

Rural Schools and Educational Policy in Spain: Differences Among The Autonomous Communities

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Abstract: Education in rural contexts requires an approach that recognises the social and productive potential of this type of schooling. It should involve a dialogue between an implicit rural identity and today's cultures, and it implies developing cultural, technologic-scientific and productive components that foster learning in a way that allows people to build and rebuild their surroundings. This paper analyses Spanish educational policy that affects rural education, dating from the implementation of the national constitution in 1978. It specifically considers policy that references the establishment of the legal jurisdiction of Autonomous Communities, and it considers the role of diversity in forming an open and heterogeneous cultural construction. Within this context, the design of educational policy related to rural education must consider rurality as a specific characteristic relevant to the social, economic, territorial, administrative and school structure throughout all of Spain, and thus, rural schooling should be understood as a specific educational subsystem.

Keywords: Rural Education, Rural schools, regional planning, regional programs.

1. Rural education in Spain before the 1978 Constitution

The promulgation of the Constitution of Cadiz, 1812, marks a definitive advance for educational expansion within Spain; specifically, Article 366 made the development of both boy's and girl's schools throughout the nation possible. From this moment, Spanish legislation contrasted rural and urban education, even though the work carried about by the rural schools and teachers had been essential in the process of developing literacy, fostering the culture-village relationship and for generally promoting the educational possibilities of the population.

1.1. Some key moments from the first third of the 20th century

The social critique of the national expenditure on education in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century led some politicians associated with the Free Education Institution (ILE) to establish certain legislative measures that favoured the expansion of the school system and the incrementation of student capacity. In 1908, the entire nation lacked 9,536 schools, and there were interesting inter-provincial differences in these numbers. Furthermore, in 1909, the age of obligatory education was raised to 12 years, creating an urgent need to reform the network of rural schools (Ruiz de Azúa, 2000).

In light of these changes, during the 20th century the educational process for the school-aged children in Spain experienced a breakthrough, culminating around the

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eighties and the recently installed democracy, Ruiz de Azúa (op.cit). In 1900, 56.2% of the censured population over the age of 10 were illiterate, whereas in 1986 this percentage was 3.89%, and mainly over the age of 45. However, during this era, political shifts still determined educational models and priorities; for example, between 1930-35 more schools were created than in the three decades prior. Despite an interest in introducing grade schools, in 1936 the majority of schools were only one classroom, not only because there were less expensive, but also because of the nature of the Spanish population, which was dispersed throughout small municipalities and villages.

1.2 The Civil War and the “national school”

The beginning of the civil war changed the educational panorama and created two different situations. In the republican zone, despite the wartime conditions, the reforms continued both on the national and provincial level, placing emphasis on the role of collectives in the growth of education in towns and villages. On the other hand, the spirit of the republican school began to crumble, giving it a dogmatic and fundamentalist nature that lasted even once the war was over. Between 1939 and 1951 6,000 schools were constructed, an answer to a deficit in classroom capacity that surpassed a million places (Puelles, 1980); during this time the primary school was neglected in the face of the Secondary School reforms.

The Law of Primary Education of 1945 determined that school was obligatory starting at 6 years of age, and provided the following differentiation: students must continue until age 10 if they then enrol in secondary school, or until age 12 if they plan on directly entering the labour market. In addition, this law led to the closing of many schools, mainly in rural areas, where the population didn't have access to secondary education, which was controlled by the Church and was in primarily urban zones. However, this law did make important references to the rural school, given that this educational model represented a majority in Spain at the time. Article 21 defines the minimum regional population for creating a school to be a zone where, in a maximum radius of one kilometre, there were more than 250 inhabitants. Schools could be run by a person with ecclesiastic or civil training, if a locale had less than 501 inhabitants, or, in smaller localities, by anyone who expressed interest in taking on the teaching responsibilities. In populations that were more disperse, it is written that the authorities should facilitate transportation for the children, or that they attend so-called Home Schools.

During the fifties one-room school houses, which offered housing and a paltry teacher's salary, was the classic model of Spanish education. In contrast to the grade school that was believed to be in a lower category, this model was the only cultural stronghold for many disperse populations. The National Surveys for Primary School from 1953 tried to defend their particular capability to adapt to the possibilities and necessities of the existing schools in each province (mixed, one-classroom and grade-based). In the sixties, the situation began to change due to the national growth rate and migratory movement from rural to urban areas: new schools were needed in urban contexts and the school population in the newly depopulated areas was regrouped, leading to the disappearance of many rural schools. At this time, school consolidation became focussed on creating more equal opportunities. In 1964, school became obligatory up until 14 years of age, and many grade schools were opened.

1.3. Consolidation policies

The Law of General Education (LGE) of 1970 comprehensively reformed the Spanish education system, adapting it to new social and economic necessities. Its most important innovation, one that had direct repercussions for rural schools, was the

introduction of Basic General Education (BGE) for students ages 6 to 14, which comprises one unified, obligatory, free stage of schooling. Article 59 states that “Basic General Education centres will be called National Schools, they will teach material corresponding to the two stages (...) and they will have no more than one unit for each course or year by which the stages are divided”; in addition, Article 132.1 states that “regional and district plans will establish equal opportunities in all aspects of rural and urban zones”, which supposes the coexistence of the so-called “incomplete schools”, where students are enrolled in the first stage of school with children of different ages.

After this series of changes, the seventies dismantle the rural school in a more significant manner, closing all schools with more than 100 students. School transportation, school consolidation (grade schools were established in each county capital) and “home schools” (boarding schools for children from very isolated areas) appear in the new educational panorama, resulting in the uprooting of students, an increase in school drop-out rates and the premature abandonment of school due to a lack of access to further educational opportunities. In spite of these policies, this decade was also a time of protest. The Movement for Pedagogical Renovation was formed, composed of a group of people who acted as defendants of a quality public school adapted to its surroundings, and denouncers of the situation rural schools were facing. Fortunately, the changes indicated in the LGE did not become fully realised – economic problems and political change impeded the implementation of the legislation.

2. Rural schools in Spain after the Constitution of 1978

Painting a picture of rural schools in Spain after the ratification of the Constitution of 1978 requires prior knowledge of the territorial organisation of the country, the shift of legal jurisdiction in controlling educational matters, and the resulting shift in the provision of educational services, from the State to the Autonomous Communities. The new standard, currently in effect, established a model of parliamentary monarchy: power resides in towns where it is exercised via the representatives in the *Cortes Generales* (Parliament), and the King, as Chief of State is the symbol of unity and permanence, even though he has no true political power. In Article 27 of the constitution, the fundamental principles related to education are developed, establishing the dissemination of different competency areas that favour the diverse entities and administrations in Spain, in addition to creating the base of Spain's current educational system.

2.1. The territorial organisation of Spain: the autonomous communities (ACS).

The organisation of Spanish territory into Autonomous Communities (ACs) is one of the most important innovations in the Constitution of 1978, which states in Title VIII:

“The State will be organised territorially into municipalities, provinces and Autonomous Communities. All these entities will enjoy autonomy that will allow them to manage their respective interests.”

The ACs are public territorial entities with self-governing faculties and legislative autonomy: each AC has its own Legislative Assembly (organised in a similar way to the Spanish Courts), Government Council (led by a President) and a Supreme Court of Justice (which does not form part of the AC but is located geographically in each respective AC). The basic legal foundation of each AC is its Statute of Autonomy, which is recognised by the State and regulates a large part of

each ACs legal jurisdiction, designating the basic norms that affect the institutional system and the legal competences a community assumes. The initial level of competence that each AC can assume essentially depends on the path it followed to create and pass its Statute, although its functions are always tied to what appears in the constitution regarding the functions of the State. In this manner, the AC doesn't pre-exist its Statute, but comes into being once it is passed. Furthermore, the Statute is a standard that is hierarchically superior in relation to other AC laws: it contains the basic founding principles establishing the unity and coherence of the autonomous territory.

Today, Spain has 17 ACs: Andalusia, Aragon, Asturias, Baleares, Canarias, Cantabria, Castilla La Mancha, Castilla y Leon, Catalonia, Comunidad Valenciana, Extremadura, Galicia, La Rioja, Madrid, Navarra, Pais Vasco, and the Region de Murcia and as a result, there are seventeen Statutes of Autonomy written at different dates.

2.1.1. Basic principles of the autonomous Spanish state

The territorial organisation of Spain into Autonomous Communities forms part of the state's basic principles that guarantee unity and solidarity, such as is described in Article 2 of the Constitution:

- Principle of Unity. The existence of autonomous communities is compatible with the existence of a nation state, because the unity lies in a common Constitution applicable to the entire territory and assumes substantial equality for the rights and duties of all citizens, the basic homogeneity of the institutional system, and economic unity.
- Principle of Solidarity. This is the founding principle of the autonomic state, and it is based on the mutual need for assistance and collaboration among the Communities.
- Principle of Autonomy. This principle recognises the capacity of each Autonomous Community to establish laws as the primary laws in their region, and to dispose of the resources necessary for establishing their own policies in the sectors under their jurisdiction.

2.1.2. The legal competence of the Spanish state: jurisdiction over educational matters

Legal competence is a status that determines a public function that affects a given matter in a specific territory. The Constitution assigns each AC a level of legal competence as determined in its Statute of Autonomy. Because it is dependent on its own statute, this level of competence, while broadly determined by one constitutional framework, can differ between communities. All legislative responsibilities not assigned to each community through its Statute of Autonomy are assumed by the State. Legal competences are organised into exclusive, concurrent and shared categories: the last two of which affect education in Spain.

The Constitution and the Statutes of Autonomy split functions that regulate the same issue. In theory, the State deals with founding principles, legislation and basic standards while the ACs have executive and regulative powers. In reality, however, legal competence tends to be *concurrent* (i.e., the two entities have the same jurisdiction on a matter). This often results in overlaps where both the State and ACs have the same type of competence (usually regulatory), albeit of varying intensities, in the same area. The State has the power to determine the ground rules or basic terms in all areas; regarding education, the state regulates the basic terms, which must fall

within dictates of the Law of Education approved by the Spanish Parliament. Whereas, the ACs set their own policies that determine how to enact the law in relation to their territory. This is a relationship based on logical adaptation.

In addition to concurrent legal competences, Spain has *shared competences*, where different rights belonging to a competence are distributed among the entities. In these cases, all actions defer to and respect the dictates of the Spanish Constitution. Regarding legislation, the State establishes the basic principles and, afterwards, the AC develops norms for regulating said principles. This is the system that allows ACs to have their own educational policy, specifically regarding education in rural areas, to the extent that we cannot talk about one unified rural education policy but must discuss 17 different approaches developed in relation to the socio-cultural characteristics of each AC. This is a decentralization of the education system, where the ACs manage, apply and execute State legislation, adapting it to the educational needs of their own regions.

Finally, we must consider the *exclusive competences* given to the Spanish State concerning education. These address, above all, the principle of unity (mentioned earlier). Some of these legal competences are:

- The general organisation of the educational system.
- The general education program – together with the ACs and with the participation of affected constituents – as outlined in Article 27 of the Organic Law Regulating the Right to Education (LODE).
- Regulating the conditions for obtaining, issuing and recognising academic degrees and certificates which are valid throughout Spain, establishing the core curriculum.
- The High Inspection and other powers, which ensure that the ACs are complying with the obligations established by the state.
- Basic standards – organic laws – developed in Article 27 of the Constitution.
- The regulation of university entrance requirements.
- The creation of public universities as well as the recognition and authorisation of private universities, in agreement with the corresponding ACs.
- The determination of national study programs, which allow for university degrees to be valid throughout the country.

Other legal competences that affect the field of education, such as: the regulation of basic conditions that guarantee the equality of all Spanish citizens in the exercise of their rights; the design and coordination of the overall planning of economic activity, the foundations of the state civil service regime and state statistics.

Educational realities are different, as is the legislation that supports them and therefore, joint decision-making has to consider many variables, which can enrich collaborative projects. Within the diversity of Spanish educational contexts is a wealth of resources that can support the overall improvement of quality.

3. Rural schools and their organisation: a look at Catalonia, Andalusia and Aragon

3.1. Catalonia and the creation of the rural education zone (ZER)

The Catalanian Statute of Autonomy (1979) was one of the first that began to shift legal competence in educational planning away from the state (on January 1st,

1981), initiating an important advance in the creation of specific policy for rural schooling in Catalonia.

One of the first and most effective measures adopted by the Education Department was the design of the *“Plan of Support for Rural Education”*, whose main objectives included: the child's integration into society, the approximation of school with its surroundings, and the preparation and stability of teachers. This plan proposes the decentralization of some educational services, modifying the model of consolidation introduced in the sixties. This measure encouraged changes like the construction of local schools, the provision or renovation of facilities and an increase in the human resources, which is necessary for quality rural schools.

Similarly, in the eighties, a large number of activities involving rural education were carried out, the majority of which were initiated by the teacher's group the “Rural Education Secretariat” (SER), which criticised the existing organisational model and acknowledged the importance of the school-context relationship and of quality education in smaller towns. After a long discussion process, the teachers who were part of SER approved the document *“School Zones for rural education”* (FMRP, 1987) which includes a clear definition of the Rural Education Zone (ZER):

“A School Zone includes a group of schools that, for their geographic, economic and cultural characteristics, are structured as one entity. The School Zone is the base unit for organising human resources and supplies, in relation to the geographic context and pedagogical needs specific to each zone. Each school that is part of a Zone maintains its independence in terms of its organization and pedagogical approach, which is closely linked to each school”.

The objective of this document was to do away with the tired vision of the solitary teacher who is isolated in the classroom without resources, in exchange for a vision of a school with more services, improved capabilities for working collaboratively with specialist and supporting faculty, and better interaction among students from different schools, while maintaining the autonomy of each school. Although the Act 195/1988 on the establishment of Rural School Zones for public primary schools (1988a) dates from July 27th, 1988, the creation of the first fifteen ZERs did not come into effect until two years later, on April 9, 1990.

Until the arrival of the Organic Law of the General Organisation of the Educational System (LOGSE) in May 1999, the Administration recognised and supported the ZER model, which had emerged from a reflection on current practices. However, the reform, along with a new understanding of rurality that was emerging, created uncertainties and suspicions. Traditional, more hegemonic, rurality became a modern, or a postmodern, rurality that was completely heterogeneous, fragmented and diverse. A “new rurality”, thanks to the SER's work in following up with the establishment of ZERs and their dedication to disseminating the model, was able to give continuity to the ideological changes taking place, centring the debate on the LOGSE educational reform characterized by constructivist proposals and the development of a curriculum that took the specificity of rural schooling into consideration.

The nineties saw the continuation of activity that led to, among other things, the establishment in 1995 of the *“Inter-university Group for Rural Education”* (GIER) that was an initiative of different professors from public and private universities in Catalonia. The GIER aims to make their institutions aware of the

educational and social benefits that rural schools provide and to increase the presence of these issues in the teacher training curriculum. The importance of these activities make sense when you consider the significant presence of rural schools in Catalonia, perhaps not in the number of students but in terms of the geographical territory they occupy. Of the 946 municipalities that make up Catalonia, there are approximately 400 schools in rural areas. 37.20% of these rural schools have integrated into a ZER (339 schools) and the rest exist within functional groupings.

Today, we can confirm that rural education in Catalonia enjoys recognition from the Administration. This can be demonstrated by two actions that took place in 2008. That year, the *Observatory of Education in Rural Areas of Catalonia* (<http://oberc.fmr.cat>) was approved. In addition, the SER received the “*Creu de Sant Jordi*” award, in recognition of the association's contribution to pedagogical innovation that promotes *a school model that is connected to its surroundings*. However, this official recognition is not reflected in policy. For example, consider the clear example provided by the Catalan Law of Education (LEC) of 2009, which opens up new debate on rural education. In this moment, the SER completed an analysis of legal texts, raising issues related to the management of the ZER and the individual identity of each school. Furthermore, prior to the passing of the LEC, education policy-makers established a definition of Educational Zones (ZE), a term that is very similar to ZER, but with a distinct meaning. Each ZE is demarcated by the Department of Education, under whose direction and coordination planning units are designed in order to respond to educational needs. This structure is designed to facilitate access to the educational services provided by all publicly funded schools and to foster equity, inclusion and equal opportunity, in pursuit of social and territorial balance. Because it is closely connected to this process, the budget crisis is having a direct impact schools, including rural schools.

3.1.1. ZERs and other decentralizing policies

Catalonia is divided into four provinces which, since 1987, have been subdivided into counties, the majority of which are run by “*Local Councils*”. Feu and Soler (2002) state that this organisational model was first criticised in 2002, when a group of commissioned experts affirmed that *the current territorial organisation of Catalonia creates significant problems and has negative consequences for the inhabitants* and proposed “*a model that, while respectful of the institutional structure, should overcome its disfunction, simplify things and, above all, clear the way for future perspectives that would be easier and less traumatic.*”

The proposed changes offered in this statement worried many mayors of small municipalities, who saw them as a threat to the administrative autonomy and the supposed identity of their municipality.

Feu and Soler (op.cit) point out that – regarding the counties and in reference to the ZER – in terms of education, Catalonia has *supralocal* territories that aren't exactly counties. Such territories originally stemmed from a necessity on behalf of rural educators and succeed in configuring a natural, flexible and meaningful educational territory that can maximize the educational potential. The authors go further, stating that ZER could be seen as embryos of future structures, which are capable of developing and implementing comprehensive and integrated educational and cultural projects that go beyond the school setting. They call these regions *Educational Sectors*. Within this line of thought, and in agreement with the *educational city project*, they also propose a model for *educational towns*: the educational project of a town, or of a wider structure such as a district, such that it becomes an integrated educational space, adapted to the inhabitants' true needs and demands. While there are some municipalities that have joined the effort and are

carrying out different educational initiatives on the municipal level, the Educational Sector model, as well as other region-based educational projects, have not prospered.

Finally, regarding the territorial organisation, Catalonia is also faced with debates related to the Vegueria Law (2010) that proposes converting the current provinces and counties into seven vegueries. The introduction of Educational Zones (ZE) coupled with the change in regional division implied by the vegueries means that rural education in Catalonia will undergo changes, although at this time we cannot know to what extent or what their exact nature will be.

3.2. Andalusia and rural public schools (CPRS)

Andalusia became the fourth AC to have legal competence over educational matters in Spain in 1983, and it was one of the first to regulate rural school groupings. The Rural Public Schools (CPRs) were established as a result of the Andalusian policy on educational transformation in rural areas, which was introduced at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. After passing the Act 29/1988 on February 10th on the establishment of Rural Public Schools in the Andalusian Autonomous Community (1998a), the legal framework was established (1988b) and an Action Plan for Andalusian Rural Schools was written (1988c).

Schools located in different geographic clusters became, legally and on an administrative level, one educational centre, with one name and only one Educational Project, School Council, teaching staff and management team. The new groupings could be rural schools consisting of up to four entities, with disperse classrooms, situated in one zone or county, from the same or different municipalities, making up only one educational centre. This new grouping model allowed for coordinated action at the personal, pedagogical and administrative level, which allowed for the best use of resources and helped schools meet specialised needs. The creation of the CPRs meant that each centre elaborated and developed its own pedagogical project, which involved:

- An organisational model adapted to its surroundings
- The adaptation of the curriculum to its specific environment
- A new methodology adapted to the particularities of the Rural School
- Teacher training specific to rural education
- The development of compensatory Psychopedagogical Programs tailored to the educational zone in collaboration with School Support Services.
- The organization of field trips and student exchanges to avoid isolation.
- Community development programs.

At the same time, and as a form of compensatory education, the Early Childhood Program in Rural Areas began to take form in 1986-87. In its initial stage it was known as "Preschool at home." According to the Ministry of Education (2008a), currently a group of 18 teachers work in 36 rural communities that correspond to 11 municipalities, in an effort that involves over 130 children aged under 6 years who have no possibility of going to school because of the isolation and dispersion of their homes (during the 2008/09 school year). These itinerant teachers practice in students' houses or in a different location in the town adapted for this purpose, and the boys and girls who participated are grouped in terms of their proximity to these sites. These teachers are managed by Teams for Educational Management in each zone and work in collaboration with the educational centres students will attend once they start primary school.

After this initial and clear legislative orientation dating from 20 years ago, the situation has become an almost unwritten policy. This gap has been filled mainly by agreements with unions to clarify and/or improve teacher's working conditions. Thus, placement in CPRs are not currently assigned automatically but at the express request of teachers. Since the 2001-2002 school year, the agreement between the Andalusian Ministry of Education and union representatives, titled *Different aspects related to Rural Public Schools and Displacement* (2001), began to take effect. No teacher may be assigned to CPRs if s/he did not indicate this preference at the time of participating in the transfer lottery or when receiving placement assignments, which means that teachers will not be surprised with an unforeseen job placement. This measure avoids causing reluctance and anger in teachers at having to work in unsolicited situations and places. At the same time, CPR teachers receive incentive in the form of accumulating more points, and thus more say in future transfers, for having cited all the CPRs in the Autonomous Community as Preferred Educational Service Centres (an element included in the Order regulating the establishment of CPRs (1988b). An exception to this standard applies to the specialist teachers who are required to travel in order to cover all centres in the region. These teachers receive a monthly financial supplement and compensation for the distance they travel, in addition to receiving a reduction in their required teaching hours depending on the length of the journeys made each week (Bustos, 2007).

Regarding the presence of rural schools, Andalusia is the second Autonomous Community (after Castilla y Leon) with largest number of rural schools in Spain. It has a total of 126 Public Rural Centres that unite 460 educational sectors dispersed throughout towns and villages in Andalusia. In addition, there are another 47 schools that were not included in the original groupings developed when CPRs were established. These centres (both the grouped and non-grouped), have more than 16,000 students enrolled in 1,434 classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The Educational Administration of Andalusia aims to progressively decrease the ratio of multi-grade groups. To this end, on October 3rd, 2002, the "Agreement on the improvement of working and professional conditions of public education teachers, excluding university professors" (Ministry of Education and Science, 2002) was signed. This document states, in chapter 2.c, that "when students from different courses in Early Childhood Education, Primary Education or Secondary Education can not be accommodated in one classroom, the maximum number of students per unit will be 15. In the case of students from different courses in the same classroom, that number shall be reduced to 12." At present, the ratio in classrooms in rural schools places the pupil per classroom average at 10.6 (Bustos, 2010).

During the process of drafting and adopting of the Law on Education in Andalusia (2007) there was hope that the law would give increased visibility to the centres in rural contexts. However, ultimately it includes no direct references to rural schools, only Article 46.4 mentions that "procedures and specific support measures shall be established to address centres in the rural areas that have students of different ages."

3.2.1. CPRs and other decentralizing policies

The Action Plan for Andalusian Rural Schools (1998c) proposed an educational model that opted for a more equal and shared distribution of resources within counties. It gave preference to schools and localities with the same needs, rather than to county capitals. It was implemented along two lines: a standard action for those Andalusian rural schools that formed part of a CPR, and a differentiated action for those Rural Schools of up to four units that were not able to join a group and form a CPR (the designation "Rural School" does not currently exist).

Today, the introduction of high-speed broadband internet has had a positive impact in rural schools. Online access provides an opportunity that allows marginalized populations to jump the digital divide, a term that describes the increase of social inequalities due to an unequal growth in access to technology. In rural Andalusia, the divide implies less access to information which effects quality of life and the development of social groups. If *new rurality*, among other things, draws on technology, the effects of a reduced presence of technological resources in school may increase due to deficiencies in the reach of broadband. The importance for rural students of having equipment and adequate lines of communication is greater than it is for urban students, who are very likely have access at home, or close to their school, to the latest technology, something that is not true in small, geographically isolated communities (Bustos, 2007).

Currently, almost all the Community's public schools, including the CPRs, have access to high-speed data services and telephone landlines managed by the Network of the Government of Andalusia (data from March, 2008). Via Iberbanda, centres are connected to the Internet and Intranet of the Government of Andalusia, which provides faster access to the applications run by the Ministry of Education. The telephone service also provides a number of advantages. Agreements between the administration and telecommunication companies facilitate the spread of services and infrastructure that normally wouldn't be profitable for the companies, due to the geographic isolation of this region.

3.3. Aragon and the grouped rural schools (CRAS)

In comparison with the ACs analysed previously, Aragon process in acquiring legal competence to manage its education (1998) has been slower, and is one of the country's Communities deemed to be on the "slow track". Thus, any changes in policy in this region related to rural education in the eighties and nineties is an effect of national policy developed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Policy in the General Law of Education (1970) had caused many schools to close and many teachers were incorporated into consolidated schools, without any promise of receiving increased pay, promotions or improved social conditions. At the beginning of the eighties, there were 74 consolidated schools with 6,346 students from 779 towns, and 11 "home schools" with 763 students from 134 towns. In this context, it is important to note that the two Teruel "home schools" that were built and rehabilitated in Alcorisa and Albarracín did not operate like the others, and three years later they would come to house the Rural Centres for Educational Innovation of Teruel (CREIT), a refuge for the *Royal Compensatory Education Act* (1983), which aimed to complete the education and socialisation of students in the second stage of Basic General Education in small communities throughout the province, based on the principles of innovation and dedication to rural schooling. The third CREIT has been operational in Calamocha since September, 1993.

The *Grouped Rural Schools (CRAs)* originated in Aragon and in all other Communities that were dependent on the national Ministry (1986), with the goal, according to Article 1.1, of "improving the conditions and the quality of teaching in rural areas". It was the teachers themselves who defined the centres, with great realism, as 'schools with very long hallways', making reference to the highways that connect the different municipalities. The educational structure in rural Aragon was supported, from that moment on, by the CRA-CRIE (two national structures that support educational management: CRA (Grouped Rural Schools) and CRIE (the Resources and Innovation Centres for Rural Education), and in 1992 these institutions were joined by the CEP (Teacher Centres, which manage continued professional

development for teachers), which allowed them to develop issues in collaboration with teachers and respond to their problems and concerns.

Administrative dependence on the central government has not been an impediment in Aragon to the development of innovative projects in the field of rural education. In the 1997-98 school year, the Teruel province began the Aldea Digita project, which focused on using ICTs in classrooms. The project involved the participation of 168 classrooms from different CRAs, 3,700 students and 400 teachers. After its implementation and the pilot phase took place, the project grew and was implemented in other ACs.

After the 1999-2000 school year, Aragon began a new path, having received legal competence to manage education in June 2000. Along with 22 different kinds of entities (unions, parents associations, and so on), the Aragon government signed the *Pact for Education*, which is closely aligned with the goals of rural education, listing the development of equal opportunity and the compensation for regional inequality as one of its main aims. Regarding the management structure of rural education, the existence of the CRAs was maintained and in the Order of August 22nd, 2002, which regulates the operation of preschools and primary schools, a section appears that makes specific reference to these groupings (Section 6), in addition to referring to them in the sections that address teaching teams and institutional projects.

The idiosyncrasy of the Aragon population and the history of its rural education has been the object of previous studies and analyses. In April 2000, Alcorisa (Teruel) hosted the 1st Congress on Rural Education in Aragon, with the theme “Technological challenges, social commitment and educational innovation”. Some of the results of this encounter included decisions to: create specific legislation that supported the CRA model, adapt the curriculum material and teaching resources to the reality of rural environments, and stimulate the permanence, stability and participation of teachers in rural contexts using positive, compensatory measures. Aware of the importance of the issue, the Government of Aragon organised a conference three years later titled “Conference on Rural Education”, in order to invite the educational community to discuss the management of rural education in Aragon. The same year, the program for digital blackboards initiated an experimental phase in the CRA in Ariño (Teruel), thanks to the collaboration with the Government of Aragon and Microsoft, and to previous work carried out in the centre related to the use of ICTs. This marked the beginning of the use of Tablet PCs as an educational tool for rural Aragon students. In the 2007-08 school year, 70% of students in public schools participated in this program.

In 2008-09, there were 76 CRAs with 936 schools distributed throughout 365 municipalities, with a total of almost 10,000 enrolled students. In the Secondary School system, Secondary School Sections were specially created in rural environments to reduce the amount of travelling students need to do in order to get to school.

In 2006, the passing of the Organic Law of Education led the Aragon Government to present public information for the Draft of the Law of Education of Aragon (LEA). Rural education is specifically mentioned in the legislative text, in the section on educational quality, in one chapter and four specific articles. These references try to respond to the uncertainties and difficulties that are evident from the more recent history of rural education. Regarding the contributions outlined that emerged in the discussion, it is clear that themes related to educational quality had a strong presence in the debate, highlighting the need to elaborate a specific plan based on rural education, recognising its presence in Aragon as a model that responds well to the needs of its population and one which contributes to the harmonious development

of the region. However, the project of creating this law is currently halted, and economic difficulties may impede any immediate approval of the legislation.

3.3.1. CRAs and other decentralizing policies

Near the time when the *Pact for Education* was signed into being, the Aragon Parliament drafted, in October 2000, a Comprehensive Plan for Demographic Policy, whose objectives included favouring inhabitants' decision to remain in rural areas, which implies providing such areas with basic services (education, health care, social services, and so on), and thus fulfilling citizens' right to equal conditions. To carry this out, measures were put into place such as access to free books, school meals, school transport, and the adaptation of vocational training to the economic system of rural areas.

Closely linked to this policy, in 2001 the Law 23/2001 from December 26th on County Demarcation was approved, and subsequently amended in 2006. The counties are a result of the special characteristics of the Aragon territory that impede the distribution of services that inhabitants from all corners of the Community demand and require, they are designed to eliminate existing inequalities and correct the unjust differences between various regions. While the Aragon counties do not have formal legal competence in educational matters, they do have control over other activities that directly or indirectly influence the quality of educational service in different stages of the educational system, such as matters related to environmental protection, social action, and culture, sports and youth. However, the new administrative structure in counties has caused certain problems related to delivering educational services in instances where a CRA contains schools from different counties.

Aragon serves as an example of the need for both municipalities and counties to put into operation the School Councils established by law, intensify the support for immigrant students – which is crucial right now for maintaining rural schools – and establish mechanisms that allow for the opening of CRAs outside of regular classroom hours in order to develop extracurricular activities that would help reconcile family and school life and promote a better use of leisure time for students in rural areas.

4. Conclusion

In Spain, rural school has undergone a substantial increase in its quality and importance. A special socio-political situation and many different factors have contributed to this improvement: on the one hand, the development of economic transfers from the central Government to the different local communities; on the other hand, a big effort on behalf of education agents (parents, teachers, local entities). All of them have helped to create a better education for everybody.

In this context, the concept of rural school varies depending on the different areas that take it into consideration. The geographical, cultural and educational diversity, alongside with the heterogeneous society that stands for the different areas of Spain, makes up a very special need in terms of organizing teaching methods and planning. It can easily be seen in the case of some autonomous regions as Andalucía, Aragón or Cataluña.

Despite all the differences we come across when analyzing rural schools, its importance as a singular educational center raises up. The special context and circumstances that most of them share is a very interesting topic to deal. Political and social measures should appraise the value of the social and educational advantages that rural schools may imply. That is something to be taken into account on an educational context that has to guarantee children's equality to education.

Rural school consolidation has to rely on criteria based on educational quality. The different samples that autonomous communities have developed are a good example of the possibilities that this type of education comprise, as a way of including the whole educational community in its development.

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