Extended abstract

Towards the Sustainability of Rural Schools in the Region of Asturias (Spain): Problems and Demands of Management Teams and their Coverage by the Written Press

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**Highlights:**

1. Asturian rural schools are facing the challenge of depopulation.
2. The digital divide and the decline in enrolments worry management teams.
3. The digital press echoes the demands and problems of the rural school.
4. The digital press emphasizes school closures and the digital divide.
5. The sustainability of these rural schools depends on inter and extern factors that condition their survival.

**Abstract:** The sustainability of rural schools depends on endogenous and exogenous factors that affect their survival. This study is aimed to identify problems and needs reported by the management teams of rural schools in the region of Asturias (Spain). In addition, the study examines how the press reports them. The study employs a mixed methodology a) quantitative, based on analysing the opinions of school management teams using a questionnaire ($\alpha=0.798$), with a response rate of 77.2 %; and b) qualitative, document based, focused on examining how the local written press treats those problems and needs. The results indicate that school management teams emphasise internal problems, such as the need for up-to-date digital resources along with maintenance of existing resources, and the need for stable internet connections, transport, and school meals services. In contrast, the written press emphasises external problems, such as the low birth rate and the consequent closure of schools. The rural schools are drawn special attention when they are about to be closed, emphasising the sorrow of the educational community, who is aware of what this means to the territory. Finally, the various administrative bodies need to respond to rural schools’ needs in order to promote their sustainability.

**Keywords:** Rural school, sustainability, press, problems, depopulation.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction and justification

Rural schools enhance the environment and culture of their surroundings, possess a unique organizational structure, and constitute a space for pedagogical innovation that energises their community. However, they suffer from the marginalization of rural areas. Undoubtedly, the maintenance of schools in rural areas contributes to ensuring social justice and equity in access to education, while also positively impacting the territory, improving the quality of life of the community, and strengthening population roots. However, their sustainability is at risk.

Rural environments are affected by invisibility and institutional neglect, difficulties in accessing services located in urban areas, poor connectivity, deficiencies in infrastructure, depopulation, and more. Therefore, rural schools (RE) are not exempt from these situations. Moreover, they face pedagogical challenges due to the diversity of students and the specificity of the context, which require qualified teaching staff, technological resources, and connectivity. The lack of visibility and presence of these schools in the digital sphere condemns them to oblivion. Hence, it is essential to investigate their current problems and demands through consultation with their stakeholders in order to address their problems.

These problems of RE have also become evident in local written press, where there has been an increased interest in understanding the situation of RE and their demands, resulting in a corresponding increase in news coverage on this topic.

This study aims to collect and specify the problems and demands of RE administrators in an region that accounts for a quarter of the rural student population. At the same time, it analyses the complicity of the local press in raising public awareness of the deterioration and abandonment suffered by these schools. Finally, possible solutions that should be jointly undertaken by public agencies in charge are proposed.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources, areas of study

This study aims to: 1) identify the problems (internal and external factors) reported by the management body of RE in the region of Asturias, as well as the most
pressing demands they make to the relevant public authorities, based on the region and type of school; and 2) analyse the treatment of these problems and demands in the local press. The employed methodology is mixed: a) quantitative, analysing data collected through a questionnaire directed at school administrators to identify their problems and demands, and b) qualitative, using documentary analysis to examine the content and treatment of local press regarding these problems and demands, in order to determine the extent to which the educational community’s voice is heard and their needs are made visible.

The region of Asturias has 57 RE, and this study involves 44 of them - representing 77.19% of the total. The first 30 news articles found on Google in the digital newspapers La Nueva España, El Comercio, and La Voz de Asturias were selected, covering the period from January 2020 to September 2022. The questionnaire used comprised 17 items grouped into two dimensions: problems and demands ( \(=0.798\)).

To analyse the news articles, categories were established to guide content analysis. The articles were classified according to eight items - based on the Framing Theory: 1) digital divide, 2) reduction of teacher staff, 3) lack of services (transportation and meals), 4) teacher shortage, 5) limited recognition of rural schools, 6) decline in enrollment, 7) school closures, and 8) demand for teacher training. Descriptive analysis (frequencies and percentages) was conducted, and the problems and demands indicated by the rural school administrators were identified, taking into account variables such as the type of school and the geographical location (region).

3. Results

a) Problems and demands according to school administrators

Among the external problems, 19% of the principals emphasise low student enrollment in their schools, 8.5% complain about the lack of services (transportation and/or meals), 8.5% express concerns about closures, and 2.8% highlight their dissatisfaction with local authorities' management.

Regarding internal problems, 20.4% report a high level of teacher temporary contracts in these schools, 16.2% mention the difficulty for teachers to participate in training courses (due to schedules, modality, etc.), 12.7% underline the lack of technological resources, and 12% emphasise the need for increased specialist teaching hours.
As for the demands, 21.6% of the chairs refer to the need for recognition and visibility of RE, 13.7% request training offerings aligned with teachers’ projects and needs, 13.1% demand more technological resources and technical support, 12.4% require improved connectivity and increased funding for project development, 9.2% seek assistance for families and the creation of classrooms for children aged 0-3 to prevent closures and attract new families, 3.9% call for greater support from local entities and agents (municipalities, neighborhood associations, etc.), and another 3.9% demand “more teachers”.

b) Problems and demands identified in the local press

The news articles reveal school closures (25%), the digital divide and lack of services (both at 21.9%), teacher shortage and decline in enrollment (both at 12.5%), and finally, limited recognition of rural schools and demand for teacher training (each at 3.1%).

4. Discussion

School administrators highlight the need for updated digital resources and stable internet connectivity. They also require means of transport and meal services for students to attract more families to the schools. These difficulties conflict with the right to quality basic education, as envisaged in Article 27 of the Spanish Constitution. On the other hand, the local press pays more attention to issues such as low birth rates and school closures, as well as highlighting the digital divide. However, other issues related to the organisation of these schools do not receive the same media coverage. It would be advisable to recognise the fundamental role that schools play within their territories.

5. Conclusions

The results reveal that promoting the sustainability of rural schools requires a joint response from different administrative organisations. In addition to recognising the fundamental role that schools play within their territories, it is necessary to consider policies that support birth rates, youth employment, and repopulation, which foster the settlement of new families in rural areas. Furthermore, support should be provided for entrepreneurship in rural areas to prevent the exodus to urban areas.
is crucial to ensure basic infrastructure, connectivity, and transportation facilities that facilitate travel and access to essential services such as health and education. The work of rural school teachers should also be acknowledged, and incentives should be offered to attract teachers to these areas and facilitate their continuous professional development. Financial support for innovative projects should be prioritised, ensuring attention to diversity with additional support teachers. Additionally, the creation of teacher networks should be encouraged to promote collaboration between schools. It would be beneficial to incorporate content on rural education into initial teacher training programmes, providing knowledge about the real situation of RE and guidance for working in multi-level classrooms. It would also be beneficial for future teachers to carry out some of their internships in these schools. Finally, it is important to promote a model of RE that engages with the local communities, including families and various local stakeholders, fostering the culture of participation and involvement in local issues.

6. Next steps

Since this study is focused on the context of the region of Asturias (Spain), it would be necessary to compare it with other regions in the country. It would be advisable to apply this questionnaire to the management teams of rural schools in other Spanish regions to compare the results and provide a panoramic view of the global problems and demands of rural schools, with the aim of finding solutions that benefit everyone.