

Extended abstract

*From Stigma to Pride: Education,
Rural Identity, and Territorial Belonging
in Contexts of Depopulation
in Teruel and Castellón (Spain)*



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Highlights:

1. Rural depopulation includes a symbolic dimension linked to territorial stigmatization.
2. Educational experience shapes the intergenerational construction of rural identity.
3. Rural pride operates as a socio-educational resource legitimizing local life projects.

Abstract: This study examines rural depopulation by incorporating a symbolic and socio-educational dimension that is often overlooked in approaches focused on structural deficits. It is based on the hypothesis that processes of territorial stigmatization and social representations of rurality influence the construction of identities, expectations, and life trajectories. The aim is to analyse how rural pride is constructed and re-signified through school experiences in territories affected by population decline. The research adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, based on 26 semi-structured interviews with adults and adolescents who were educated in rural areas of Teruel and Castellón. The analysis was conducted using Grounded Theory through open, axial, and selective coding processes. The results reveal a generational contrast: while narratives of devaluation and out-migration as a life horizon predominate among adults, more ambivalent discourses emerge among young people, where mobility does not necessarily exclude attachment to place. Furthermore, contextualised school experiences strengthen the sense of belonging and legitimise the possibility of developing life projects linked to the territory. The study concludes that rural schools act as key agents in territorial re-signification, although they cannot replace the structural policies required.

Keywords: Rural school; Territorial stigmatization; Generational imaginary; Social capital; Sense of belonging.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

Research into rural depopulation has traditionally focused on structural factors such as demographic decline, limited employment opportunities, inadequate public services, accessibility issues and infrastructure shortcomings. From this perspective, rural areas are often portrayed through a deficit-based lens. Whilst these factors undoubtedly contribute to population loss, such approaches tend to overlook the symbolic, cultural and educational dimensions that also influence decisions to stay, leave or return.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of territorial representations and social imaginaries in understanding transformations in the rural environment. Rural areas are not merely physical spaces, but also socially constructed realities that acquire meaning through collective narratives, cultural practices and symbolic representations. In this context, territorial stigmatisation plays a significant role.

Rural areas are frequently associated with backwardness, a lack of opportunities, low social prestige and economic marginalisation. These narratives not only shape external perceptions, but can also be internalised by those who live in these areas, giving rise to feelings of inferiority, lower sense of pride in their region and a weakening of belonging to the place.

This symbolic dimension takes on particular significance in areas affected by severe depopulation, where the persistence of negative representations can contribute to normalising emigration as the only desirable life path.

Within this framework, this study explores the role of education in the construction and reframing of rural identity through the concept of rural pride. Particular attention is paid to Universal Rural Pride Day, an initiative that originated in the province of Teruel and has gradually spread to other rural areas. This initiative seeks to challenge the dominant narratives of rural decline and to promote positive representations of village life through educational, cultural and community activities.

The study is based on the premise that schools and educational experiences can play a key role in fostering a sense of belonging to the local area, developing positive

rural identities and legitimising life plans linked to rural life. By analysing the perceptions of different generations, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the symbolic and socio-educational dimensions of rural depopulation.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The overall aim of this study is to analyse how rural pride and rural identity are constructed and reinterpreted in areas affected by depopulation through educational experiences and community initiatives linked to Universal Rural Pride Day.

More specifically, the research pursues three objectives:

1. To identify and compare social representations and imaginaries of rurality between two generational groups: adults and school-age adolescents living in the same rural area.
2. To analyse the role of educational experiences in shaping rural identity and in the transmission of discourses that stigmatise or redefine the rural environment.
3. To explore the perceived symbolic and educational impact of initiatives linked to rural pride on the construction of territorial identity, a sense of belonging and expectations for the future.

The research adopts a qualitative, ethnographic methodology. Data collection combined participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The authors took part in six editions of Universal Rural Pride Day held between 2019 and 2025 in various municipalities in the provinces of Teruel and Castellón.

The main source of empirical data consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with people aged between 12 and 50. All of them had attended primary school in rural areas located in the regions of Maestrazgo, Sierra de Gúdar, Cuencas Mineras and Els Ports – territories characterised by low population density, demographic decline and strong historical and cultural belonging-. The data were analysed in accordance with the principles of Grounded Theory.

3. Results

The results reveal significant generational differences in the way rural areas are perceived, experienced and valued.

With regard to representations of rurality, the adults frequently describe their school years in a context marked by narratives of territorial devaluation. The village was perceived as a temporary place from which one had to leave in order to achieve educational success, social mobility and professional development. Many participants recall messages conveying the idea that opportunities could only be found in cities. In some cases, a rural background was associated with feelings of shame or social inferiority.

By contrast, adolescents express more positive and complex perceptions of the rural environment. Although they recognise that higher education and certain employment opportunities often require mobility, they do not consider this to be incompatible with maintaining strong emotional and territorial belonging.

The second analytical dimension highlights significant differences in educational experiences. Adult participants describe a school education that was scarcely connected to local realities. Rural culture, heritage, traditional trades and community knowledge were scarcely part of educational practices. Schools were perceived as institutions that reproduced educational models centred on urban benchmarks.

In contrast, the teenagers describe more contextually relevant educational experiences. Local history, natural heritage, traditions and community involvement form part of school activities.

The third dimension relates to the connection to the local area and expectations for the future. Adults express a strong emotional connection to their villages, but describe life trajectories marked by emigration. Their connection to the local area is primarily emotional and retrospective, often accompanied by feelings of nostalgia and a renewed appreciation for the rural environment once they have left it.

Among adolescents, expectations for the future appear more open and flexible. The possibility of staying, leaving or returning to the area is perceived as a decision shaped by existing opportunities, rather than as an obligation determined by prior social expectations.

Universal Rural Pride Day is emerging as a particularly significant educational and community initiative. Participants highlight its ability to strengthen a sense of

place, foster intergenerational dialogue, increase community participation and raise the public profile of rural culture. Notable activities include artistic projects, heritage-based learning experiences, local history workshops, community collaborations and service-learning projects.

4. Discussion

The findings reinforce the view that rural depopulation cannot be explained solely by structural factors, but must also take into account the symbolic and educational dimensions that influence the development of relationships with the local area and expectations for the future. The persistence of processes of territorial stigmatisation amongst the adult population suggests that negative perceptions of the rural environment can be internalised and contribute to legitimising emigration, highlighting the significance of dynamics of symbolic devaluation in these contexts.

Within this framework, schools play a key role as spaces for building positive rural identities and strengthening belonging to the local area through educational practices linked to heritage, culture and the community. Similarly, initiatives such as Universal Rural Pride Day can be interpreted as socio-educational mechanisms that promote a reframing of the territory, helping to challenge the stigma associated with rural areas and to generate alternative narratives about their future. Although these actions do not replace the necessary structural policies to tackle depopulation, the results suggest that they can play a significant role in transforming social perceptions of rural life.

5. Conclusions

This study shows that rural pride is a socio-educational process shaped through interaction between schools, the community and the local area. The results highlight a generational shift: whilst adults have often internalised narratives that devalue the rural environment, young people express greater levels of attachment to the land and hold more positive views of rural life. In this context, schools and initiatives linked to Universal Rural Pride Day help to strengthen territorial identity and legitimise the

possibility of building a life in rural areas, complementing the policies needed to tackle depopulation.

6. Future Directions

Future research should extend the analysis to other rural areas and examine in greater depth the effects of locally-based educational initiatives on the identity, sense of belonging and life trajectories of young people. It is also necessary to continue exploring the role of schools and educational policies in fostering rural pride and in redefining the significance of areas affected by depopulation.