

## The Rural School from Child's Point of View: A Participatory Research Through Photovoice

Manuela Raposo-Rivas \*

*Department of Education, School Organisation and Research Methods, University of Vigo-UVigo, Ourense, Spain ORCID: 0000-0001-7781-7818*

Silvia Sierra-Martínez

*Department of Education, School Organisation and Research Methods, University of Vigo-UVigo, Ourense, Spain ORCID: 0000-0002-4367-3681*

Almudena Alonso-Ferreiro

*Department of Education, School Organisation and Research Methods, University of Vigo-UVigo, Ourense, Spain ORCID: 0000-0002-9438-2681*

Olalla García-Fuentes

*Department of Education, School Organisation and Research Methods, University of Vigo-UVigo, Ourense, Spain ORCID: 0000-0001-9084-0078*

M<sup>a</sup> Ainoa Zabalza-Cerdeiriña

*Department of Education, School Organisation and Research Methods, University of Vigo-UVigo, Ourense, Spain ORCID: 0000-0003-3713-5163*

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Rural schools have been studied throughout their history. However, the presence of the students' perspective in these schools has not been a preferred topic. The aim of this research is to listen to and make visible the opinions and feelings of the students enrolled in the grouped rural schools (CRA) in the province of Ourense (Spain). The methodology used is participatory in nature and is designed to achieve the collaboration, involvement, recognition, and acceptance of the participants. In the process developed, a first stage of awareness-raising and a second stage of negotiation and joint decision-making can be distinguished. At the same time, interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection are combined. Child-friendly data collection strategies are used: 6 multi-level assemblies (143 minutes of audio recordings), photovoice (303 textualised photographs) and drawing conversation (101 narrated drawings). Six schools participated, with a total of 101 school children enrolled in pre-school and primary education. The data analysis process was carried out with the ATLAS.ti 22 software. The results obtained show that the pupils' voice focuses mainly on five visions centered on the

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\* Correspondency: [mraposo@uvigo.es](mailto:mraposo@uvigo.es)

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material, academic, contextual, emotional, and relational aspects. In addition, play stands out as a transversal axis that saturates all the categories. The conclusions show the importance of taking into account the voice of the pupils, as it allows the participation of all pupils with a diversity of competences, skills and expressive styles.

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## **Introduction**

In the Spanish context, we are witnessing a generalised phenomenon of depopulation of the rural environment that has been increasing nowadays, although it is accompanied by mobilisations and proposals to make the “empty Spain” visible, which advocate promoting political changes to make these silent processes visible and put a stop to them, highlighting the revaluation of rural areas in recent years thanks to the improvement of existing infrastructures (Tahull & Montero, 2018). Despite this, recent research has found that rural schools have become an invisible reality or have been silenced by education policy (Álvarez & García, 2022).

The latest report of the State School Council (2021) on the situation of the Spanish Education System shows that Galicia is the autonomous community with the highest percentage of the population living in small and scattered localities (dispersed population) close to 50% (48.2%). In these environments, one of the most common formulas for schooling are the Centros Rurales Agrupados (Rural Grouped Centers [CRA]). According to the aforementioned report, in the 2019-20 academic year (the latest for which data is available), in Galicia there are 26 CRAs with 189 units that take in students from 139 localities, being the only community that shows an increase in the number of students, 2,227 in the 2019-20 academic year compared to 2,086 in the 2018-19 academic year.

On the other hand, previous research carried out in the field of early childhood defines proposals in which pupils are given a voice as much more ethical experiences, as well as politically and educationally more committed to democracy (Moss, 2011). These types of proposals recognise not only children's capacity to understand and make decisions, but also to construct meanings, to plan... and perhaps most importantly, they show how participation is not linked to age but to the opportunities given to pupils to make it possible (Ceballos-López et al., 2018). Evocative examples such as the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy or the “Student Voice” experiences (Fielding, 2011), show that it is possible to develop more democratic, inclusive, and fair practices through participation (Ceballos-López et al., 2016).

Moreover, since the 19th century, the use of visual resources in research spaces has been commonplace, even recognised as important instruments for opening up new fields of exploration, mainly because the use of images favours the approximation of social actors with the scenario, they are part of, together with the representation of how they articulate and live in their socio-cultural contexts (Melleiro & Gualda, 2005). Thus, photovoice is presented as a method that, through photography and collaborative storytelling, can favour children's participation. According to Doval et al. (2013), it is an innovative participatory and community-based research technique that originally allowed,

To give power and voice, through documenting the reality of their daily lives using images and narratives, to those who are not normally heard. The photographs speak of the visions and concerns of the different populations by capturing their personal reflections and points of view (p.152).

Although a large proportion of the world's children live in rural communities and attend rural schools, the scarcity of studies in this area represents a limitation in educational research (Smit et al., , 2015) and reinforces certain myths regarding the rural school in the 21st century that should have been overcome, such as that in rural schools the quality of teaching and student performance is inferior (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OCDE], 2019). Probably based on these myths in Spain, as in many other countries, the rural school “has traditionally been mistreated, neglected and too often abandoned” (Tahull & Montero, 2018, p.162), forgetting that conception of the rural school presented by Tonucci (1996), as a contextualised laboratory, open to experimentation and innovation.

However, the important transformations experienced in recent times in rural contexts have led us towards a new identity of the rural school in a society with complex and diverse characteristics (Abós, 2015), which should be addressed from educational research in order to understand the reality of these idiosyncratic contexts and to promote the visibility of these educational models. The reality of rural schools cannot be defined in a generic way as it depends on numerous variables (Romo, 2013), although some shared characteristics are usually recognised (Álvarez-Álvarez & García Prieto, 2022): low school ratios, families working in productive sectors (related to cattle farming, agriculture and fishing), high intensity and frequency of relations between school and context, and the frequent existence of multi-grade classrooms. Even so, we agree with Romo (2013) on replacing the old debates on rural schools as a homogeneous reality with others that take into account heterogeneity according to their typology, socio-demographic environment and teachers.

In the Spanish context, with the transfer of educational competences to the autonomous regions and the political influence of many of the decisions regarding rural schools, these can be very diverse from one region to another, encompassing both unitary classrooms and county schools or grouped rural centres, the latter being the denomination assumed, among others, by the Autonomous Community of Galicia. Bernal (2009), referring to the student body, identifies that it is heterogeneous as it is grouped by different ages; there is a shortage of students and a certain isolation due to the lack of communications and the ratio of these centres is very low, which may mean difficulties for the administration in maintaining them. However, the perspective of the student body has not been a major focus of studies on rural schools (Howley, 2009).

Research in this area is very slowly focusing on students and their education, “investigating school-environment relations, the working methodologies of the teaching staff or the teaching of curricular specialities” (Bustos, 2011, p. 157). For his part, Howley (2009) proposes some more sociological questions that have students as the focus of attention: what kind of students are they?, what do they do and what do they not do?, who benefits and harms in educational processes?, what can be done so that priority issues are dealt with within the institution and not among elites formed by scientists, bureaucrats and politicians?, etc. An example of this is the study by Lorenzo et al. (2017) that addresses the expectations and beliefs held by rural students about their professional and academic future, in which 270 students from rural schools in Aragon, Catalonia and Andalusia participated. The authors conclude that “the number of inhabitants of the villages where students live influences the beliefs students have about themselves and the work they believe they will do” (p.49).

From a more critical and transformative perspective, both in terms of the object of study and the research methodology based on the use of photovoice, we can identify the studies by Doval et al. (2013) and Parrilla et al. (2017) carried out in a rural town in the province of



Pontevedra with just over 20,000 inhabitants and a population density of around 70 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (72.17 in the year 2021). The aim of the research by Doval et al. (2013) was to find out the opinion of the 110 infant and primary school students on the strengths and weaknesses, concerns, and priorities they have for their participation in school and to identify how to improve it. The results show the children's preference for learning in groups and in mixed groups of younger and older children, discarding homogeneous groups by age and articulating the idea of participation around the reference of "being able to learn" (p. 164). For its part, the study by Parrilla et al. (2017) allows us to redefine photovoice as a participatory, research and teaching-learning methodology with a markedly inclusive character due to its "capacity to create and develop educational processes and materials designed for all and with the participation of all" (p. 17).

Students, through photovoice, can relive the experience they have gained in order to express strengths and weaknesses (Suprpto et al., 2020). In addition, images can be used in a way that provides excellent information for research and the well-being and empowerment of the participants (Teti, 2019). For all these reasons, this methodology has been chosen for the research described below.

The study presented here is part of a project funded by a competitive call for proposals resulting from a collaboration between the Diputación de Ourense and the University of Vigo. Its purpose is to deepen the needs of the CRAs in the province of Ourense, as well as to identify the barriers and strengths of schools organised in a peculiar way in multigrade classrooms. In particular, in this work we focus on the voice of the students of the CRAs with the aim of listening and making visible their opinions and feelings associated with their experience, while delving into those issues that are most relevant to them, allowing them to be empowered in the research on rural schools.

## **Method**

The methodological approach followed is based on the basic principles of qualitative and participatory research: collaboration, involvement, recognition, and acceptance (Booth, 2006). The foundations are thus laid to build a process committed to listening to the voice of students around the rural school. Several reference authors (Hart, 1993; Messiou, 2017; Parrilla et al., 2016; Nind, 2014) have focused their interest on participation and delimited in a continuum, the different types and degrees in which such participation can materialise in an inclusive research process.

If we follow Hart (1993) in analysing the type of participation developed in this research, it is a participatory study of "assigned but informed". For the author it is the fourth level (out of a continuum of 8) of real participation. In it "the population is arranged to participate in a certain activity and is informed about what the activity consists of" (p.13). In other words, the participants have been selected because of their connection to a rural school, they have been invited to participate and informed of the conditions of their participation. At the same time, their interests have been taken into account in all agreed decisions. In contrast, Nind (2014) establishes a continuum of participation approaches distributed over four levels where power is more or less shared. This study falls within what the author defines as the second degree of real participation, "partially researcher-driven research" (p. 11). In this case, it was born with the intention of developing a participatory and collaborative enquiry process with the educational agents involved. In order to achieve a collaborative construction of knowledge, the study has been conceived and designed by the researchers for the participants and their

needs.

### **Participants**

The research takes place in a Galician province whose school context is characterised by the isolation of the educational community in a geographically scattered population, a very low student-teacher ratio, the grouping of students in multilevel classrooms or the difficult access to socio-cultural resources by the population (Segovia, 2011).

Students from 6 schools in 2 grouped rural centres (3 schools in each of the CRAs) participate on a voluntary basis. Due to a period of decline in this context (educational policies, displacement to urban centres, depopulation of rural areas, declining birth rate...) (Segovia & Maceiras, 2018) over the last two decades, the number of clustered rural schools has decreased significantly, going from the initial 20 schools in the province to the current 2 (Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa [INEE], 2019). This significant decrease highlights the value of the voices of the participants in the study, on the one hand, by having the entire sample and, on the other, by obtaining a multi-vocal vision that the students share about the rural school.

In total, 101 pupils enrolled in Infant Education (IE) and Primary Education (PE) from both CRAs took part in the study. Table 1 summarises the school population of each of them, differentiated by years and groups. In both, students are grouped in multilevel classrooms. On the one hand, students in 4th and 5th grade of Infant Education are grouped in one classroom, and on the other, students in 6th grade of Infant Education, 1st and 2nd year of Primary Education.

Table 1. School population in each CRA

CRA	Students				
	4º IE	5º IE	6º IE	1º PE	2º PE
CRA 1	15	14	16	11	11
CRA 2	7	6	5	12	4
Total	22	20	21	23	15

### **Field work**

In the research process developed with the students, two key moments can be distinguished:

- (1) Awareness-raising stage. This involves an initial immersion in the field of work with the aim of establishing the first contact between the educational community and the researchers. It allows for an in-depth study of the peculiar organisation of the centres in multi-level classrooms, as well as making the researchers aware of issues such as the environment in which the study will be carried out, key informants, the resources available, the characteristics of the context or the type of educational community.
- (2) Negotiation and decision-making stage. After the first contact with the reality to be interpreted from the point of view of the participants, the negotiation of participation begins, as well as the delimitation of needs and expectations regarding the research on the part of all those involved. In order to materialise the aims of this stage, a document





of intentions is drawn up by the researchers and another document of needs by the teachers. After negotiation, the conditions under which the study is to be carried out (timing, objectives, internal organisation, etc.) are agreed on.

In the fieldwork carried out with the pupils, two forms of child reflection can be distinguished which provide mutual feedback: interpersonal reflection and intrapersonal reflection.

- Interpersonal reflection. By means of the assembly and drawing-conversation techniques, reflection is promoted among the group. In the first of these, monothematic assemblies are developed in which, led by the teachers and the researchers, the participants reflect on the rural school. The reflection groups are multilevel, i.e., the groups are pre-formed by students of mixed ages, thus favouring collective enquiry. On the other hand, in the drawing-conversation technique, the participants draw at the same time as they reflect aloud with the rest of their classmates, sharing impressions and concerns about the rural school and favouring intra-group reflection.
- Intrapersonal reflection. Individual reflection is promoted through the photovoice technique. Given the lack of autonomy of the participants due to their age (between 3 and 7 years old), the researchers work individually with each of the students. The work of reflection is developed individually in the taking of the photographs and in the transcription by the adults of the narratives thought up by the children.

One of the main challenges faced in participatory research are those related to quality and ethics. The research carried out with both adults and children follows the standards established in the European Early Childhood Education Research Association [EECERA] Code of Ethics as well as the ethical recommendations established by the University of Vigo. In line with these, special attention is paid to the principle of information that should govern the entire process and which culminates with the signing of the informed consent form. Other issues taken into account are voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, and respect for the assessments made by the participants during the study.

### ***Research instruments***

In order to collect the students' vision of their rural school, we followed the premises established by Wiles et al. (2008) according to which inviting children and young people as research participants implies that data collection takes place through “child-centred” methods or “child-friendly” techniques (Castro et al., 2016). This allows the data collection strategies themselves to be adapted to children, rather than the other way around, in order to listen to them on issues that are specific to them. Multi-level assemblies (Jiménez, 2010), photovoice (Soriano & Cala, 2016) and conversation drawing (Castro et al., 2015) have been used with pupils.

- “Map of the school” assemblies: reflective conversation between participants that allows for large group reflection on the idea they have of their school, as well as the feelings or emotions that arise when talking about it.
- Photovoice “The school I have, the school I want”: an information-gathering technique that combines photography and narrative. On the one hand, the process of photographic production by the students of places, situations or resources that they relate to experiences, both positive and negative, of their rural school. On the other

hand, the elaboration of the narrative, a reflective text authored by each child on the proposed theme.

- Drawing-conversation “Promote your school”: pictorial representations elaborated by the students in which they express their vision of the rural school, at the same time as they dialogue and reflect as a group. Each participant thinks of a corporate identity or brand that represents their school by drawing a logo and writing a slogan. The reflection revolves around how they would invite other children to study in their rural school.

Table 2 details the techniques used, the objective of each technique, the priority dimensions of the object of study, the research questions or topics raised, and the data obtained.

Table 2. Techniques for collecting information and data produced by students

Technique	Description	Dimensions	Questions/ Topics	Data produced
Assembly	Group reconstruction of a map of their rural school	Mixed classrooms. Peer tutoring. Flexible methodologies and spaces. Natural and varied resources. Feelings.	What is our school like? Do we coexist with peers of other ages in the same class? How do we work in the classroom? What are breaks in nature like? etc.	6 assemblies 143 minutes of audio recording 60 photographs 12 field notes
Photovoice	Visual and narrative representation of their rural school	Strengths Barriers Changes	Topic 1: What I like most about my rural school... Topic 2: What I like least about my rural school... Topic 3: What I would change about my rural school...	303 textualised photographs
Drawing-conversation	Pictorial representation of the potential of your rural school	Strengths	Topic: I promote my school...	101 narrated drawings

### **Data analysis and categories**

The data analysis process is approached from the content analysis method, specifically, through coding supported by the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti 22. Following Strauss & Corbin's (2002) proposal, data coding is carried out inductively and interpretatively through the categories that emerge from the data, taking as a reference the theoretical framework and the objectives of the study.

The analysis process is developed in three phases: 1) open coding, where significant segments of information are identified and selected and linked to the categories of analysis (Figure 1); 2) axial coding, where relationships between codes are established, for which co-occurrence tables have been used; and 3) selective coding, which focuses on the theoretical construction based on the relationship between codes, expressed through the category networks and maps.

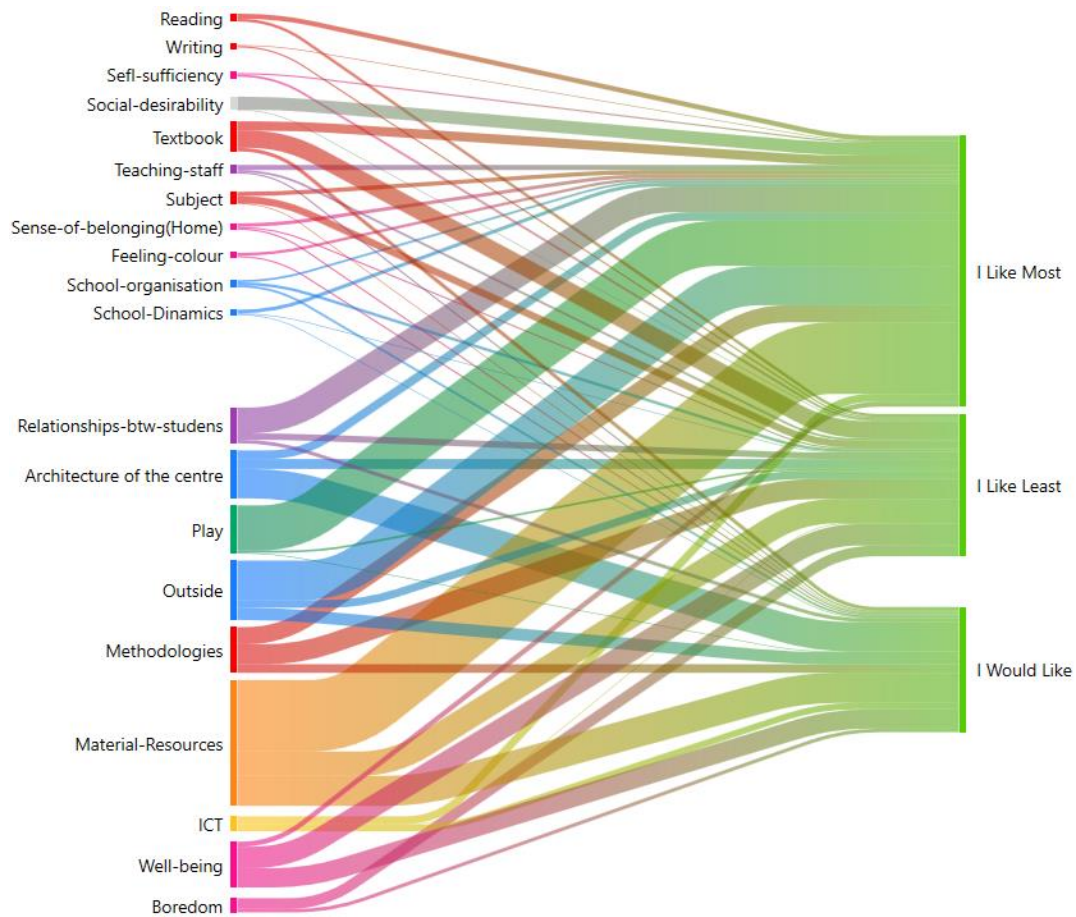


Figure 1. Sankey diagram of the categories of analysis

To ensure the confirmability of this study, data triangulation has been used from three perspectives: 1) combining different data collection strategies (multi-level assemblies, photovoice and drawing-conversation) with the purpose of contrasting information and counteracting the possible subjectivity that may occur in the interpretations of the researcher-analyst; 2) using different informants (students from different educational stages) and school contexts (students from different Infant and Primary Education centres); 3) in the process of data analysis, a "handmade" enquiry of the information has been coordinated with the qualitative analysis software.

## Result

Table 3 shows the main results organised into strengths, barriers and improvements from the perspective of the students in the CRAs, as well as the response frequencies and the relationship between the dimensions of the study and the aforementioned categories of analysis.



Table 3. Students' views of the CRA

Dimensions		Strengths	Barriers	Improvements
Material vision (171)	Material resources	97	33	41
Academic vision (144)	Academic activities (reading and writing)	7+1	4+2	0
	Methodologies	21	28	12
	Subject	6	10	0
	Textbook	13	24	5
	ICT	11	0	8
Contextual vision (116)	Architecture of the centre	12	7	28
	Outside	47	11	11
Emotional vision (96)	Sense of belonging (home)	4	0	2
	Well-being	7	30	25
	Self-sufficiency	2	3	0
	Boredom	0	15	5
	Feeling-colour	4	0	2
Relational vision (48)	Relationships between students	28	9	5
	Teaching staff	1	3	2
Idealised vision (19)	Social desirability	18	1	0
Institutional vision (17)	School organisation	3	4	1
	School Dynamics	5	1	1

Of the different visions that result from the analysis, the ones that have most weight in the students' voice are: 1) material vision, focused on the resources and material elements used in their day-to-day life; 2) academic vision, especially focused on the methodologies used in the classroom; 3) contextual vision, linked to architectural elements and spaces of their school, especially those referring to the outside; 4) emotional vision, focused on aspects related to well-being and possibilities for action (or boredom); 5) relational vision, which fundamentally alludes to relationships between classmates.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship map of the categories that appear most frequently in the data (substantiation) and have the highest number of relationships (density), known as core categories (Abela et al., 2007).

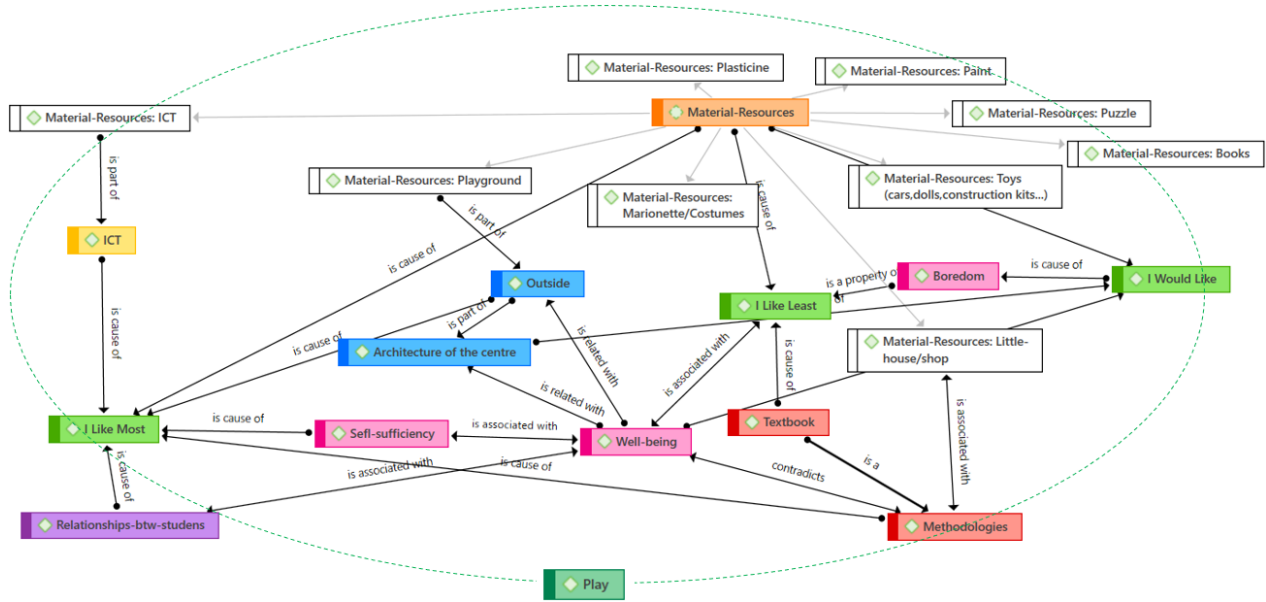


Figure 2. Network of relationships of the central categories of the analysis generated in ATLAS.ti 22

As it can be seen in Figure 2, play (n= 67) appears as a transversal category that is present and saturates all the others. In this sense, it can be seen how children categorise their responses in terms of play and the possibility of playing. Thus, if play arises or is possible in the questions posed to them, the children's responses tend to be positive or linked to positive emotions, and conversely, what is not directly or indirectly related to play tends to be categorised by them as negative (I don't like it, boring), as can be seen in Figure 3.




Drawing-Conversation	Photo Voice
<p>Promociona a túa escola... MA NOSA ESCOLA APRENDIEMOS XOGANDO</p>  <p>“In our school we learn by playing”. (M., 8 years old, Drawing-Conversation)</p>	<p>(What I like most is...)</p>  <p>“To play, because we learn by playing” (Fr., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>  <p>“Playground, because we can play to we want” (A., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>

Figure 3. Exemplifying student voice through Photovoice and Drawing-Conversation

**Material vision: strengths, barriers and resource enhancements**

Children's responses are mostly focused on things they can see and are tangible, which is typical of their specific stage of development. The material resources available to them at school (inside and outside the classroom) are the main focus of their discourse (Figure 4).

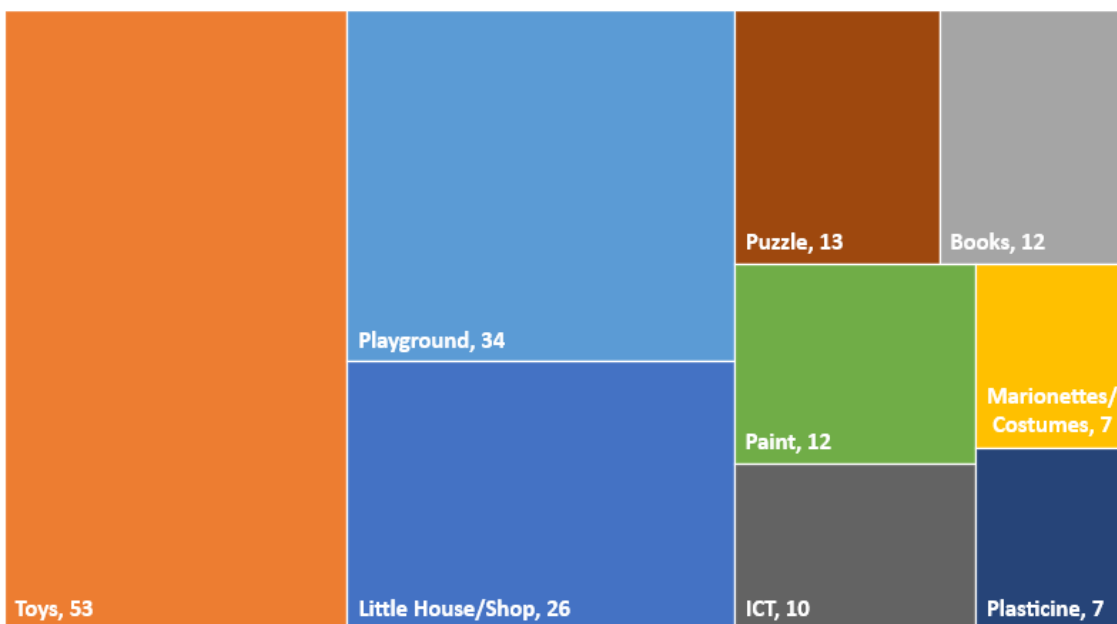


Figure 4. Rectangle chart of the subcategories of the dimension Material Resources

Pupils refer to objects and materials that they use in their daily routines and activities. They include in this category objects of varying degrees of complexity and abstraction. Thus, we find in their responses both concrete material objects such as play dough, paintbrushes or more technological objects such as the Tablet, together with other more structured objects, such as materials used to design educational spaces or corners, like the little house, the tent or the kitchen, or costumes that allow them to design and develop unstructured games both individually and collectively (Figure 5).

<p>LAPLASTILINA</p>		
<p>“Plasticine” (Á., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>	<p>“Brush, because it paints” (Ar., 4 years old, Photovoice)</p>	<p>→ capita porque tiene muchas cosas quiere</p>
		<p>“I like the little house because it has a lot of things to play with them”. (S., 8 years old, Photovoice)</p>

Figure 5. Exemplification of “What I like the most about my rural school...” referring to the material vision.

The majority of pupils' references to these resources are positive, although some mentions

point to the need to change or improve them for new or different ones, either because they are deteriorated or worn out, or simply because they do not like them or do not appeal to them, as can be seen in Figure 6.

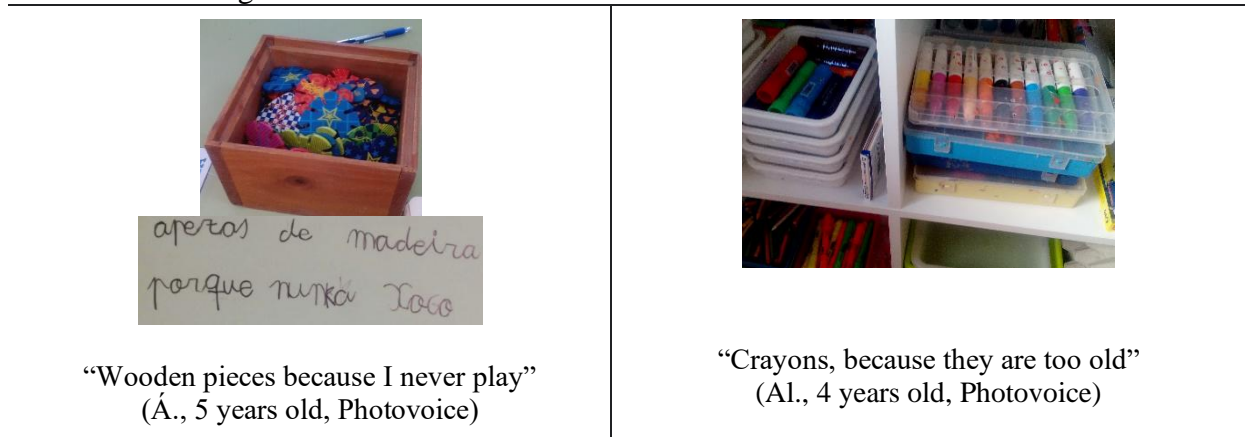


Figure 6. Exemplification of “What I would change about my rural school...” referring to material resources.

Moreover, pupils draw attention to the care of the materials and their suitability for their abilities and possibilities of use and action. In fact, difficulty of use, as well as boredom, are the main causes of the negative view of some of the resources available to them in the classroom (Figure 7).

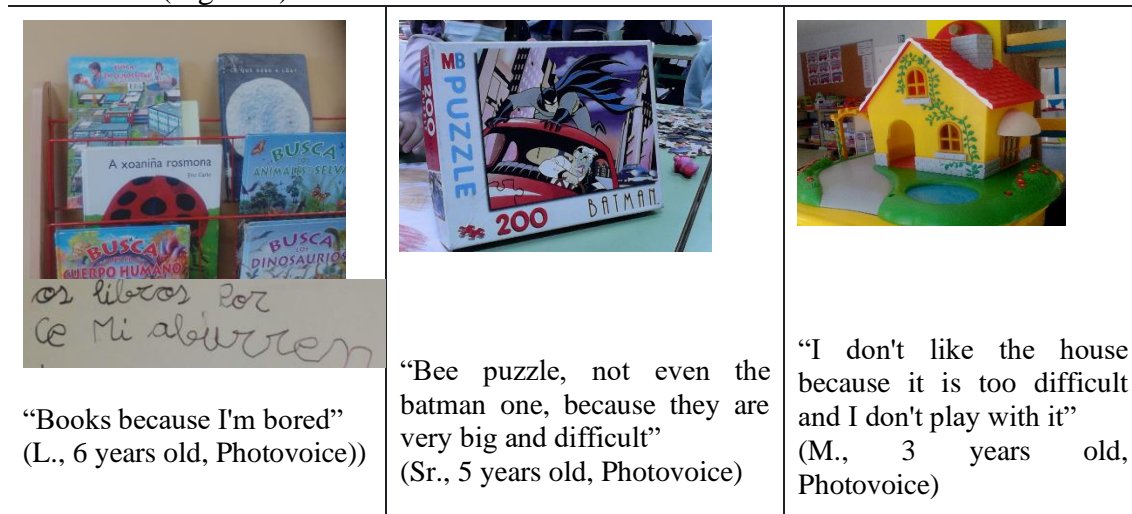


Figure 7. Exemplification of “What I don't like about my rural school...” in terms of care and appropriateness of resources.

### Academic vision: strengths, barriers, and improvements

In the children's discourse on academic vision, the presence of methodological issues stands out, represented by references made in relation to the structuring of activities or times at school. These issues appear in two directions, on the one hand, those related to play, understood as strengths, and on the other hand, those related to worksheets and textbooks, understood as barriers. It is worth noting that both visions have a similar presence in the students' discourse.

The references mentioned as strengths of the rural school point to a playful vision “I like to

play” or “having fun”, and to more concrete or more structured possibilities, such as the puppets that allow them to create stories together and put them into play both individually and collectively through the little theatre (Figure 8).



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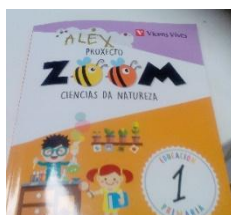
“Playing with puppets, because we have fun together and make a play and we all like to play theatre. And we go one by one”  
(J., 5 years old, Photovoice)

Figure 8. Exemplification of "What I like most about my rural school..." referring to symbolic play.

Furthermore, in terms of barriers, we find multiple examples that relate them to textbooks and flashcards, used as a classroom methodology, which they classify as “not liked” (Figure 9).

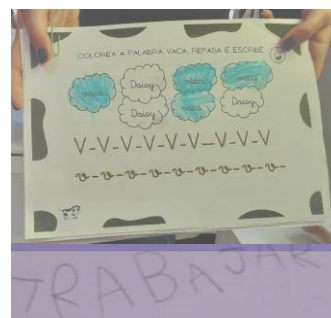


“Work, because I have to do the worksheets and if I don't do them, the teacher gets angry”  
(R., 5 years old, Photovoice)



traballar porque é aburrido

“Work, neither the worksheets nor the books, because they are very boring”  
(M., 6 years old, Photovoice)



TRABAJAR  
“Work. We do a lot of work, painting, making letters, cards...” (Ln., 5 years old, Photovoice)

Figure 9. Exemplification of “What I like least about my rural school...” referring to methodological aspects

**Contextual view: strengths, barriers and improvements on architecture and outdoor spaces**

The outdoor spaces are highlighted as one of the great strengths of the rural school for its students (Figure 10), especially referring to the schoolyard, its closest environment. This refers both to the spaces themselves and the material elements present.






<p>“What I like most about school is the playground (...) because there is a slide” (Assembly, 3-4 years old)</p>	 <p>“The playground because we can play” (B., 4 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“School cool” (F., 7 years old, Drawing-conversation)</p>	 <p>“Because I have a lot of fun” (Í., 7 years old, Drawing-conversation)</p>
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Figure 10. Exemplification of “What I like most about my rural school...” that alludes to the contextual vision.

It is interesting to note that they do not focus exclusively on outdoor objects or resources, such as the swing or the slide, or on the outdoor spaces themselves, but also incorporate the possibilities for action that they allow (Figure 11).



<p>“A giant stone in the courtyard. -I love it! -And me! -I love climbing!” (Assembly, 5-8 years)</p>	 <p>“¡Climb! Because it's too big -the stone in the courtyard” (S., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“Collecting acorns” (F., 3 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“¡Playing in the oak grove” (C., 5 years old, Drawing-conversation)</p>
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Figure 11. Exemplification of “What I like most about my rural school...” in terms of outdoor spaces.

These possibilities for action also become symbols of the identity of their schools, such as the large “climbing” stone in the courtyard, or the possibilities of the natural resources of the Oak Grove.

Questions related to architecture go beyond physical issues and are linked to other aspects such as the organisation of learning spaces or “environments”, both in their own classrooms and outside. Here, they refer to the material elements and resources used in their daily lives and in their classroom and play routines and how they relate to the category of methodologies. The children also demand improvements both in physical or construction elements and in others of a more organisational nature and in the adaptation and selection of educational spaces in the classroom itself or in the outdoor playgrounds (Figure 12).




		
<p>La decoración y los espacios de mi clase</p> <p>“The decoration and spaces in my classroom” (Sr., 8 years old, Photovoice)</p>	<p>“A covered playground for when it rains” (G., 7 years old, Photovoice)</p>	<p>“Bigger playground, where it doesn't rain” (M., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>

Figure 12. Exemplification of “What I would change about my rural school...” that refer to elements around them

They also allude to the size of the playgrounds, the use they could make of them and the need for covered spaces for when it rains, as well as more fanciful ideas, typical of this age group, such as having a water park or amusement park.

**Emotional vision: strengths, barriers and improvements in rural schools**

In this vision we can identify two clear trends, on the one hand, responses related to more negative emotional aspects, in the sense of what they do not like to happen in their relationships with others at school, and on the other hand, a more positive one that has to do with peer and teacher relationships, which is closely linked to the relational vision and which is dealt with in the following section.

Pupils express situations and circumstances in their school which they find unpleasant, referring mainly to specific aspects but which they are able to link to emotions, both superficial and deeper. Thus, we find situations in their relationships with their classmates that they would change or that they identify as negative, such as fights or arguments (Figure 13).

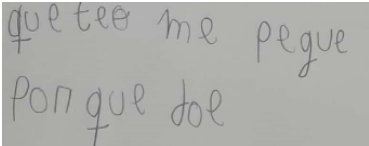
	<p>“Sometimes we fight” (Assembly, 5-8 años old)</p>
<p>“I would change a partner, who would not hit me, who would be good.” (Fr., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>	

Figure 13. Exemplification of “What I would change about my rural school...” related to emotional issues

A group of responses are also identified that refer more to their relationship with adults and the “rules or norms” of the school, such as the traffic light for behaviour or the negative reinforcements (punishments) that exist (Figure 14).




 <p>“I would change the behavioural traffic light from red and yellow - leave only green” (I., 4 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“To be punished” (B., 6 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“I don't like sitting down or being punished, because it's boring” (F., 4 years old, Photovoice)</p>
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Figure 14. Exemplification of “What I would change about my rural school...” related to emotional issues

These demands for change are an important wake-up call for some of the children who are encountering problems in their relationships with their peers and/or teachers and should be taken into account.

**Relational vision: strengths, barriers and improvements in the social sphere**

The voice of the pupils highlights the importance of personal relationships as one of the great strengths of the rural school, emphasising both the people themselves and the characteristics and possibilities of relationships in the spaces or activities that are carried out in them or with different materials (Figure 15).





 <p>“The managers' area, because they're all there and they're talking” (Ar., 4 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>Mis amigas porque puedo jugar con ellas agoras que puedo jugar “My friends because I can play with them at things we can play at” (Ir., 7 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“Play, because I play with my friends” (R., 5 years old, Photovoice)</p>	 <p>“Painting with pink paint and playing with my friends” (N., 3 years old, Photovoice)</p>
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Figure 15. Exemplification of “What I like most about my rural school...” the voice of the pupils in terms of personal relationships.

Their responses, the result of the developmental stage in which they find themselves, refer mainly to concrete relationships with their classmates, mediated, most of the time, by different games and materials that enable them to carry out activities or actions together, such as playing with Legos or painting together. It is also pointed out that the inter-level relationship, favoured by the multigrade classrooms typical of rural schools, causes

conflicting opinions among the students, as shown in the following dialogues.

Table 4. Examples of assembly excerpts

<p>Q: And how about going to class together?                  A: Great; (Boy, 4 years old)                  A: I play with S.] (Boy) .                  Teacher: “With S. who is over 5 years old (Assembly, 3-4 years old)</p>	<p>Q: And do you like to be with the little ones?                  A: Not at all! (Girl, 7 years old) (Assembly, 5-8 years old)</p>	<p>Q: Do you older children like to be with the little ones?                  A: Sometimes (Boys/Girls)                  Q: Do you like to help them?                  A: Yes, we do (Boys/Girls) (Assembly, 5-8 years old)</p>
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## Discussion and Conclusions

The research carried out moves away from the traditional pedagogical perspective on what happens in CRA classrooms, to approach the students' perception of the rural school, a line of study that has not been very much taken into account in research on rural schools (Howley, 2009). As Bustos (2011) points out: “what is not made visible does not seem to exist, and research can help to prevent this invisibility from continuing to be one of the great hindrances for these schools” (p. 157). This was one of the main motivations for this work in combining the voice of the schoolchildren with their opinions and feelings associated with their experience.

Photovoice has allowed the schoolchildren to be active participants and collaborators who identify “what is important” in their school, contributing images that are relevant and meaningful to them with a subsequent dialogue that determines the meaning and interpretation of the photographs. This has contributed to the active participation of children in the school (Cook & Buck, 2010), giving them a voice and listening to them while empowering them as co-researchers in the study.

In the voice of the students, it became evident that there are elements considered by them as identity symbols of the schools, which facilitate the development of a sense of belonging, as well as the construction of coexistence frameworks that are facilitated by the very characteristics of these schools, small ratios, multi-grade classrooms, familiarity and the possibility of daily relationships, etc., aspects already highlighted in the research by Vázquez (2018).

The study carried out points to the importance of taking into account the voice of the students, because it is something that they themselves demand, and also because it allows the participation of all students, with a diversity of competences, skills and expressive styles, much more than if we opt for more traditional data collection techniques focused on orality (interview) or writing (questionnaire) (Doval et al., 2013; Parrilla et al., 2017).

The pupils' voice is especially raised in relation to material resources, their daily lives and routines, which is why it seems interesting that the democratic processes of schools could begin by including them in the selection and renewal of materials, with the participation of girls and boys in both their choice and their organisation. This participation in the organisation of these educational resources, as well as of classroom and centre spaces, will offer schoolchildren the possibility of modulating and improving the practices carried out in rural schools, thus participating in the fundamental objective of the teaching-learning processes.

The results also point to the interest of exploring the possibilities offered by the natural





outdoor space, highlighted as a strength by pupils, in terms of actions, as it is one of the great advantages offered by the school in rural contexts. In this regard, recent research by Pérez-Solís and Torralba-Burrial (2021) points to the value of natural elements as didactic resources that affect pupils' motivation and their connection with nature, as well as their great potential as learning resources for the multigrade school.

Play takes a central place in the students' discourse. It permeates everything, it is associated with the outdoors, methodologies, ICT, relations between students, etc. The children demand a place for learning through play in rural schools, highlighting the value and potential of play in their development and demanding more space for it in their school. This research has sought to put that green ear that allows adults, researchers, teachers and families to “hear things that adults never stop to feel (...), children when they tell things” (Rodari, 1979).

The research carried out has made it possible to take into account the voice of the students, listening to and making visible their opinions and feelings about the rural school to which they belong. However, it is not exhausted here, but opens up future lines of research in which to continue investigating. One of them would be to contrast the children's reflections with the opinions of teachers, families, and local authorities. Another could be to check whether the children's visions that emerge in this study related to contextual, material, academic, emotional, and relational aspects are repeated in other schools, whether they coincide with the perspective expressed by students in other rural places or in an urban environment.

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