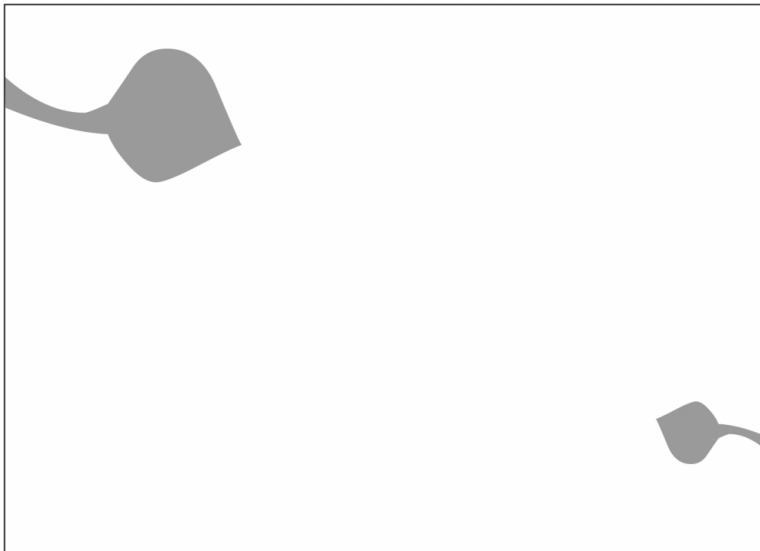


Extended abstract

*Migration in Rural Lleida (Spain): Effects on the
School-Family-Community Relationship
and Social Cohesion*



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Highlights:

1. Rural schools build community by valuing local knowledge and promoting social transformation from within the territory.
2. Migration to rural areas can help mitigate depopulation if adequate services and infrastructure are in place.
3. Migration patterns can influence the functioning and internal dynamics of educational institutions.
4. Cultural diversity requires strengthening the school-family relationship with staff, inclusive strategies and effective communication.

Abstract: The arrival of migrants in rural areas brings demographic, social, cultural and economic changes. This article analyses the impact of migration in rural Lleida (Spain), focusing on the role of schools and their educational communities. Using a qualitative methodology based on fifty interviews conducted in 2024 with mayors, technicians from different levels of government, and professionals in the social and educational fields as well as representatives from third-sector social and educational organizations linked to the area, and other stakeholders connected to the region, the study explores how the arrival of migrant populations transforms the dynamics and relationships between schools, families and the local environment. The results show that the school becomes a fundamental axis of social cohesion, cultural integration and community revitalisation, a key space where new forms of coexistence are built and a shared sense of belonging is forged. The study also highlights the importance of collaboration between schools and local and social initiatives in the territory to address the challenges posed by diversity.

Keywords: Education; rural school; rural context; migration flows; inclusion.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Contemporary migration flows are significantly transforming the demographic, social, economic and educational dynamics of rural territories, particularly in contexts affected by depopulation, population ageing and the loss of essential public services. This study focuses on the province of Lleida due to its territorial dispersion, high number of small municipalities and economic dependence on agriculture and agri-food industries in several counties. These characteristics make the territory especially suitable for exploring the relationship between migration, educational sustainability and community cohesion.

The research is based on a central premise: rural schools are not merely educational institutions but also key actors in territorial development. Beyond their pedagogical role, they contribute to community vitality, foster social cohesion and support local sustainability. In many rural municipalities facing demographic decline, the arrival of migrant families has become crucial for maintaining school enrolment, preventing school closures and sustaining local services. At the same time, increasing cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity creates new challenges for schools, requiring them to adapt their educational practices, strengthen communication with families and respond to increasingly complex social realities.

Against this backdrop, the study examines how recent migration processes are reconfiguring the socio-educational landscape of rural Lleida and analyses the contribution of rural schools to the construction of more cohesive and sustainable educating territories.

2. Objectives, Methodology and Sources

The study pursues two main objectives. First, it analyses the effects of contemporary migration processes on education in rural municipalities across Lleida. Second, it assesses the role of educational institutions as agents of social cohesion, community

integration and territorial development. The analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions: (i) demographic change; (ii) impact on educational institutions; (iii) inclusion and social cohesion dynamics; and (iv) the school-family-community relationship. The research pursues two main objectives:

A qualitative methodology was employed. The study is based on 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted during 2024 with mayors, local and supra-municipal government technicians, and representatives of social and educational third-sector organisations. Interview guides were validated by an expert committee and structured around institutional, pedagogical, relational and territorial dimensions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and manually analysed through interpretative frameworks and analytical categories designed to capture the complexity of participants' experiences and perceptions.

The qualitative findings were complemented by official statistical data from the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat), academic literature on migration, depopulation, rurality and education, and technical reports produced by public administrations and local organisations. The study includes evidence gathered from informants across thirteen counties of the province of Lleida.

3. Results

Demographic Transformations

The findings reveal the growing importance of immigration within the demographic structure of Lleida. According to Idescat, foreign-born residents account for 20.33% of the provincial population, although their territorial distribution is highly uneven. Counties such as Segrià, Urgell and Pla d'Urgell present particularly high proportions of foreign residents, whereas other areas display a much lower presence. In smaller municipalities, variations are even more pronounced, reflecting diverse demographic realities and different implications for local sustainability.

Interviewees consistently identified immigration as a key factor in maintaining the viability of many rural municipalities. In particular, agricultural and agri-food sectors rely heavily on migrant labour, making immigration a critical contributor not only to demographic stability but also to local economic sustainability.

Impact on Educational Institutions

Migration has had a significant impact on rural schools. The arrival of migrant pupils has helped stabilise enrolment levels and prevent school closures, particularly in smaller municipalities. However, the distribution of migrant students across schools is highly uneven. While some Rural School Zones (ZERs) report that foreign-origin pupils represent between 40% and 50% of total enrolment, others have only a marginal migrant presence. This diversity creates distinct educational contexts that require tailored responses rather than standardised solutions.

One of the major challenges highlighted by participants is rolling enrolment (*matrícula viva*), associated with the residential and labour mobility of some migrant families. Schools frequently face the need to reorganise classes, redistribute resources and modify educational projects within very short timeframes. These circumstances complicate educational planning and increase organisational pressure on school staff.

Inclusion and Social Cohesion Dynamics

The findings highlight the rural school as a fundamental space for social cohesion, cultural integration and community development. Schools provide environments in which new forms of coexistence and belonging can emerge, facilitating encounters between diverse populations and strengthening local social networks.

Nevertheless, important barriers to inclusion persist. These include insufficient resources, such as a lack of social educators, or intercultural mediators. Linguistic and cultural barriers, socioeconomic inequalities and insufficient coordination among institutions further hinder integration processes. Mastery of the Catalan language and active family participation were identified as essential factors for successful educational and community integration.

School-Family-Community Relationship

One of the strengths of rural schools is their capacity to foster relationships based on proximity, trust and shared responsibility. Interviewees described several examples of good practice involving close collaboration between teachers and families, as well as the active participation of family associations in community initiatives and local development.

However, challenges remain. Some migrant families experience difficulties participating in school life due to demanding work schedules, language barriers or limited knowledge of educational structures and procedures. Participants also reported isolated cases of social segregation beyond the school environment. These findings indi-

cate the need to strengthen communication channels, develop inclusive participation strategies and facilitate the engagement of all families in educational and community processes.

The absence of specialised support staff means that teachers frequently assume social and administrative responsibilities that go beyond their pedagogical role, increasing their workload and limiting their capacity to respond effectively to emerging needs.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that immigration can contribute significantly to the demographic and educational sustainability of rural territories. However, migration should not be understood as an automatic solution to depopulation. Its positive effects depend on broader structural conditions, including access to adequate housing, stable employment opportunities, quality public services and coherent territorial planning capable of supporting long-term settlement.

The study also highlights the strategic role of rural schools in the construction of educating territories. Their proximity to local communities, capacity to build social networks and ability to promote participation place them at the centre of integration and cohesion processes. Nevertheless, schools cannot fulfil these functions effectively without sufficient resources and stronger coordination among educational institutions, local authorities and community organisations.

Furthermore, the seasonal and temporary nature of part of the migrant population raises specific challenges. Labour mobility and temporary residence patterns generate fluctuations in school enrolment, complicating resource allocation and educational planning. Addressing these issues requires structural and flexible policy responses that take into account the temporal characteristics of rural labour markets.

The discussion also suggests the need to move beyond instrumental approaches that view migrants primarily as a source of labour or demographic replacement. Instead, migration should be understood through a framework centred on rights, equity, social inclusion and territorial sustainability. Such an approach recognises diversity as a societal asset and emphasises the importance of ensuring conditions that facilitate settlement, participation and equal opportunities for newly arrived families.

5. Conclusions

The research demonstrates that rural schools constitute strategic social infrastructures capable of contributing to community cohesion, cultural integration and local development. In many small municipalities, they are essential for maintaining public services and sustaining community life.

Migration can help mitigate the effects of depopulation when accompanied by adequate housing, employment opportunities and public services. Without these conditions, its impact is likely to remain limited and temporary.

The growing cultural diversity of rural communities requires stronger school–family–community relationships supported by specialised professionals, inclusive educational strategies and effective communication mechanisms. The instability generated by seasonal employment and labour mobility also calls for flexible educational policies and additional resources capable of responding to changing enrolment patterns.

Finally, effective coordination among public administrations, schools and community organisations emerges as a fundamental requirement for the construction of sustainable educating territories capable of addressing demographic, educational and social challenges in an integrated manner.

Future research

Future interventions should promote integrated public policies linking housing, employment, transport and educational services in order to facilitate the long-term settlement of migrant populations in rural areas. Likewise, territorial governance models that enhance coordination among public administrations, schools and third-sector organisations should be strengthened.

The incorporation of specialised professionals, including social integration officers, social educators and intercultural mediation professionals, would help reduce teachers' workload and improve support for families. Furthermore, teacher training in intercultural competences and family-oriented literacy and participation programmes should be expanded.

Finally, further research is needed to examine territorial governance models that facilitate institutional coordination and to conduct longitudinal studies assessing the medium and long-term effects of migration on the sustainability of rural services. Such evidence would contribute to the design of comprehensive rural repopulation strategies integrating housing, employment, transport and education within a coherent territorial development framework.