on the use of digital media. <i>International Journal of Educational Research</i>, 131, 102,596.</p> <p>Vigo-Arrazola, M. B. (2023). Exploring the influence of the ethnographic researcher's role in digital teaching practices in disadvantaged schools. <i>Ethnography and Education</i>, 18(3), 233-248.</p> <p>Torres Sales, L., & Correa Gorospe, J. M. (2024). La construcción de narrativas de vida (audio) visuales a través de relaciones intergeneracionales. En B. Vigo-Arrazola (Ed.) <i>Desafíos ante la estigmatización en educación: Prácticas creativas e inclusivas con medios digitales</i> (pp. 153–167). Síntesis.</p> <p>Martín Bermúdez, N., Dieste Gracia, B., Coma Roselló, T., & López Medialdea, A. M. (2024). Interacción en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje desde las experiencias del alumnado. En B. Vigo-Arrazola (Ed.) <i>Desafíos ante la estigmatización en educación: prácticas creativas e inclusivas con medios digitales</i> (pp. 121-135). Síntesis.</p>
<p><i>From Sweden</i></p> <p>Rosvall, P. Å. (2020). Counselling to stay or to leave?-Comparing career counselling of young people in rural and urban areas. <i>Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education</i>, 50(7), 1014-1032.</p> <p>Rosvall, P. Å., Rönnlund, M., & Johansson, M. (2018). Young people's career choices in Swedish rural contexts: Schools' social codes, migration and resources. <i>Journal of rural studies</i>, 60, 43-51.</p> <p>Rönnlund, M., Rosvall, P. Å., & Johansson, M. (2018). Vocational or academic track? Study and career plans among Swedish students living in rural areas. <i>Journal of Youth Studies</i>, 21(3), 360-375.</p> <p>Öhrn, E., Beach, D., Johansson, M., Rönnlund, M., & Rosvall, P. A. (2023). Rural education and migration: a study of the 2015 reception of young refugees in Sweden. <i>Australian and International journal of rural education</i>, 33(2), 1-15.</p> <p>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. <i>European Educational Research Journal</i>, 18(1), 19-33.</p> <p>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. <i>Education Inquiry</i>, 9(1), 4-21.</p> <p>Öhrn, E., & Beach, D. (2019). <i>Young people's life and schooling in rural areas</i>. Tufnell Press</p> <p>Beach, D., & Öhrn, E. (2025). The community function of schools in rural areas: Normalising dominant cultural relations through the curriculum silencing local knowledge. <i>Pedagogy, Culture & Society</i>, 33(3), 943-960.</p>
<p><i>From both Spain and Sweden</i></p> <p>Beach, D., & Vigo-Arrazola, 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. <i>Journal of Rural Studies</i>, 77, 199-207.</p> <p>Vigo-Arrazola, B., & Beach, D. (2022). Las escuelas rurales ante las políticas de mercado: Un análisis meta-etnográfico. <i>Education Policy Analysis Archives</i>, 30, 173-173.</p> <p>Bagley, C., Beach, D., Fargas-Malet, M., & Vigo-Arrazola, B. (2026). Troubling rurality and rural schooling: a qualitative meta-synthesis of research in rural schools in three European national school systems. <i>Critical Studies in Education</i>, 67(1), 97-113.</p>

Table 3. Details the schools selected to participate in the research study

School and classroom	Location
School /SAI/. Multigrade primary school.	Sparsely populated. Small settlement. Agricultural processing industry, ancillary car industries.
School /SOIm/. Part of a multigrade primary cluster school.	Sparsely populated. Small settlement. Earthworks, and manufacturing. Agri-food cooperatives.
School /SPo/. Part of a multigrade primary cluster school.	Sparsely populated settlement. Construction and agri-food industry.
School /SOlb/. Multigrade single classroom.	Sparsely populated small. Woollen mill, hydroelectric power, agriculture, art, and tourism.
Coastal school. Multigrade secondary school. Parallel stream.	Densely populated coastal town with emerging tourism and former fishing industry.
Inland school. Multigrade secondary school	Sparsely populated. Forestry, agriculture, and associated manufacturing industries.
Mountain school. Multigrade secondary school	Sparsely populated. Mining and recreation industry, tourism.
River school. Multigrade secondary school. Single stream.	Dense population. Military base, Hydropower plant, Hospital and service sector employment.
Forest school. Multigrade secondary school. Single stream.	Sparsely populated. Forestry and associated industry.
Sea school. Multigrade secondary school. Parallel stream.	Dense population. Fisheries Manufacturing Construction industry.

Table 4. Emergent perceptual themes connected to schooling and the curriculum

Supporting features
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Heritage culture: Recognising traditions, objects, museums and highlighting the value of and interacting with/in the local environment 2. Employment capital: Identifying sustainable vocations and professions in and around the area and promoting a future for the area 3. Natural material heritage: Recognising environmental value from local geology, geography and biology 4. Community support and two-way involvement: community in school and school in community
Opposing features
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Global epistemic rural marginalisation 2. Performative marginalising curriculum relations and primacy to second hand forms of knowledge 3. Market competition and competitive exclusions from market participation under metro-centric neoliberal capitalism 4. Tepid community involvement and isolated schools

sedimentary, volcanic, igneous, and so on. The school is in a heritage area of identified natural attraction connected to a nationally identified area of special natural importance. It makes these kinds of activities easy in this school. But as a teacher in another (Swedish) school pointed out, *environmental beauty and value exist also in unrecognised areas and locally knowledgeable people know where*. In Mountain School for instance, tourism, culture and local history were highlighted, and in Inland School the region being “unique, biodiverse and rich in natural resources” (teacher) was stressed, along with a notion of the value and challenges of an untamed nature and sustainability. Local value was seen also in other ways. In home economics in Mountain School for instance the teacher made a point of (the locally accessible) moose meat being a more sustainable

meat choice than (the nationally widely bred) cow, pig or chicken, and this theme of the value of local game was repeated also by pupils and in PoSchool

In PoSchool students researched crane migration and the importance of conservation in the area. It helped them develop or deepen an interest and sense of care in and for the local environment, which they recognised as also ecologically important. Experiences of features working against teaching for sustainability and resilience typically included examples relating to a variety of cultural and environmental elements on the curriculum that misaligned with sustainability goals, through subjugation to a standardised curriculum (cf. Roberts & Downes, 2016) and difficulties of cultural opposition to capitalist relations of production when people and places relied on capitalist production for their sustenance.

Community involvement

Community involvement occurred through community members and pupils' families supporting learning activities in school about environmental knowledge and skills in community heritage projects. As one teacher pointed out, *without people from the community, many things just would not be possible and wouldn't happen*. They also identified a value in digital media, in terms of connecting people through everyday relations and interactions in the local communities and *broad-casting interesting educational features of local everyday life and the environment*. In Mountain School the history teacher took the class to visit the local museum and in Forest School content included visits to the local labour market and discussions of the competences it required.

Pupils in these schools had regular assignments that targeted local values or traditions, which got them working outside the school and in the local environment. They helped to make them aware of and in some cases involved in important political decisions that proliferate rural regions by building a place-conscious curriculum with mutual involvement of the community in the school focussing on the value dynamics of local areas. Two common tactics were (i) using place-based education to nurture place identities and (ii) using local contexts to feed the standardised national or regional curriculum. Both can assist place-focused engagement with the community and encourage pupils/students to think about local issues, assets, and challenges (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2025; Price Azano et al., 2020). Using student and community voices to develop creative and sustainable education and searching for ways to develop *strategies against depopulation* were important themes in the dynamics of *place, participation* and *integration* for sustainability and education and spatial justice

Presenting possibilities for sustained local employment and careers

Generally, the ethnographies presented very few examples that have highlighted local vocational or career opportunities in curriculum content. Consequently, the idea that students can study to develop avenues by which to leave their rural community behind and, potentially settle in another part of the country or world is essentially reinforced and sometimes indeed made very evident by teachers in the classroom. In one investigation one teacher was very clear that he saw nothing left of any value to local people in the local area. He spoke instead of how he had told his children to move as soon as possible. Employment opportunities no-longer included possibilities for sustaining a good life for the next generation he said. Aspects related to the economic dimension of sustainability had already led to depopulation, and schools often remained silent about this (Bagley et al., 2026; Beach & Öhrn, 2019, 2025).

This teacher stood out as an exception. He spoke out on the effects of material hollowing out of a region by capital in the interests of the generation of private profit at the expense of local people (and other species) and their life conditions. He said this represented “a material challenge for sustainability and resilience brought about locally through global entrepreneurialism and rural area population and resource exploitation.” Yet these things remained largely outside of the

enacted curriculum. Positive global possibilities appeared instead. An example was when an official in the municipality stated that “you can live here and be part of something bigger, as citizens of the world.” Learning in school he said created advantages for young people by helping them move away from the area “to widen their perspectives and opportunities,” thus inducing an image of greener pastures of employment outside the local area and the value of education and schooling for fashioning access to these greener pastures as opposed to finding ways to protect rural spaces and develop sustainability and resilience in and for communities. “Identity today is less connected to where we were born. We travel an incredible amount. It is often cheaper to fly to the Mediterranean than to Stockholm.” (Coastal School, 27 January).

Teachers experiences of curriculum performative pressure

Teachers described ways of wanting yet also struggling to put a face to local history due to having to communicate official knowledge as presented in the formal curriculum and its specific learning objectives, content and assessment methods. Moreover, whilst they gave examples of how features of local conditions formed content around which to develop pupils’ analytical capacities and global understanding, they admitted that this was rarely purely in the interests of these values in and for themselves or for valuing cultural heritage and local epistemic knowledge for its own sake or the sake of the local community bond (cf. Beach & Öhrn, 2025; Beach *et al.*, 2018; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano, 2020). Instead, two alternative ways of subordinating local to global epistemologies took place:

1. The demands of national curriculum performativity obtained complete primacy over local variations and local knowledge and its implications for the possible future of pupils and for the resilience and sustainability of their communities
2. Teachers in rural schools attributed interest and value towards local knowledge and culture but also saw this content as valuable primarily for helping pupils to learn official curriculum knowledge and perform well on national examinations

As one teacher explained things, *the curriculum pressure doesn’t usually give you the opportunity for other activities*. Teachers were usually so tied up with the curriculum that it was very difficult to create and include other activities.

Difficulties in articulation of critique of the capitalist political economy

Critical ethnographic research in the humanities, education and social sciences gives rise to interdisciplinary investigations of global and societal structures and discourses of power to reveal forms of injustice and the sources of the reproduction of inequality. Typical possible themes include overt deconstruction and criticism in classroom interactions of:

1. Global capitalist wage labour relations.
2. Private accumulation and exploitation of the planet’s resources.
3. The reproduction of hegemony, and economic, social and cultural reproduction in education, society and culture.
4. The spread of neoliberal global capitalism from 1990 onwards and the power and exploitation it uses to develop economic growth.
5. The free space provided by complicit politicians who allow neoliberal capitalists to freely accumulate vast wealth.

These points are among the most significant threats to global health and welfare and the sustainability of rural communities according to for instance amongst others Benatar *et al.* (2018),

Cullenberg (1998), Labonté and Stuckler (2016) and Yusoff (2021). Yet analysing the ethnographies in Table 3 indicated that basically none of them are visible in schools and classrooms and that neoliberal capitalism's mechanisms of accumulation continue to roll on almost as if they were self-perpetuating. However, they do not operate automatically and here is another missed opportunity for critical pedagogues. There are support mechanisms that themselves require maintenance and support that research has uncovered, and that teachers could teach about, both in relation to the local context and as a global feature.

The most obvious support comes, in line with point 5 above, from governments and government policy (albeit with strong economic and other external pressures, such as from the UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the WTO), and critical educators for sustainability working in school can identify and call this out. Moreover, this is not all they could do. They could also initiate social processes of development of self-organising social networks for fostering forms of counter-hegemonic globalisation in the interests of planetary sustainability in rural and in most circumstances also planetary futures. It has not happened in schools working for rural sustainability in the research sample (Table 2), at least not yet, but it could. Curricular activities in rural schools generally fail to make a significantly meaningful contribution to the sustainability of rural territories and populations. They reinforce instead an established curriculum to the service of a standardised society (Bagley et al., 2026; Beach & Öhrn, 2025; Beach & Vigo-Arazola, 2025; Faber, 2018; Hart, 2018).

Discussion

Using the results and products from ethnography, in this article we have applied a meta-ethnographic methodology to generate a meta-ethnographic narrative to illuminate how teachers approach their teaching for rural sustainability. This makes sense in relation to teaching for sustainability conceived as a form of development that meets current needs without compromising planetary culture for future generations along both environmental, social and economic dimensions. In the discussion section we will try to highlight what we see as important feature of and implications to draw from the research narrative.

A first important point is that meta-ethnographic synthesis treats the themes developed in qualitative studies as metaphors, not as literal descriptors, and proceeds accordingly on an understanding that synthesis requires studies to be translated into one another by comparing interpretations broadly and thinking about the specific concepts each author uses and develops, in terms of relative equivalents and relative commensurability (Noblit & Hare, 1988). In other words, thinking about themes and concepts in terms of the cogency (efficient integration) and range (ability to incorporate other symbolic domains) and the revelation of multiple potential connotations (Noblit, 2019), in the present case relating to how rural sustainability is framed by actions that generate a sense of respect for local places, the community and the lives of the people who live there.

In terms of the emergent themes, structure and agency both play a role. The pedagogical practices of the teachers appeared to determine, at least in part, in part the implementation of the sustainability in relation to student life and the place in these circumstances, as these place-sensitive practices are ultimately responsible for the ways in which the teachers construct spaces for a sustainability architecture within their respective schools. They do so moreover within the immediate materiality of school grounds and by extending to connections to other local places, the near-environment and local nature. Teachers in these ways foster student interaction within their life experiences and their environment through open-ended activities that include enquiry, investigation and expression. These findings are consistent with other studies (i.e. García-Esparza et al., 2024; Ichinose, 2017) that highlight the importance of local voices and places as learning resources.

Local places inform and shape teaching practice, which in turn translates into students' learning about the notion of place. However, as in other studies (cf. Carrete-Marín & Boix-Tomàs, 2024), the teachers overwhelmingly put the curriculum and the neoliberal references at the forefront of their practice. In most cases, the teachers addressed aspects such as fauna, flora, nature and traditions in the environment but always based on the acquisition of curricular content. Furthermore, local references seem rather to further a historical contextualisation – what once shaped the local community and the lives of those who used to live there.

The next point is in line with Massey's conceptions of space and education (1994/2013, 154–155). It is that schools should form contexts in which to think about the sustainability of space and the construction of courses of action and ideas for creating rural sustainability and community resilience. It, again in line with Massey, identifies that subscribing to the demands, needs and values of neoliberal capitalism, undermines these possibilities. Hence, understanding and attaining the conditions for place sustainability in education is constructed from a particular constellation of social relations and content that must meet and interweave important sustainability features. Yet the teachers' perspectives and approaches in the schools studied appear to disregard the sustainability of rural areas when the concern becomes one of maintaining levels of performance on the national (principally global neoliberal) curriculum and official knowledge (Bagley *et al.*, 2026; Roberts & Downe, 2016). This is particularly the case in schools that operate according to the demands of curriculum performativity and a standardised curriculum as discussed in Beach and Vigo-Arrazola (2020, 2025).

The standardised curriculum and the assessment of students is presented as a limitation. For instance, there are hardly any references to the future possibilities of professional lives locally, for today's pupils in tomorrow's village. Furthermore, when professional opportunities are identified, the focus is placed on metro-centric values from a perspective that ultimately serves to uphold a situation of global knowledge for social mobility and unequal exploitation among the population rather than egalitarian participation rather than for the enriching the future possibilities of the area and those who wish to and will remain in it (e.g. Morais *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, the education from and for sustainability that takes place in schools seems to fail to activate a sense among students of needing to tackle the issue of rural depopulation and community revitalisation. According to Massey's (1994/2013) concept of the geometry of power, the educational practices carried out by teachers in these schools considering place, culture, values and possibilities to inform students of the professional and future opportunities available in their communities are largely limited by their response to historical forces and social relations of production, thus shaping individual identities and generating a problematic situation for rural spaces (Massey, 1994/2013).

At this point, first of all, it is important to pay attention to the articulation of territorial sustainability in a context in which, as Massey points out, education for sustainability, including through the implementation of the SDGs (UNESCO, 2016, 2023) in schools located in rural spaces, could be contributing to further the interests of urban capital accumulation at the expense of rural places, people in the rural community sustainability (cf. Bagley *et al.*, 2026; Beach & Öhrn, 2025). There is a dynamic of control determined by existing social relations according to abstract urban values and capitalist interests and the teachers' conception of sustainability fosters a series of social relations in particular ways that effectively fail to articulate a sense of true rootedness in the students' local context (Massey, 1994/2013). They become postmodern nomads of production as a mobile physical and/or intellectual labour power.

This educational outcome is reinforced by a curriculum that overlooks the needs of rural territories and the people who live there. Rural interests, values, places, people, and resources are subjugated to the interest of global neoliberal capitalist production and thus, the school simply does not benefit its students or promote territorial development in a sustainable way (Roberts & Downe, 2016; Torre, 2023). As Torre (2023) suggests, there is a considerable need for and value in forming a new definition of territorial development based on analyses of production and governance relations linked to a broader conception of territorial innovation. In line with Massey's

conceptions of space and education (1994/2013, 154–155), schools should form contexts in which to think about the sustainability of space and the construction of courses of action and ideas for creating rural sustainability and community resilience. Subscribing to the demands, needs and values of neoliberal capitalism undermines these possibilities.

Conclusions

The support shown by schools for the sustainability of rural communities is somewhat unclear. Efforts appear to be aimed mainly at the overall imperative of schooling rather than the rebuilding and sustainability of communities. In this way the schooling offered in rural schools serves to reinforce an attitude of “learning to leave” rural communities rather than learning for taking a role in rural territorial development. Improving teacher awareness concerning this problematic could be helpful in along with heightened flexibility on the part of the education administration regarding curriculum performativity, market governance, risks of competitive exclusion of schools and ultimately the sustainability of rural schools and the local communities should serve.

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Author Biographies

Begoña Vigo-Arrazola is a PhD in Education Sciences. Associate Professor at the Department of Education Sciences at the Faculty of Education in University of Zaragoza in Spain. Her research focuses on inclusive education, rural schools, teacher education and ethnography. She is the coordinator of the Reference Research Group of the Government of Aragon “Education and Diversity” (S49_23R) and of the Campus Iberus Action Group “Inclusive education in rural, urban and peri-urban areas.” She is presently leading several regional and national research projects in the area of education.

Dennis Beach is an Emeritus Professor of Education at the Department of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg in Sweden. His main research interests are in the sociology and politics of education, justice and equity in education, educational research methodology, higher education policy, and teacher education. He is a former editor-in-chief of the journal *Ethnography and Education* from 2013 to 2017 and one of the senior commissioning editors for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia sections on Educational Research and Qualitative Methods, as well as Editor-in-Chief of the European Educational Research Association book series on Transdisciplinary Perspective in Education Research.

Elisabet Öhrn is Professor of Education at Department of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Her main research area is the sociology of education, with a special interest in power processes, place, gender and class. This includes studies of sub/urban and rural schooling, the importance of local context for relations in school, patterns of segregation, and young people's understandings of power and how they would act to create change. She has been leading several national research projects in these areas.

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