Extended abstract

The Rural School: A Review of the Scientific Literature

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Highlights:

1. The rural school has a specific nature. It has been marginalized like the rural environment.
2. The school has a great capacity for teaching innovation.
3. The training of rural teachers is a very important issue.
4. The rural community is both an area for social transformation and a pedagogical resource.

Abstract: There is no doubt about the importance of conducting research on rural schools, as existing studies are very limited. Based on this premise, the study presented here aims to show the main themes and approaches to rural schooling, both from a sociological and pedagogical point of view, in the academic literature. The systematic review of the scientific literature published in three important databases until 2019 shows that the characteristics and limitations of rural schools, teachers and the relations between schools, families and the rural community are the main subjects of reflection. The results indicate that rural schools suffer from the same economic and symbolic marginalization of the rural environment but have great potential as spaces for pedagogical innovation and as dynamic institutions for rural communities. One of the main challenges is to provide greater training for teachers in order to adapt them to the reality of rural schools. In conclusion, this study is a contribution to scientific knowledge of the reality of rural schools and their needs.

Keywords: rural teachers, rural community, education research.
Extended abstract

Introduction

The objective of this work is to carry out a systematic review of the scientific literature published until June 2019 on rural schools, in order to analyze the main themes and approaches to this institution, both from a pedagogical and sociological perspective. The interest of this work comes both from the scarcity of research carried out on rural educational environments and from the symbolic character that rural schools have acquired in the fight against rural depopulation. In this sense, the work presented here can be considered exploratory. The research question we are trying to answer is what the main themes of reflection on rural schools are, both from a sociological and pedagogical point of view, present in the scientific literature. Answering this question can also help us be aware of the main challenges and problems facing rural schools at the beginning of this century.

Objectives, methodology and sources

The main objective of this work is to analyze the main topics and approaches to rural schools collected in academic literature, through a systematic review of publications made up to June 2019 and collected in three very relevant databases in the area of Social Sciences (Proquest, Web of Science and JSTOR). In this way, it is intended to make a contribution to the scientific knowledge on the sociological and pedagogical discussion about rural schools and to palliate the lack of research that has been pointed out by several authors.

The present study was carried out through a systematic review of the literature for which three criteria were established to select studies on rural schools: 1) they were published in journals indexed in Proquest, Web of Science or JSTOR; 2) they are included in the area of social sciences; and 3) they deal with schools in the rural setting. Then, a search was made in the databases already mentioned and filtered by selecting the discipline of Social Sciences. The key words “rural school” and “rural edu-
cation" were also used. In this first filtering, 8493 articles were located, of which, after examining their title and summary, it was decided to eliminate 8385 because they only referred to the rural school as the context in which certain research or experiences had been carried out, but they did not include any specific reflection on the rural school. After reading the remaining 108 articles, 51 were selected because they incorporated a broad reflection on rural schools. A second, more detailed reading of these 51 documents made it possible to appreciate the existence of three major themes: the rural school, its characteristics and limitations; teachers in the rural setting and the school's relationship with families and the rural community.

Results

In the first place, in the category related to the rural school, its characteristics and limitations, it can be highlighted that the studies compiled point out the complexity of defining the concept of rural school because the term rural encompasses multiple considerations and it is impossible to specify what is rural and what is urban because society is continually changing. It should be noted that from a pedagogical perspective, rural schools are heterogeneous, which is a challenge for teachers since they must adapt not only to the students' learning rhythms, but also to the different courses existing in the classroom in order to ensure that everyone acquires an integral and balanced development during the teaching-learning process. Even from a sociological perspective, it is important to keep in mind that the school for the people is much more than an educational institution, since it acts as an institution that unites rural society.

Secondly, from a sociological perspective, rural teachers were less well regarded when working in educational centers far from the pedagogical quality associated with urban schools and added to the training deficit other negative aspects such as: living in isolated and unknown locations, being less socially considered or receiving less salary. From a pedagogical point of view, these particularities of rural schools affect the reality of teachers, since they need to adapt their didactic-pedagogical approaches to the context in which they are carrying out their work and to the needs of the students, which is generally far from the initial training received.

Thirdly, the relationship of the school with the families and the rural community is, as the analyzed research highlights, essential. From the sociological point of view, because it should not be forgotten that education has a social purpose and that,
by extension, the rural school has an important role. And, from a pedagogical perspective it is relevant because this relationship is specific to the rural environment, families tend to be more involved with the school than in urban centers and the rural community is also involved, as is the case with learning communities.

Discussion

Based on these three approaches identified in the literature analyzed, the following impressions can be highlighted:

1) Rural educational centers are a key part of social cohesion in rural communities, so their role goes far beyond being a mere educational institution.

2) Teachers lack the necessary training to be able to fully exercise their teaching duties in rural schools, since they require training adapted to these school contexts to be able to manage multi-grade classrooms.

3) A specific element of the rural school is, without a doubt, the close relationship that can and should be established between the school, the families, and other socializing agents of the community.

Conclusions

To conclude, we must point out that this review of the issues and approaches present in the academic literature on rural schools helps to make visible some of the problems and challenges faced by this important institution in rural communities. On the one hand, the permanence of the school in the villages should be an important issue in order to avoid further marginalization of the rural world. In addition, the stabilization of teachers, the provision of material resources or the adaptation of curricula are other aspects that need special attention from institutions. On the other hand, it shows the challenge that Universities and teacher training centers must face: the training of competent teachers not only in the urban environment, but also in the rural environment, which has some characteristic features that should be addressed during the training of future teachers. And, in short, this study also represents a contribution to scientific knowledge in an area insufficiently studied in sociological and educational research, such as rural schools.
Future research directions

It should be noted that this work also shows the need to address various future lines of research, among which the following stand out as examples analyzing the effective and symbolic role of rural schools in relation to the dynamics of rural depopulation and the demands of citizens associated with the so-called revolt of emptied Spain; researching the experiences of educational innovation in rural schools and the configuration of their own pedagogical model; or analyzing the curricula of the Early Childhood and Primary Education grades to see whether or not there is a lack of training for teachers who join rural schools, or developing a training proposal for rural teachers and analyzing whether it improves their teaching performance. Even, given that the results of this systematic review of the academic literature reveal that studies follow the same trend when dealing with aspects of rural schools over time, an interesting future line is to carry out a consultation with active teachers in rural schools to find out, from their protagonists, the characteristics of these educational centers today.