

## **The Power of Small Things: Transformation from a Rural School in the Axarquía (Málaga)**

**La fuerza de lo pequeño: transformación desde una escuela rural de la Axarquía malagueña**

**A Força do Pequeno: Transformação a partir de uma Escola Rural na Axarquía Malaguenha**

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### **Abstract**

Rural schools represent an essential pillar in many communities, functioning not only as educational institutions but also as central hubs of social and cultural life. In my case, with 17 years of experience in education and currently working at CPR San Hilario de Poitiers, a rural school that includes a Specific Special Education Classroom (AEEE) and operates under the semi-D model (a primary education center that also delivers the first cycle of lower secondary education—typically 1st and 2nd year of ESO—without being a secondary school), I have witnessed both the strengths and challenges of this educational context. Over the years, I have developed pedagogical practices grounded in individualized attention, emotional support, and networked collaboration with families and the broader community. Our school is a Learning Community, which allows us to implement evidence-based successful educational actions such as dialogic literary gatherings and interactive groups, thereby strengthening community participation and inclusion. We make the most of our multi-grade structure and the close ties with our environment to promote a transformative and person-centered education. This context has enabled more personalized learning, where smaller class sizes make it possible to adapt learning rhythms, foster strong interpersonal bonds, and build trust. Horizontal relationships among teachers, students, and families are consolidated, promoting values such as cooperation and shared educational responsibility. Despite these advantages, rural schools face significant challenges: outdated infrastructure, limited institutional recognition, and bureaucratic obstacles in dealing with educational administrations. These issues can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of resources. Nevertheless, the human potential, community engagement, and the learner-centered pedagogical model position rural schools as powerful spaces for transformation that deserve greater support and visibility.

**Keywords:** Rural education, Learning communities, Educational inclusion, Community participation, Attention to diversity, School management, Population decline, Education, Early childhood education, Public education, Primary school, Rural schools, Childhood.

## Resumen

La escuela rural representa un pilar esencial en muchas comunidades, actuando no solo como espacio educativo, sino también como centro neurálgico de la vida social y cultural. En mi caso, con 17 años de experiencia en educación, y actualmente trabajando en el CPR San Hilario de Poitiers, un colegio rural, con Aula Específica de Educación Especial (AEEE) y semi-D (espacio de educación primaria que también imparte el primer ciclo de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria -ESO-, sin ser un instituto), he vivido de cerca tanto sus fortalezas como sus desafíos. A lo largo de estos años, he desarrollado prácticas pedagógicas basadas en la atención individualizada, el acompañamiento emocional y el trabajo en red con las familias y el entorno. Nuestro centro es una Comunidad de Aprendizaje, lo que nos permite implementar actuaciones educativas de éxito como tertulias dialógicas y grupos interactivos, fortaleciendo la participación de toda la comunidad y la inclusión. Aprovechamos la estructura multietapa y el contacto estrecho con el entorno para fomentar una educación transformadora, centrada en las personas. Este contexto ha favorecido una educación más personalizada, donde el bajo número de estudiantes por aula permite adaptar el ritmo de aprendizaje, generar vínculos sólidos y fomentar la confianza. Se consolidan relaciones horizontales entre docentes, alumnado y familias, promoviendo valores como la cooperación y la corresponsabilidad educativa. A pesar de estas ventajas, la escuela rural enfrenta retos importantes: infraestructuras a menudo obsoletas, escaso reconocimiento institucional y dificultades burocráticas con las administraciones. Estos obstáculos pueden generar sensación de aislamiento o falta de recursos. Sin embargo, el potencial humano, la implicación comunitaria y el modelo pedagógico centrado en la persona convierten a la escuela rural en un espacio transformador que merece más apoyo y visibilidad.

**Palabras clave:** Educación rural, Comunidades de Aprendizaje, Inclusión Educativa, Participación de la Comunidad, Atención a la Diversidad, Dirección de Escuela, Disminución de la población, Educación, Educación de la primera infancia, Enseñanza pública, Escuela primaria, Escuelas rurales, Infancia.

## Resumo

As escolas rurais representam um pilar essencial em muitas comunidades, funcionando não apenas como instituições educativas, mas também como centros neurálgicos da vida social e cultural. No meu caso, com 17 anos de experiência na área da educação e atualmente trabalhando no CPR San Hilario de Poitiers, uma escola rural que conta com uma Sala Específica de Educação Especial (AEEE) e que opera sob o modelo semi-D (um centro de ensino primário que também oferece o primeiro ciclo do ensino secundário obrigatório — normalmente 1.º e 2.º ano do ESO — sem ser um instituto), pude

vivenciar de perto tanto os pontos fortes quanto os desafios desse contexto educativo. Ao longo dos anos, desenvolvi práticas pedagógicas baseadas na atenção individualizada, no acompanhamento emocional e no trabalho em rede com as famílias e com a comunidade envolvente. A nossa escola é uma Comunidade de Aprendizagem, o que nos permite implementar Atuações Educativas de Êxito fundamentadas em evidências, como as tertúlias dialógicas e os grupos interativos, fortalecendo assim a participação da comunidade e a inclusão. Aproveitamos ao máximo a nossa estrutura multietária e os laços estreitos com o meio para promover uma educação transformadora e centrada na pessoa. Esse contexto tem possibilitado uma aprendizagem mais personalizada, em que o número reduzido de alunos por turma permite adaptar o ritmo de aprendizagem, construir vínculos sólidos e fomentar relações de confiança. Consolidam-se relações horizontais entre docentes, alunos e famílias, promovendo valores como a cooperação e a corresponsabilidade educativa. Apesar dessas vantagens, as escolas rurais enfrentam desafios significativos: infraestruturas muitas vezes obsoletas, reconhecimento institucional limitado e obstáculos burocráticos no relacionamento com as administrações educativas. Essas dificuldades podem gerar sentimentos de isolamento e falta de recursos. No entanto, o potencial humano, o envolvimento comunitário e o modelo pedagógico centrado no aluno transformam as escolas rurais em espaços potentes de transformação que merecem maior apoio e visibilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação rural, Comunidades de aprendizagem, Inclusão educativa, Participação comunitária, Atenção à diversidade, Gestão escolar, Declínio populacional, Educação, Educação pré-escolar, Educação pública, Escola primária, Escolas rurais, Infância.

## **Introduction. The Rural School**

In an educational world increasingly defined by standardization, speed, and volume, rural schools continue to demonstrate that small can also be transformative. Against the widespread image of rural schools as disadvantaged spaces, new realities emerge that highlight their ability to foster strong bonds, offer personalized attention, and strengthen community ties. This article is about a concrete experience in a small school in the Axarquía (Málaga), where educational transformation has not come through large-scale reforms, but through listening, closeness, and collective commitment.

Far from being a limitation, the rural environment becomes the ideal setting for an education focused on people, respectful of individual rhythms, actively involving families, and deeply connected to the local territory. Multi-age coexistence, teacher collaboration, and the openness to inclusive methodologies have made it possible to consolidate a pedagogical practice with its own identity, deeply human and conscious.

This education is about lived experience, but also on dialogue with theoretical frameworks that support innovation in rural contexts. Because transforming rural schools does not mean replicating urban models on a smaller scale—it means recognizing and enhancing their unique characteristics. That is the perspective from which this article is rooted: in the conviction that the power of the small lies in its ability to care, connect, and transform.

The rural school is a fundamental pillar in many communities, not only as a space for learning but also as the backbone of social and cultural life. This is the case of our Colegio Público Rural San Hilario de Poitiers, a rural, semi-D school with a Specific Needs Classroom. However, despite its importance, we face numerous challenges, from outdated infrastructure to administrative hurdles.

Even so, its pedagogical model offers significant advantages that deserve recognition and support. Rural classrooms, with fewer students per class, allow for more individualized teaching. Teachers can get to know each student deeply, adapt the learning pace, and create an environment of trust and closeness.

In addition, the community plays a key role in the educational process. Families tend to be more involved in the school, promoting an education connected to the local culture and environment. Although this remains one of our weakest areas, we strive to involve families and volunteers in our daily life.

One of the greatest strengths of rural schools is the close contact with nature. Many activities can take place outdoors, promoting active methodologies such as project-based learning, hands-on experimentation, and environmental education. Every year, we go hiking on various local routes: Las Cuevas, La Teja, Fuente Gorda, Mesa de Mazmúllar... In our case, the implementation of the Learning Community model has further enhanced the school's impact, transforming it into a participatory and inclusive school. This approach not only improves academic results but also strengthens community bonds and fosters values such as solidarity, respect, and cooperation.

In rural schools, students often learn in multi-age classrooms where children of different ages and educational levels share the same space. While, at first, some families and teachers may see this as a disadvantage, over time they discover the many benefits this organization brings.

Many rural schools still operate in buildings from the past century, with poor heating systems, chipped and moth-eaten doors from 1975, no shaded areas in the playgrounds, historical bathrooms, accessibility problems, and until recently, limited technological resources. In many villages, the school is not just a place of learning: it is the center of community life. It is where families meet, where children build their future, and where the spirit of the village remains alive. However, to make this possible, maintaining these schools must be a priority. Replacing doors, upgrading electrical systems, improving heating, or repairing roofs are not just infrastructure tasks—they are essential actions to ensure the

safety and well-being of students. A well-maintained school is a clear message that education matters and that the community is committed to its future.

Space and materials matter. The classroom and its materials are not secondary elements in education: they are active parts of the teaching and learning process. A well-designed space with appropriate materials can enhance creativity, autonomy, and motivation to learn. In any context -but especially in rural education- innovation and adaptation of the environment can make a significant difference in students' educational experiences. For that, we need institutional support.

In rural areas, access to school is a challenge for many children, as they must travel long distances by school bus to exercise their right to education. Unlike urban environments, where proximity facilitates attendance, in rural areas the daily commute requires good logistical organization to ensure that all students arrive safely and on time. Costasur Bus, overcoming long journeys, tricky roads, and adverse weather conditions, makes it possible. Behind every route is a team that not only transports students but also helps create an atmosphere of safety and trust on every journey. It is important to recognize that school transportation in rural areas is not a mere service: it is a key part of the educational structure. Supporting rural schools means supporting equal opportunities, and to achieve this, we need support networks and services that make education accessible to every corner, no matter how remote.

Moreover, rural depopulation threatens the viability of many schools, forcing closures and leaving families with limited options. Despite these challenges, rural schools represent an educational model with enormous potential and are a benchmark for innovation and quality. It is essential that authorities recognize their value and provide the necessary resources for rural schools not just to survive, but to thrive and evolve. Education in rural areas is not only about access to learning—it is about equity, community development, and social sustainability.

Some families, day by day, show great strength and determination in their pursuit of quality education for their children. Among them is one family in particular whose story reflects the true meaning of struggle, collaboration, and unconditional love. This family has always worked tirelessly to ensure that their son, who uses a wheelchair, and all our students have access to inclusive and quality education. Their struggle has not been solitary: they have joined forces with our educational community to achieve improvements that benefit everyone. Thanks to their persistence and effort, our school now has an elevator and better accessibility, ensuring that no child faces barriers to learning or participation in school life.

Their commitment goes beyond infrastructure. They have accompanied us every step of the way, offering support, trust, and affection. They have cared for us as if we were part of their family, and we have done the same in return. This relationship, based on respect and empathy, reminds us of the

importance of families and educators working together to build a school where everyone feels welcome and valued.

Their story is a living testimony that unity and perseverance can transform realities. We feel fortunate to have them as part of our community and are grateful for every gesture, every word, and every effort they have made to improve our school for the benefit of all.

Maintaining rural schools is an investment in education and in the survival of our villages. A school in good condition is a symbol of future, commitment, and hope. If we want the school to remain the heart of the village, we must ensure it operates in the best possible conditions. Because in every well-kept classroom, there is a community that continues to believe in its people and in its land.

Now is the time to reclaim the rural school as a high-quality educational alternative, with potential that deserves to be promoted and protected. In Andalusia there are a total of 104 rural public schools: 11 in Malaga, 8 in Huelva, 1 in Seville, 7 in Cadiz, 37 in Granada, 13 in Jaen, 17 in Almeria, and 10 in Cordoba, 18 fewer than a decade ago (Marquez, 2023).

### **Comares (Málaga): Rural Charm and Contemporary Challenges**

Comares, known as the "Balcony of the Axarquía," is an Arab-origin village located in the Axarquía region, in the province of Málaga. Its privileged position atop a high hill offers breathtaking panoramic views and a natural environment that blends historical richness with scenic beauty. It preserves Moorish architecture, with labyrinthine alleyways and Arab arches that reflect its rich historical heritage. It is also the birthplace of a style of *cante por verdiales* that bears its name, enriching the cultural life of the village. *Panda Arroyo Conca* is our most emblematic *panda*, with parents, mothers, and students transmitting their legacy year after year. I am currently learning to dance and play the castanets at the *verdiales* school along with another colleague.

Walking up to the main square, admiring the landscapes and historical arches, pausing to enjoy the sun, sharing a coffee at *Bar La Plaza* or a herbal tea at *Bar Los Tres Balcones*... these are experiences that go far beyond daily routine. They are moments of learning, of connection with local history, of identity building, and of strengthening community bonds. Education in a rural setting like ours is not only possible—it represents a unique opportunity to cultivate open, critical, and engaged minds. From the peacefulness of Comares, we continue to advocate for an education that, far from the noise, resonates powerfully in every child who is part of our educational community.

Due to its location on a high summit, access to Comares may involve navigating complex roads, which can hinder frequent travel to urban areas. As in many rural settings, the availability of services such as

shopping centers, leisure options, public transportation, and certain medical specialties may be limited, requiring travel to nearby towns to meet certain needs.

Young people can enjoy outdoor activities, via ferratas, the longest zipline anchored in natural terrain, hiking trails... all promoting a healthy lifestyle and a deep connection with the natural environment. Comares' rich cultural heritage offers young people the chance to engage in local festivities and keep ancestral traditions alive.

The local economy may not provide a wide range of employment opportunities, especially in specialized sectors, which could force young people to move elsewhere in search of professional opportunities. The Andalusian Institute of Statistics and Cartography offers users access to statistical and geospatial information through the *Andalusian Statistical and Geospatial Data Portal (Portal DEGA)*—a new website designed in accordance with modern web technologies focused on usability, accessibility, and data reuse. The purpose behind the development of this portal is to directly disseminate information related to statistical and cartographic competencies, making data available in various formats, along with user services and interoperable statistical and cartographic tools. In the *Multiterritorial Information System of Andalusia (SIMA)*, we can find data on Comares (Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía, 2025).

The absence of higher education institutions in the municipality means that young people who wish to continue their studies must relocate to other cities, which can pose both logistical and financial challenges.

It is important to address issues related to accessibility, service availability, and opportunities for young people in order to ensure sustainable and balanced development that allows new generations to thrive without having to leave their homeland.

### **Detailed Overview of the Legislation that Has Regulated Rural Schools Throughout Spanish History**

Education in rural areas of Spain has been shaped by significant legislative changes that reflect the country's various political, economic, and social realities. From the efforts of the Second Republic to democratize access to education to current attempts to ensure equal opportunities in rural areas, the legal framework has evolved in response to the challenges of each era.

On October 17 and 18, 2024, the Regional Conference for School Leadership Teams titled *"Making Rural Schools Visible"* was held in Córdoba, organized by the Provincial Teacher Training Center. It was an enriching space where numerous schools had the opportunity to share best practices and reflect on the present and future of rural education.



One of the most relevant moments was the presentation by Mr. José M<sup>a</sup> Pérez Jiménez, Education Inspector from the province of Seville, who offered a detailed overview of the main laws and decrees that have governed rural education in Spain. Below is a brief summary of the most significant milestones:

#### 1. Decree of May 29, 1931: Boost to Rural Public Education during the Second Republic

With the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, education became a national priority. A secular, free model was promoted, based on the principles of the Free Institution of Education (*Institución Libre de Enseñanza*).

One of the most significant efforts in rural education was the Decreto de 29 de mayo de 1931, which created the Board of Pedagogical Missions. Its aim was to bring knowledge and education to the most isolated villages, with the belief that all citizens, even those in rural areas, should benefit from social progress.

The Pedagogical Missions provided rural libraries, film and slide screenings with educational content, theatrical performances and concerts, as well as talks and lectures on current affairs and civic education. This model sought to reduce the cultural gap between rural and urban areas by promoting a modern and inclusive education.

#### 2. Rural Schools under the Franco Dictatorship: Drastic Reduction of Educational Institutions

After the Civil War (1936–1939), the rise of Franco's regime marked a setback for the educational system. A centralized, Catholic, and patriotic model was imposed, eliminating the advances made during the Second Republic.

Rural education suffered massive neglect: of the 40,000 rural schools that existed before the war, only around 4,000 survived. Scientific and philosophical content was eliminated in favor of religious and nationalist doctrine. Women's presence in education was reduced, reinforcing their traditional role as housewives. This period marked a stagnation in rural education, leaving many areas without access to schooling.

#### 3. Primary Education Act of 1945

In an attempt to reorganize the educational system, the dictatorship passed the Primary Education Act of 1945, which established compulsory education up to age 12, the teaching of Catholic doctrine as a central pillar, and Church supervision over teachers and curriculum content. However, this law did not bring real improvements for rural education, which continued to be relegated to a secondary role.

#### 4. General Education Act (LGE) of 1970: Elimination of One-Room Schools



The General Education Act of 1970 introduced Basic General Education (EGB), leading to structural changes in the educational system. However, in rural areas, the law had negative consequences: many one-room schools were closed, forcing students to attend larger schools in nearby towns. This increased the risk of school dropout in rural areas, where travel was difficult and families had fewer resources.

#### 5. Third Development Plan and Law 22/1972: Strategies for Implementing EGB

Law 22/1972, within the Third Development Plan, aimed to develop strategies for implementing EGB in rural areas, but failed to provide an effective solution to school depopulation. While efforts were made to improve resources and teacher training, structural problems in accessing education persisted.

#### 6. Creation of Rural Clustered Schools (CRA) in 1986: A New Organization for Rural Education

In 1986 (Royal Decree 2731/1986), rural education underwent a major classification and restructuring with the creation of the *Colegios Rurales Agrupados* (CRA), a model that remains in place today. These schools group several villages under a single administration and teaching staff, ensuring better distribution of resources, a more comprehensive curriculum, and a sense of community—without needing to relocate children to cities. Over time, these schools have evolved into the current *Colegios Públicos Rurales* (CPR).

#### 7. Decree 29/1988 of February 10: Establishment of Rural Schools

This decree consolidated the structure of rural schools, guaranteeing their place in the educational system and establishing operational criteria.

#### 8. Law 9/1999 on Educational Solidarity: Support for Disadvantaged Populations

Law 9/1999 introduced measures to improve equity in education, dedicating Chapter IV to disadvantaged populations, including rural communities.

#### 9. Decree 167/2003 of June 17: Actions in Rural Areas

Measures were established to improve resource allocation and teacher training in rural schools, although no major structural changes were introduced.

#### 10. Organic Law 2/2006 of May 3 on Education: First Recognition of Rural Education

This national legislation included, for the first time, explicit references to the need to guarantee equity in rural education.

#### 11. Andalusian Law 17/2007: Omission of Public Rural Schools

In Andalusia, Law 17/2007 barely mentions Colegios Públicos Rurales, leaving their regulation in a normative limbo. Chapter III, Article 46.4 mentions only that specific procedures and support measures for classrooms with students of different ages in rural areas shall be established.

#### 12. Decree 328/2010: Modifications to the School Network

Changes were introduced in the organization of rural schools, including the potential integration of small centers into larger networks.

#### 13. Organic Law 8/2013 of December 9 for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE): Depopulation and Geographic Dispersion

The 2013 LOMCE recognized the issue of rural depopulation but did not provide concrete measures to prevent the closure of rural schools.

#### 14. Organic Law 3/2020 of December 29, Amending Organic Law 2/2006 on Education (LOMLOE): Equal Opportunities in Rural Areas

LOMLOE 2020 reinforced the goal of ensuring equal educational opportunities in rural areas, advocating for strategies to combat educational exclusion in regions with low population density.

The review of educational legislation allows us to understand how rural education in Spain has evolved and what current challenges we face in these settings. Over the years, various laws have attempted to guarantee equitable access to education for students in rural areas—although in other periods, this was not always the case. Still, there is a long way to go.

Making rural schools visible is not just a matter of recognition, but an important step toward advancing a fair and high-quality educational model across all territories. Rural education has its own unique characteristics that require specific and tailored responses. For this reason, specific legislation for rural schools is more necessary than ever—legislation that not only ensures adequate resources but also values and promotes the richness of these educational environments. It is essential that educational policies take into account the specificities of multigrade schools, geographic dispersion, teacher mobility, digitalization, and community involvement in learning.

*“Making Rural Schools Visible,”* held in Córdoba, the Local Conference for School Leadership Teams, with María Teresa Salces Rodrigo, showed the special report *Educational support in public rural schools: challenges and opportunities* (Defensoría de la infancia y adolescencia de Andalucía, 2022, 2023a, 2023b), which highlights the need to ensure equitable education in rural areas.

This analysis is fundamental because, although legislation is a key pillar, it has to reflect the realities of our schools and consider the real needs of our day-to-day work. Together, we must strengthen networks of support, visibility, and collaboration. The connection between rural schools, community engagement, and the recognition of the value of these schools is essential for continued progress. It is not only about defending rural schools, but about strengthening them with effective strategies, adequate resources, and spaces to share good practices.

We need the particularities of our schools to be considered, and for example, for a specific regulatory framework to be created for Public Rural Schools, one that takes into account their singularities and characteristics.

It is not enough to be present on social media; we must create meaningful relationships. The future of rural education will depend not only on legislation but also on the commitment of communities, teachers, and administrations.

### **Collaboration Networks**

The 1st International Congress on 21st Century Rural Education (*For Rural Education and Repopulation*) was held in Cortes de la Frontera, in the mountains of Ronda, in April, 2024. PROCIE (University of Málaga), the Paulo Freire Rural University, the Confederation of Rural Development Centers (COCEDER), Social Action Collectives (CAS), the Paulo Freire Institute (Spain), and the City Council of Cortes de la Frontera (Málaga), were the organizers.

Tamara Balboa García, president of COCEDER, outlines in the preface to the Congress proceedings the reasons why they began this work and saw the need to organize such a congress (Martagón et al., 2024).

In October 2024, after many school years without regional training focused on rural schools, the Córdoba Teacher Training Center (CEP), together with a group of committed individuals from across Andalusia concerned about the realities of rural schools, began organizing the *Regional Conference for Leadership Teams of Public Rural Schools (CPR): Making Rural Schools Visible*. They wanted to help understanding the current situation of rural schools in Andalusia. Legislation about rural public schools, national school networks, the eTwinning network, European projects, successful practices consolidated in different Andalusian provinces, sharing concerns and proposals, creating spaces for exchange and debate to improve education in rural settings, and give visibility to the work carried out by CPRs as a path to quality education and rural development... were other goals to achieve.

As a key outcome of the event, the organizers highlighted the creation of the *Andalusian Network for Educational Innovation and Collaboration of CPRs (RAICER)*, formalized with a manifesto and a ten-point agenda for rural public education.

These spaces not only help us activate critical thinking, but also foster debate, reflection, and the search for solutions to the challenges of rural education. Moreover, they provide something essential: visibility and a support network—so necessary for moving forward and building together. Let's continue working as a team, connecting ideas, and combining efforts so that rural education can take the place it deserves.

Our school, as a *Learning Community*, understands education as a process in constant evolution, where research plays a key role in improving teaching practices and strengthening school coexistence. That is why we actively collaborate in research projects that allow us to generate evidence-based knowledge and contribute to the improvement of education.

Currently, we are working with Analía Leite and Virginia Martagón on the research project *Collaborative Networks in Education: Critical Teaching for an Inclusive Society*, developed by the University of Málaga. This study seeks to deepen the importance of network-based collaboration among educators, promoting a critical, reflective, and transformative approach to teaching aimed at advancing toward a more inclusive society.

Additionally, we collaborate with María del Mar Prados on the research project *Impact of Successful Educational Actions on Performance and Coexistence*, from the University of Seville, as part of the Andalusian Network of Learning Community Schools. This study analyzes how Successful Educational Actions influence improved learning and coexistence in educational settings.

Through these collaborations, we reaffirm our commitment to quality education, where teaching and research go hand in hand in building more inclusive, equitable, and successful schools for all students.

Moreover, parent associations (AMPAs) play a key role in school life, as they channel family involvement in their children's education. In our Learning Community, the AMPA *La Tahona* is not only supportive but a fundamental pillar in the development of multiple activities and in the management of the school.

From our experience, having a committed and involved AMPA fosters a climate of trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Schools cannot move forward alone—they need the support and involvement of the entire educational community to keep building quality, inclusive education based on respect and cooperation.

The defense of public education, and of our school in particular, would not be possible without the collaboration networks that help give visibility to the work we do. Among them, we would like to highlight

the contribution of José Ortiz, who, through his social media and Facebook page “*Comares, pueblo de la Axarquía*,” has been a great ally in promoting our school.

He was one of the first to recognize the value of everything we do as a rural school and as a Learning Community, acknowledging the efforts of our entire educational community and helping our project reach more people. His support has helped many families, teachers, and education professionals to learn about our reality, our practices, and our achievements. Collaboration networks are essential for strengthening and bringing visibility to rural education. Thanks to them, we continue building a school that is connected to its environment, its community, and the world.

As part of our commitment to open and participatory communication, at CPR San Hilario de Poitiers we have developed a school news broadcast that gives voice to students and highlights the activities, projects, and experiences that shape school life. This resource, collaboratively created, reflects the value of active listening, free expression, and a sense of community in our rural school (Sarmiento, 2024).

A school is not just a building with students and books... is the soul of those who bring it to life every day. In our case, teamwork is the driving force. Thanks to a committed and passionate teaching staff, we continue building -with love and dedication- a quality education that is inclusive and grounded in the values that truly transform.

### **My Personal Experience in a Rural School: Unitaria Llano Almendra**

One of the main challenges is the lack of adequate infrastructure and educational resources. Many rural schools lack teaching materials, internet access, and technology, which forces teachers to be creative and develop innovative strategies for teaching. Seventeen years ago, my journey in education began with a mixture of excitement, uncertainty, and a long-anticipated destination: CPR San Hilario de Poitiers (Comares). Anticipated, because it was my first choice—my mother's hometown, who had also studied in a one-teacher rural school, Las Cuevas.

I clearly remember her warnings: “They might send you to Comares, or to Llano Almendra, or Las Cuevas...” At that time, I did not want to listen. I did not want to face the possibility of being sent to such an isolated school. I did not want to think about the fear or uncertainty that idea brought me. Mothers are never wrong.

I had just passed the public examination, I was 23 years old, with no previous experience in schools, and my destiny was the one-teacher school of Llano Almendra. A small school with 14 students, from age three to sixth grade, where I faced challenges I had never imagined.

When I learned about my assignment, I felt afraid. It was not just the complexity of a multigrade classroom with students of different ages and learning levels, but the conditions of where I would have to work. There was no phone, no internet, barely any coverage, few neighbours -most of whom worked in the mornings- and at that time, access to the school was difficult. Additionally, many of my students did not speak Spanish fluently, which added another layer of difficulty to teaching. Most importantly: I was alone in facing each of these challenges; specialist teachers came only once a week to teach their subjects.

At first, I was overwhelmed. I asked myself why they had not sent someone with more experience, someone better able to handle such a complex situation. As the days passed, I realized there was no time for regret, I had to take action, learn on the go, train myself, and find solutions. The students, their families, and neighbours were and still are wonderful people. I will always carry them in my heart.

When I arrived at the Llano Almendra one-teacher school, I knew my role as a teacher went far beyond giving lessons. I became a teacher of everything: material designer, cultural mediator, creator of strategies to integrate every child into their learning process. Even back then, we organized active recesses on the street, with the occasional runaway student... I did not have a support team or abundant resources, but I had creativity, the desire to learn, and a community willing to collaborate. Other teachers were in Comares, and two colleagues were posted at the Las Cuevas unit.

Multigrade classrooms demand personalized teaching. Each student with his/her own rhythm and needs, and teaching had to be flexible and adapted to the local context. I learned to value community-based learning and to understand the importance of bonding with the environment. In these spaces, education does not only happen inside the classroom, but in every interaction with the community, in every shared activity, and in every challenge we overcame together.

We invented extracurricular classes with families, because I understood that learning could not stay confined to the school. We organized yoga with one mother, crafts with neighbours, my mother and sister were volunteers, and taekwondo with my brother-in-law. I involved families and my own family. Everything was voluntarily, with effort and deep commitment. It was not just a program of activities, but the construction of a support network, a space where the community became an active part of the educational process.

Rural education taught me that teaching is a collective act. The school is not an isolated entity, but a meeting place where knowledge, traditions, and experiences converge. In Llano Almendra, the community became the largest classroom I ever had. We learned, created, and above all, grew together.

Today, when I look back, I see that experience gave me the most valuable tools of my professional life. It showed me that being a teacher in a rural setting is more than academic work—it's a commitment to the community, an act of resilience, and an opportunity to transform realities.

The three years I spent in Llano Almendra were key to my development as a teacher, where I learned that rural education goes beyond teaching content: it is about accompanying, understanding, and transforming lives. I realized that learning happens not only in the classroom but also in the fields, in play, and in conversations with families. I developed great admiration for rural schools, recognizing that teachers do more than teach—they build community, generate opportunities, and sow hope.

Although I felt overwhelmed at first, today I can only feel gratitude for that experience. It gave me all the tools I needed to become the teacher I am today. If I could go back, I would choose Llano Almendra without hesitation. Because it was there, amid uncertainty and challenges, that my love for rural education was born. Today, after years of learning and growing, I am the principal of this beautiful school. Although my role has changed, my values remain the same. My experience in rural education taught me that a school is not just a physical space, is a network of shared relationships and learning. As a school leader, my goal is to keep promoting an educational model where the participation of everyone -teachers, families, neighbours, volunteers, institutions- is the driving force for change.

### **Teachers in a Rural School: A Great Challenge and a Lot of Uncertainty**

There is little discussion in Education Faculties about rural schools, multigrade classrooms, or itinerant teaching. This absence in initial teacher training means that when a teacher arrives at a rural school for the first time, they are often faced with feelings of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity.

The challenge is even greater when the school is not only rural but also a *Learning Community* and a semi-D model, including Secondary Education students. In this case, the challenge goes beyond managing multilevel teaching; it also involves energizing community participation, coordinating successful educational actions, and transforming school coexistence through dialogue and inclusion. However, what initially seems like an overwhelming challenge soon becomes a deeply enriching experience. The rural school offers a closeness with students and families that allows for the development of more personalized, inclusive, and meaningful methodologies. Moreover, the combination of dialogic learning (García, 2017; García & García, 2022), neuroeducation, and community participation turns these schools into spaces of innovation and educational reference.

It is essential that universities begin to include specific content on rural education in their curricula, preparing future teachers to face this reality with tools, confidence, and understanding. Because rural education is not second-rate education, it is education with its own identity, with an immense transformative potential that deserves to be recognized and strengthened.



## **Realities in Educational Settings**

Schools are facing increasingly complex challenges in supporting their students. Mental health issues, addiction to new technologies, difficulties with concentration, the search for immediacy, and school absenteeism are realities that directly impact the academic and personal development of children and adolescents. However, one of the greatest challenges lies in the lack of training and information some families have to address these issues at home, which complicates collaboration between school and home. Many families do not have the tools to manage these challenges or are unaware of their real impact on their children's development. It is urgent to strengthen family training in areas such as emotional regulation, responsible use of technology, and the importance of establishing routines and healthy habits.

The rise in cases of anxiety, depression, and stress among students highlights the need for an educational approach that prioritizes emotional well-being. Schools must be safe spaces where students can express their emotions, find support, and develop strategies to cope with their difficulties. Actions such as meditation, dialogic learning, and peer tutoring have proven to be effective tools in improving emotional health in educational environments.

Constant access to digital devices has changed the way children and adolescents interact with the world. Hyperconnectivity and excessive screen use can negatively affect concentration, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.

We live in a society where immediacy takes precedence over reflection. Many students struggle to maintain attention during long tasks and seek quick answers without going through processes of analysis and reasoning.

Learning Communities and neuroeducation remind us of the importance of adapting teaching to the reality of students, focusing on motivation, belonging, and well-being. Understanding these challenges does not mean resisting change, but rather finding innovative solutions that allow the school to remain a space of learning, coexistence, and personal growth for everyone.

To learn more about this experience, you can access the following interactive presentation, which outlines the educational transformation journey of CPR San Hilario de Poitiers, a rural school and Learning Community committed to innovation, inclusion, and community development (González, 2025).

## **Neuroeducation, Positive Discipline, and Peaceful Conflict Resolution**

Since 2021, at CPR San Hilario de Poitiers, Comares, we have embarked on a journey of educational transformation based on neuroeducation (Bueno, 2017; Carrillo & Gómez, 2023), positive discipline,

and peaceful conflict resolution. This process has been accompanied by training and guidance from Macarena Soto, with whom we have learned to identify mistakes, explore alternatives, and consolidate practices that build a school based on the pillars of safety, belonging, and motivation.

As Jane Nelsen (2021), a leading figure in positive discipline, points out, "where there is no connection, there is disconnection." In our educational community, we have chosen an approach focused on connection rather than control, which involves a deep commitment from the adults who accompany students: constantly self-assessing, emotionally regulating ourselves, and engaging in continuous professional development.

One of the biggest challenges has been shifting our perspective on conflict resolution. We have moved from applying sanctions and immediate consequences, such as expulsion, to allowing time for reflection, learning, and change.

This process has not been easy; we have faced resistance, doubts, and ongoing adjustments. However, we have learned to contextualize dynamics and adapt our language to each group. This journey towards a more conscious and respectful education is ongoing. We know that there is no final destination but a path of continuous growth.

Neuroeducation allows us to understand how the brain learns and how emotions influence this process. With this knowledge, we manage each situation with empathy and awareness, respecting the rhythms and needs of our students. Constructive conflict resolution helps us view disagreements as opportunities for personal and group growth. We teach children to express themselves, listen, and find solutions in an environment of respect and cooperation.

We rely on a democratic educational system, where the voice of every member of the community is valued. Positive Discipline is a clear example of this, as it promotes active participation, mutual respect, and the search for joint solutions. This approach allows us to create a school where each person feels seen, heard, and valued.

Our community has normalized practices that just a few years ago seemed unthinkable in a traditional educational setting: consensual creation of coexistence norms (respect, learning, fun, and communication), fostering responsibility and autonomy, meditation to promote emotional regulation, classroom roles for both students and teachers, emotional awareness and vocabulary, helping children identify and express their emotions, a focus on solutions rather than punishments, respect for oneself and others, strengthening self-esteem and empathy, observation and evaluation of learning processes, connection and emotional management instead of avoidance, respect for diversity, recognizing and valuing differences as richness, daily gratitude practices, and viewing mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures.

Reflecting on our experiences with these tools not only improves school coexistence but also fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and a sense of belonging in our students. Let us continue building together a democratic educational system where learning and coexistence go hand in hand.

### **Learning Community and Rural School**

Learning Communities have become a well-established educational model based on dialogue, inclusion, and scientific evidence, with a dual purpose: to ensure academic success and to foster harmonious coexistence among students. Through successful educational actions, the goal is for all children to receive a quality education, without exception (Joanpere-Foraster et al., 2023).

Not everyone sees it that way. Every year, at the beginning of the school term, we face a new reality: a diverse teaching staff with varying levels of knowledge and attitudes toward Learning Communities. Some already know the model and believe in it. Others know nothing and show no interest. Some are curious and eager to learn. Others have chosen the school specifically because they want to work this way.

This diversity of perspectives means that each school year brings new challenges for the leadership team. Training and support become fundamental pillars in integrating teachers into the project, always striving to ensure that educational transformation does not depend solely on a few individuals but becomes a commitment shared by the whole community. It is a process that requires patience, dialogue, and trust in the real impact of this educational model. Every teacher who joins and every family that participates reinforces the belief that dialogic learning transforms lives and opens doors.

In 2018, our school was officially recognized as a Learning Community, marking a turning point in how we understand education. Since then, we have been gradually implementing the Successful Educational Actions, guided by our motto: *“Looking inward: the starting point for change.”*

This approach has allowed us to recognize our strengths and challenges and define the direction we want to take. With the commitment of the entire educational community, we have developed the following Successful Educational Actions, internationally recognized for their positive impact on learning and coexistence: Dialogic Gatherings, Interactive Groups, the Dialogic Model of Conflict Prevention and Resolution, family training, community educational participation (extended learning time, dialogic readings, and mixed committees), and the dialogic training of teachers. Thanks to these actions, we have improved learning, reduced conflicts, and strengthened the bonds between students, teachers, and families. We continue to move forward with the conviction that change starts from within and that together we are building a more equitable and transformative education.

The most recent Successful Educational Action we have implemented in our school is the launch of the brave ones club. This initiative arises from the motivation to continue applying evidence-based practices for the prevention of peer violence, promoting a safe and respectful coexistence.

The Brave Ones Club has significantly changed how students perceive and respond to violence. Now, the most respected children within the group are those who actively stand against violence, demonstrating that positive leadership is key to transforming the school climate. Thanks to this action, along with previously implemented strategies and principles, we have significantly reduced conflicts. Moreover, the perception of reporting violent situations has changed: students no longer see those who speak up as snitches, but as brave. This shift in mindset strengthens the collective commitment to the safety and well-being of the entire educational community.

The space we have created is open and welcoming, designed to make students feel safe and relaxed. We have included cushions, books by Begoña Ibarrola (2020), cooperative games, and materials that support reflection and emotional regulation. This environment allows children to express their emotions, analyze conflictive situations, and seek constructive solutions with adult support. From the perspective of dialogic learning and neuroeducation, we know that the environment influences how we handle conflicts. Creating a warm and judgment-free space enables students not only to learn how to resolve their differences but also to develop meaningful social skills for life.

To advance the educational transformation of a Learning Community, it is essential to keep in mind its key phases: awareness, decision-making, dreaming, priority selection, and planning. Each of these stages guides the change process, ensuring meaningful and effective community participation.

Dialogic learning, the foundation of Learning Communities, is based on seven core principles (Flecha, 1997; Aubert et al., 2008): Egalitarian dialogue; Cultural intelligence; Transformation; Instrumental dimension; Creation of meaning; Solidarity; and Equality of differences. In addition, it is crucial to take into account the scientific contributions that support these educational practices, ensuring that our actions are grounded in solid evidence.

At the Provincial Conference on the Dissemination of Good Practices in Learning Community Schools, held in Málaga in April 2024 and organized by all the provincial CEPs, we had the privilege of listening to Rocío García Carrión, researcher at the University of Deusto. With an outstanding international career at universities such as Cambridge and Harvard, her research focuses on evidence-based educational interventions, dialogic learning environments, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and family and community participation. During her talk, Rocío guided us through the evolution of Learning Communities. These spaces for training and reflection reaffirm the importance of working based on evidence and community, building a more inclusive, equitable, and transformative education.

On that occasion, we had the privilege of sharing our experience on the fusion between learning communities and neuroeducation, with special emphasis on the implementation of the dialogic model of conflict prevention and resolution. A connection that reaffirms how everything is interrelated: words, the psychology of language, and neuropsychology have made great contributions to inner well-being, learning, and the construction of positive relationships.

In education, words matter. Not only what we say but also how we say it, how others speak to us, what we tell ourselves, and what our silences mean. All of this shapes our attitudes, emotions, and relationships. Language has both constructive and destructive power, and being aware of its impact allows us to create learning environments based on respect, motivation, and personal growth.

This reflection is essential to school coexistence, as our words influence how students, families, and professionals feel and relate to one another. Speaking with respect, dialogue, and trust not only prevents conflicts but also fosters empathy and social cohesion.

Each year, the International Meeting of Learning Communities offers us a unique opportunity to share experiences, reflect on our educational practices, and continue learning together. It is a space where teachers, families, volunteers, researchers, and other educational agents come together with a common goal: to promote transformative education based on dialogue and inclusion. We also share a visual resource that features the annual calendar of the different Successful Educational Actions carried out as a Learning Community (Sarmiento, 2025).

### **Conclusions. School principals in Rural Public Schools**

Being the school principal of a school is no easy task. It is a journey filled with challenges, moments of uncertainty, complex decision-making, and a great deal of responsibility. However, each challenge brings learning, each obstacle, an opportunity for growth, and each day offers a new chance to transform education and the lives of those in the school community.

This professional position in a context where certain gender inequalities persist presents particular challenges. Despite progress in gender equity, women -especially those in leadership roles- still face barriers and challenges rooted in traditional stereotypes and roles. Although this topic deserves a full article of its own, I wanted to mention it here, to contextualize the obstacles that women often must overcome in educational leadership.

From the very beginning, this role has demanded adaptability, resilience, and unwavering vocation. Learning to manage teams, fostering a respectful and safe learning environment, mediating conflicts, and building a united educational community are some of the responsibilities I have taken on with

commitment and passion. Education is not only about transmitting knowledge—it's about inspiring, guiding, and supporting the holistic development of every student.

Throughout this journey, I have come to understand that I am not alone. The educational community is the cornerstone of this path. I have received the unconditional support of committed teachers, families who believe in education as a driver of change, our school counselors, and students who teach us every day with their creativity, dreams, and way of seeing the world.

In a teacher's professional life, there are moments that test our vocation, our patience, and our leadership capacity. Unexpected situations, emotional challenges, and the need to make complex decisions can make the path feel lonely and overwhelming. However, in those crucial moments, the support and companionship of key people can make the difference between burnout and resilience.

One of the most difficult moments of my career taught me, more clearly than ever, the importance of having a support network. During that time of uncertainty and difficulty, I was fortunate to receive the unwavering support of my inspector, José Antonio Guerrero. His presence was not only an institutional pillar but also a beacon of guidance and trust.

Far from being limited to a bureaucratic role, my inspector was always available—listening attentively, advising wisely, and offering help no matter the time or day of the week. His commitment was not based on distant supervision, but on genuine, close, and human accompaniment.

That experience left me with a valuable lesson: educational leadership is not exercised solely through knowledge, but through closeness and the ability to build trust. I am deeply grateful to have had someone who understood this during such a crucial time. And today, looking back, I reaffirm my commitment to replicate that model of support with my colleagues and the educational community I serve. Because in education, change and improvement always arise from teamwork and mutual respect.

When lived with passion, education becomes an act of love, dedication, and trust in the future. And although the journey is not always easy, the rewards are always there—in every curious gaze, in every achievement reached, in every human bond that is built.

It wasn't easy at the beginning, and along the way there have been moments of uncertainty and challenge, even from colleagues themselves. However, every day I find my greatest reward right in front of me: in every student who has passed through these classrooms and shared their growth with me, in every fellow headteacher, teacher, and staff member who has walked alongside me, teaching me in both good times and hard ones. I have learned that loyalty is real, that we are deeply social beings, and that human connection is above all. Most valuable of all, I have discovered that in this journey, some people become lifelong friends.

Besides, there are those who support us when we get home after a day full of endless meetings, resolving conflicts, trying to keep everything flowing in harmony while the educational system continues to impose barriers. Our partners, parents, siblings, and friends who listen without judgment, who hold us when we feel we cannot go on, who appreciate our efforts even when we ourselves doubt whether we are doing things right. They are the ones who remind us who we are beyond our leadership role—who respect our silences, our absences, and our restless minds, always inventing, always searching for ways to improve and transform. Because being a school principal is not only about leadership and decision-making, it is a constant process of learning and emotional burden. And not enough is said about the human side of this work, about how it affects those around us, how our professional concerns sometimes spill into our personal lives, and how our moments of creativity can also mean forced disconnection for those who love and support us.

That is why today, I want to recognize the value of those who are there, who hug us when we are frustrated, who give us a push when we need it, and who, without expecting anything in return, walk this path beside us. Thank you for being our safe haven.

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