Self-perception of the leadership in rural schools to mobilize the relationships with the community

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Abstract

Rural educational leadership is considered a key factor for fostering positive relationships between rural schools and their surroundings. These relationships, in turn, enrich the educational process and enhance the connection of social agents with the school. Therefore, through an exploratory study, we aim to understand whether Spanish rural educational leaders believe that their leadership style influences the type of relationships established and how this occurs. This investigation utilized a mixed questionnaire with the participation of 123 rural school administrations, along with a case study in a Rural Grouped Centre in Galicia. The findings emphasize that school administrations believe their leadership contributes to positive connections between the school and its community, and community involvement in educational centres is increasingly common. In conclusion, leadership style significantly influences school-community relationships, and a school plan that articulates and enhances these relationships and the terms in which they take place is indispensable. Furthermore, the bidirectional positive impact of these relationships is acknowledged by all key stakeholders involved.

Keywords

Rural School, Leadership, School-Community Relationship, Administrative Direction, Continuous Training.

1. Introduction

1.1. Relationships in Rural Schools

The warmth and proximity of relationships established by rural schools are significantly influenced by the leadership style and management of the school, as school administrators are closer to the community and exert a greater influence on school involvement than teachers (Barrientos *et al*., 2016; Camarero, 2015; Leiva-Guerrero, 2022; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Torres, 2008; Zuckerman, 2020). In this article, the educational community comprises all daily participants in rural schools, including teachers, families, students, administrative staff, neighbours, and local organizations. Thus, community participation encompasses the engagement of all these individuals in school activities (Fred & Singh, 2021; Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022; Traver *et al*., 2010). Rural schools promote rural development (Zuckerman, 2020) and implement practices to foster positive relationships with the community. These include ongoing teacher interaction with the environment, the incorporation of social references, proximity, the expansion of the classroom into social spaces, and the integration of rural culture and the environment into work plans (Abós *et al*., 2021; Álvarez-Álvarez *et al*., 2020; Camarero, 2015; Champollion, 2011; Sales *et al*., 2019; Torres, 2008).

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School-community relations in rural areas are characterized by being close and positive, leading to an understanding and improvement of the local area, shared educational responsibility, collaborative problem-solving, addressing social inequalities, and strengthening the sense of belonging to the rural world (Calvo *et al*., 2016; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Herrera, 2017; Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022; León-Nabal *et al*., 2017; Lien, 2021; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Younis *et al*., 2022; Zuckerman, 2020). Although relationships were traditionally limited to families regularly associated with the school, community participation in rural schools is on the rise (Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022), and scientific research on school leadership attests to this fact (Abós *et al*., 2021; Bolívar, 2010; Fred & Singh, 2021; Freire & Miranda, 2014; Harmon & Schafft, 2019; Leithwood *et al*., 2004; Seashore-Louis *et al*., 2010; Mayoral *et al*., 2018; Álvarez-Álvarez *et al*., 2020).

Leadership is required to oversee practices within the school (Ortega & Cárcamo, 2018), and shared and networked leadership practices are needed to establish and promote collaboration and engagement networks with the community (Botella, 2023). Both Calvo *et al*. (2016) and Ortega and Cárcamo (2018) found that clarifying community participation and democratically establishing when and where it occurs lead to an increase in participatory willingness. Therefore, this research aims to understand the role of rural leadership in mobilizing relationships with the community, according to the perception of rural school administrations.

1.2. Rural Administration and Leadership

Rural school administrations face significant challenges (Cothern, 2020; Hansen, 2018; Ulker & Baris, 2020; Younis *et al*., 2022), including resource scarcity, social, territorial, and labour isolation (Álvarez-Álvarez & Gómez-Cobo, 2021; Sales *et al*., 2019; Klocko & Justis, 2019), the temporary nature of the staff, and a lack of specific training plans in rural leadership (Barrientos *et al*., 2016; Bolívar, 2010; Torres, 2013) . These factors hinder the continuity of projects (Álvarez-Álvarez *et al*., 2020; Fred & Singh, 2021) and the professionalization of the position (Torres, 2013; Zuckerman, 2020).

Leadership requires reflection and preparation (Mayoral *et al*., 2018; Bolívar, 2010), as emphasized by rural directors studied by Lorenzo *et al*. (2019), who have received specific training for their profession. Leadership training is crucial and necessitates educational policies due to its implications for schools and their environments (Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022). Torres (2013) and Zuckerman (2020) advocate for rural leadership interaction as a means to address difficulties within rural schools.

In a society that encourages democracy and participation, school leadership must delegate and diversify tasks (Bolívar, 2010; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Torres, 2013), and leadership must facilitate and motivate participation (Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022; Lorenzo *et al*., 2019; Ortega & Cárcamo, 2018). It is essential for these figures to have dedicated time for these purposes (Abós *et al*., 2021; Bolívar, 2010; Fred & Singh, 2021; Leithwood *et al*., 2004; Zuckerman, 2020).

Previous research (Barrientos *et al.,* 2016; Lorenzo *et al*., 2019; Traver *et al*., 2010) considers that the mastery of communication skills by rural leadership is important for community involvement in schools (Zuckerman, 2020). Thus, studies by Lorenzo *et al*. (2019) and Ulker and Baris (2020) highlight skills for creating a relaxed working environment, which facilitates and energizes relationships (Bolívar, 2010; Ulker & Baris, 2020), and a clear purpose: social, community, and educational improvement (Mayoral *et al*., 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Younis *et al*., 2022). Finally, multiple authors (Abós *et al*., 2021; Hansen, 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017) call for managerial knowledge of the geographic and cultural context to build trust and community support and create a collaborative culture (Zhu *et al*., 2022).

Rural leadership is transformational (Quality Education Agenda, 2016), understood as leadership seeking educational innovation and improvement to address challenges and difficulties (Zhu *et al*., 2022). It is also redarchic, as it promotes the collaboration and involvement of the community in schools (Botella, 2023). Rural leadership empowers teachers for change by establishing and leading joint work points (Seashore-Louis *et al*., 2010; Zhang *et al*., 2002; Zhu *et a*l., 2022). It encourages autonomy in decision-making and participation in public life (Seashore-Louis *et al.,* 2010; Traver *et al*., 2010; Zhang *et al*., 2022; Zhu *et al*., 2022).

In this line, the practices of successful rural leadership studied by Preston and Barnes (2017) show that they have become agents of change for the school and its environment through the interrelation of the local context with the global world (Quality Education Agency, 2016; Mingorance & Estebaranz, 2016). In those rural schools that have embraced change, leadership exercised by both management teams and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) has been decisive (Camarero, 2015; Torres, 2008). In China, it is empirically proven that rural leadership plays a crucial role in stimulating community participation (Leiva-Guerrero *et al*., 2022; Zhang *et al*., 2022) by (1) promoting reflection and teacher training on collaboration structures and (2) mobilizing and supervising actions.

Transformational leadership emerges in rural schools through the interplay of pedagogical and distributed leadership. This entails the compilation of support and training from colleagues equipped with relevant strategies, tools, or methodologies (Fred & Singh, 2021). This leadership approach addresses social and educational challenges in a multidisciplinary and collective manner (Abós *et al*., 2021; Barrientos *et al*., 2016; Camarero, 2015; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Notably, rural pedagogical leaders actively promote the continuous training of their team, encouraging the utilization of social, material, and cultural assets present in the environment (Lorenzo *et al*., 2019). Moreover, directors, as studied by Mayoral *et al*. (2018), emphasize that a school's educational project is not fruitful unless it considers the needs and perspectives of various community agents, ensuring continuity.

2. Methodology

The research aims to explore leadership in rural schools as a key factor in mobilizing relationships with the educational community. Specific objectives include: (1) exploring the leadership's self-perception regarding its role in stimulating community relationships; (2) identifying trends in leadership style regarding relationships with the environment; (3) understanding the specific training of rural leadership in Spain in these terms; and (4) understanding rural school-community relationships.

The review of scales on rural schools, their relationships, and their leadership style allowed for the development of a questionnaire to shed light on an empirically understudied question: the role of rural leadership in mobilizing relationships with the community from the leadership perspective. The questionnaire sought to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships that rural schools establish with their community through specific questions in the study. Validated by five expert researchers in rural education, who provided rigorous feedback on its content and form, the questionnaire is structured around seven study axes: (1) leadership style; (2) director's knowledge of the local area; (3) specific training; (4) leadership actions to guide relationships; (5) environment-community relationship with the school; (6) school relationship with the environment-community; and (7) characteristics of the school's relationships with its community.

This questionnaire is the result of consulting and adapting other scales validated in this research field, such as "effective practices of pedagogical leadership in school management" (García-Garnica, 2018), the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) pedagogical leadership scale, and the rubric for evaluating family participation in schools by León and Fernández (2017). The questionnaire consists of a Likert-type scale and open-ended questions to delve into the addressed issues in detail. It was sent to all rural directors in Spain (812) through an online form, resulting in 123 responses. Quantitative analysis was conducted through descriptive statistics using Excel, calculating mean values, percentages, and deviations, presented in tables in the next section and briefly discussed after their presentation. Additionally, the data is complemented by the ethnographic analysis of educational leadership and participation practices in a Galician Rural Clustered Centre, using systemic observation and conducting interviews with community members (neighbours, bakers, families, teachers, management, students). Qualitative analysis was performed.

Observation was chosen as it allows for attention to natural behaviours and interactions and formulating future hypotheses (Qaddo, 2019; Uwamusi & Ajisebiyawo, 2023). Interviews allowed for a detailed understanding of participants' perceptions regarding research questions, and interviewers could explore mentioned aspects and gather more information, serving as a suitable complement to observation to understand developed practices (Kumar, 2022; Utibe, 2019). Both practices are helpful in exploratory studies such as this one, as there are no previous studies, and they identify central aspects of this theme that will guide broader studies.

3.Results

3.1. Characterization of Study Participants

The 123 school directors, comprising 79 women and 44 men, are unevenly distributed across Spain (Figure 1). Regarding their age, the predominant age group is between 41 and 50 years (43.09%) (Table 1), and the most common initial education is a diploma (73.17%). Over 79% of the participants lead Clustered Rural Schools (CRA, ZER, CER, CPR, CPRA, Eskola Txikiak).
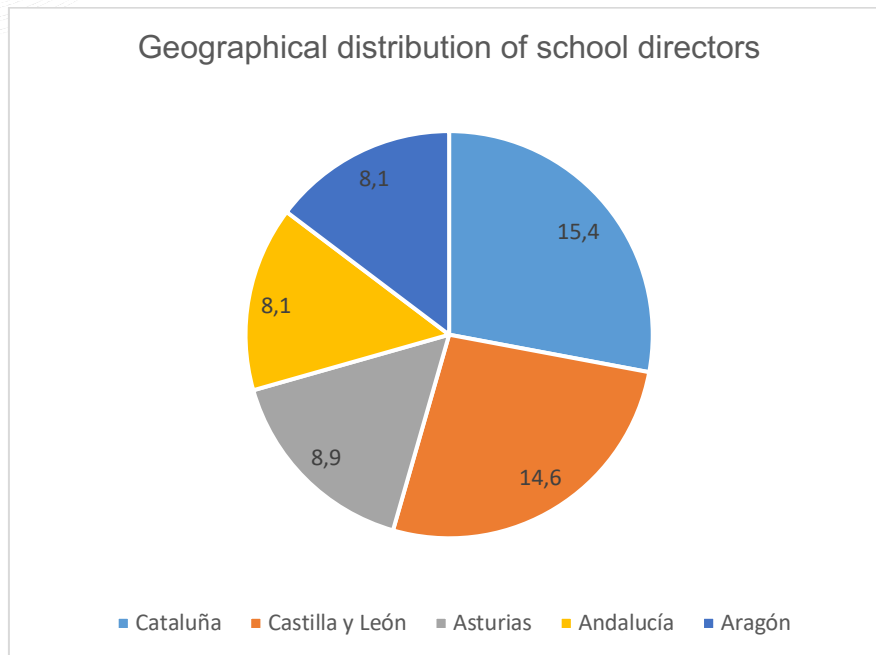
Figure 1. Geographical distribution of school directors

Table 1.
Age of school directors

Age range	Percentage
Under 30	2,4%
31 a 40	13,8%
41 a 50	43,1%
51 a 60	37,4%
Over 60	3,3%

The initial characterization suggests a lack of proposals for initial or ongoing training on leadership or the stimulation of community relations, with initiatives relying on regional interest. There is also a lack of attention to rural particularities, except in the Galician, Catalan, and Basque communities. For example, there are proposals such as "specialized training sessions for management teams of rural grouped schools" or "seminars for directors of Rural Schools in Euskadi," with a duration of fewer than ten hours.

3.2. Leadership for the Improvement of Community Relations

Through different tables, the remaining results will be presented. In the Likert scale, the value 1 corresponds to the highest degree of disagreement with the question, and value 5, consequently, to the highest agreement. Thus, in the data analysis, the use of the value 1 is associated with the term "totally disagree"; value 2 implies "disagree"; value 3, "somewhat agree"; 4, "agree," and finally, the number 5 refers to "totally agree." The corresponding symbols for the mean value (x̄) and standard deviation (σ) have been used.

Table 2.
Directorial leadership style

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{x}$	σ
My leadership style contributes to enhancing the relationships between the school, the educational community, and the environment	0%	2,4%	5,7%	35,8%	**56,1%**	4,46	0,71
I am responsible for collecting contributions from all members of the educational community and giving them meaning and response	0%	5,7%	15,4%	**44,7%**	34,1%	4,07	0,85
I monitor the effectiveness of relationships established with all members of the educational community	1,6%	12,2%	31,7%	**34,1%**	20,3%	3,59	1,00
I set guidelines for collaboration and relationship with the educational community	0,8%	7,3%	22%	**44,7%**	25,2%	3,86	0,91
I stimulate a cooperative work environment with the educational community to improve the quality of teaching	0%	0,8%	9,8%	39%	**50,4%**	4,39	0,70
In my school, the SEP has been developed and structured thanks to the contributions of the educational community	4,9%	11,4%	20,3%	**39,8%**	23,6%	3,66	1,10
In my school, the educational community is aware of what is happening in the school through formal and informal meetings, as well as monitoring social networks or blogs of the school	1,6%	4,1%	12,2%	38,2%	**43,9%**	4,19	0,92

The participating directors express that their leadership significantly contributes to enhancing relationships with the community and the environment, as reflected in an average Likert scale score of 4.46. Nearly 92% of them indicate strong agreement or agreement with this sentiment. Similarly, sentiments are echoed in relation to fostering a cooperative work environment, yielding an average score of 4.39, with almost 90% strongly agreeing or agreeing. However, in queries regarding the collection of contributions, monitoring the effectiveness of relationships, or the development of the School Educational Project (SEP) through contributions, the average responses are 3.59, 3.86, 3.66, respectively, indicating more variability compared to the initially discussed questions.

These values are supported by qualitative data, as rural leadership advocates for a management style characterized by listening, collaboration, and proximity, under the premise that "to educate a child, the entire tribe is necessary" (Participant21).

Table 3.
School leadership's knowledge of the local area

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{x}$	σ
I know the needs and potentialities of the local area and its educational community through observation and active listening to all members	0%	1,6%	6,5%	37,4%	**54,5%**	4,45	0,69
In my school, understanding of the local area is cultivated through plans and programs that focus on heritage, diversity, and culture	0%	4,1%	20,3%	34,1%	**41,5%**	4,13	0,88
I represent the school within the local area by participating in activities, associations, or local institutions	1,6%	7,3%	18,7%	32,5%	**39,8%**	4,02	1,02

I maintain active communication channels with other leaders in the local area to discuss educational and leadership issues	5,7%	4,9%	27,6%	26,8%	**35%**	3,8	1,14

Rural school administrations are focused on understanding their local area (average: 4.45). This understanding is nurtured through plans and programs aimed at comprehending heritage, diversity, and culture, with 34.1% and 41.5%, respectively, rating values 4 and 5 on the Likert scale. It can be observed that responses to both questions are concentrated around the mean value. On the other hand, the representation of the school administration in the local area, although having an average value of 4.02, shows greater dispersion, as nearly 27% of the administrators exercise it to a minimal or moderate extent.

An area of interest is rural leadership isolation. There are active communication channels among rural leaders (average value: 3.8), and their responses exhibit high dispersion in the results. Some administrations have no (5.7%) or very little (4.9%) interaction with counterparts. However, associations like AMCRAGA (Association of Teachers from Grouped Rural Schools in Galicia) aim to facilitate communication among rural administrators and teachers who share concerns and needs.

Table 4.
Specific training

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\overline{x}$	σ
I regularly attend leadership training to enhance collaboration with the local area.	11,4%	19,5%	**30,1%**	22%	17,1%	3,14	1,24
I propose diverse training sessions for teachers to identify and address local area needs.	1,6%	5,7%	16,3%	**41,5%**	35%	4,02	0,94

The average value for responses on specific training to improve collaboration with the local area is slightly above 3, reflecting a distribution across all degrees of agreement. Notably, just over 30% of participants have had minimal or no training in this regard. Qualitative data supports this, indicating a lack of specific training for rural directors, with many having general training in areas such as "leadership and management of schools" (Participant75) or "training for leadership teams" (Participant76). However, directors propose specific training for their teaching staff on some (16.3%), many (41.5%), or numerous (35.0%) occasions.

Table 5.
School leadership actions for leading relationships

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\overline{x}$	σ
I understand, regulate, and enhance the actions of the educational community in classroom and school dynamics	0%	3,3%	14,6%	**52,8%**	29,3%	4,08	0,75
In my school, schedules and spaces are adapted to the demands and needs of the educational community to facilitate their participation in classroom and school dynamics	0%	6,5%	13%	**43,9%**	36,6%	4,11	0,87
I regularly engage with entities and community members to build positive and influential bonds	0%	1,6%	6,5%	45,5%	**46,3%**	4,37	0,68
I propose new projects when I observe that community participation is low due to a lack of motivation or identification	0,8%	4,9%	23,6%	**46,6%**	24,4%	3,89	0,86

More than 80% of the school directors affirm that they effectively understand, regulate, and enhance community actions in their educational centre to a considerable or great extent. To achieve this, spaces and times are adapted to the needs of participants on some (13%), many (43.9%), and numerous (36.6%) occasions. They believe that their work involves ongoing interaction with community entities, a matter that has an average of 4.37 and little response dispersion. Open-ended questions reinforce this, indicating that "from

the management, there is close collaboration with the town halls" (Participant35) and "different administrations" (Participant57). Furthermore, 71% of the participants consider that they propose new projects when observing low community participation "somewhat" and "a lot".

3.3. School-Community Relations

Table 6.
Environment-community relationship with the school

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{x}$	σ
In my school, community participation and involvement of institutions in school life are increasing	0,8%	4,9%	24,4%	**38,2%**	31,7%	3,95	0,91
In my school, institutions in the local area understand their social and educational potential and regularly participate in school dynamics	0,8%	4,9%	23,6%	**39,8%**	30,9%	3,95	0,90
In my school, material, social, and cultural resources from the local area are used provided they align with the educational purposes of the school	0%	2,4%	13%	**44,7%**	39,8%	4,22	0,76
In my school, community inclusion in school dynamics is outlined in a specific plan	4,1%	9,8%	23,6%	**35,8%**	26,8%	3,72	1,09

Regarding the relationship established between the community and the school, directors agree that participation is increasing (31.7% totally agree, and 38.2% agree). Thus, rural institutions understand their potential and regularly engage in school activities, with 23.6% somewhat agreeing, 39.8% agreeing, and 30.9% totally agreeing.

Directors believe that resources provided by the local area are incorporated into educational dynamics if they are pedagogically appropriate (mean value: 4.22), and 84% of participating directors strongly or somewhat agree with their incorporation—an idea supported by various testimonies: "We are open to the local area and take advantage of all the educational opportunities it provides" (Participant6) and "The local area is an essential and structuring element of the curriculum" (Participant76).

Finally, when asked about implemented actions, such as the existence of a specific plan regulating community inclusion in the school, there is no agreement. Although the mean value is 3.72, responses are quite dispersed, with 9.8% and 4.1% of participants stating that they disagree or totally disagree.

Table 7.
Relationship of the centre with the local area and the community

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{x}$	σ
My school serves as the primary means of socialization and cultural dynamism in the environment	0,8%	6,5%	22,8%	**38,2%**	31,7%	3,93	0,94
In my school, students and teachers participate in community commemorations (patron saint's day, tributes to illustrious people) and engage in local activities (farming, livestock, tourism)	3,3%	8,9%	23,6%	30,1%	**34,1%**	3,83	1,10
In my school, collaborative initiatives between the school and the educational community are implemented (e.g., learning communities, interactive groups, service-learning dynamics)	10,6%	19,5%	23,6%	**27,6%**	18,7%	3,24	1,26
In my school, the relationships established with families go beyond solely school-related issues, addressing deeper family needs	0%	4,1%	20,3%	34,1%	**41,5%**	4,24	0,80

The results regarding the relationship between the school and its environment do not differ from those collected in the previous section. Nearly 70% of the participants agree or totally agree that their school serves as a means of socialization and cultural dynamism in the area, with the school being "one of the pillars of the town" (Participant31) and a "fundamental axis and engine of activities" (Participant75). Thus, 64% of the school leaders believe that their students and teachers participate in commemorations and activities proposed in the local area. However, it is noteworthy that 3.3% of the directors indicate that there is no participation in such dynamics in their schools, followed by 8.9% who consider it to occur infrequently.

Again, when asked about ongoing actions, the dispersion of responses increases. With a standard deviation of 1.26 points and a coefficient of variation of 39%, 10.6% of the directors do not implement dynamics to unite the school and the community, followed by 19.5% who indicate doing so infrequently and 23.6% who claim to do so on some occasions.

Finally, 75.6% of the responses from the directors express that they agree or totally agree that school involvement in the family extends beyond the educational realm.

Table 8.
Characteristics of the school and community relationships

Items	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{x}$	σ
In my school, the proximity of the teaching staff, the management, and the community promotes the development of a shared vision of teaching.	1,6%	0,8%	9,8%	**36,6%**	51,2%	4,35	0,82
En mi escuela, los docentes y la comunidad aúnan fuerzas para acompañar y reforzar los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje	0%	2,4%	21,1%	37,4%	**39%**	4,13	0,82
En mi escuela, la comunidad educativa conoce nuestra organización y los mecanismos de participación desde principio de curso	0%	4,9%	13,8%	30,9%	50,4%	4,27	0,88
In my school, the relationships established with the educational community are stable, warm, close, and long-lasting	0%	4,1%	6,5%	42,3%	**47,2%**	4,33	0,77
In my school, contact with the educational community is crucial to generate a sense of belonging between the local area and the centre.	0%	4,1%	13%	38,2%	**44,7%**	4,24	0,83

The school-community relationship is characterized by promoting a shared vision of teaching, with 90% of the responses concentrated in high values. Collaboration between teachers and the community to support and reinforce teaching and learning processes is a common point among participants, with 39% of administrations completely agreeing, 37.4% quite satisfied, and 21.1% somewhat satisfied, considering it "a line of action for the centre" (Participant19).

81% of the administrators believe that their educational community is familiar with the organization and participation mechanisms available from the beginning of the school year, with an average value of 4.28. Finally, 90% of administrators consider the relationships with the community to be stable, warm, close, and long-lasting, with an average response value of 4.33. They foster a sense of belonging from the community to the centre, as indicated by 83% of participants and some of their testimonies, stating that "they participate in our projects, and we participate in theirs" (Participant122).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The observed trends diverge from those documented in scientific literature and previous empirical studies. From a leadership standpoint, the rural leadership style has been shown to enhance community relations (Zhang et al., 2022), playing a crucial role in their regulation (Leiva-Guerrero et al., 2022; Lorenzo et al., 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rural leaders express a commitment to considering the opinions and needs of their surroundings, fostering collaborative work (Younis et al., 2022), and monitoring the effectiveness of relations (Zhu et al., 2022). However, there is generally a lack of reflective, documented, or systematic follow-up on the implemented measures, leading to instances where some schools fail to inform the community.

The collaborative culture, characterized by mutual understanding and knowledge (Zhu et al., 2022), is actively pursued by rural leaders aiming to comprehend the needs and potential of the environment, instilling such knowledge in their teachers and students (Abós et al., 2021; Hansen, 2018). However, leaders exhibit a lack of consensus regarding their involvement in the community outside the school. In contrast to Barrientos et al. (2016) or Bolívar (2010), more than ten per cent of directors operate independently of their community

counterparts (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Additionally, it is apparent that leadership training does not appear to be a priority for those involved, raising questions about its potential impact on schools and their community relations.

There are leadership actions aimed at fostering community relations. Leaders are cognizant of, regulate, and enhance these relations, which is crucial for developing new initiatives (Zuckerman, 2020). Thus, the leadership figure maintains constant contact with community entities and members (Preston & Barnes, 2017). While participants perceive themselves as highly involved, the data indicate that this involvement lacks structured monitoring plans, presenting an area for potential improvement.

Concerning school-environment relations, a bidirectional link is established. On the one hand, community participation in schools is on the rise (Leiva-Guerrero et al., 2022), as social and cultural institutions in the environment recognize the pivotal role that schools play. Similarly, most rural schools make use of resources provided by their surroundings. However, when questioned about tangible actions, such as the existence of a specific plan for community inclusion, collaboration exists but lacks systematic implementation. On the other hand, the educational institution stands out as a social and cultural focal point in its locality (Abós et al., 2021; Mayoral et al., 2021).

Finally, it is evident that school-environment relations are characterized by promoting the educational co-responsibility of the entire rural community and collaboration in educational processes (Herrera, 2017; León-Nabal et al., 2017). These are stable, warm, and close relationships that foster a sense of belonging from the environment to the school and vice versa (Barrientos et al., 2016; Leiva-Guerrero et al., 2022).

It is worth noting that, after the considerable effort made to locate and contact the directors of all rural schools in Spain, this study boasts significant participation from 123 directors. This sheds light on a critical issue in schools: collaboration and joint work with the centre's environment, the various mechanisms in which such practices take place, and the involvement of good leadership in this process.

This work paves the way for future perspectives and new research directions on leadership as a key factor in rural school relations with its environment. In-depth interviews are recommended to understand the actions related to the community within their leadership style and the existence of plans or projects in this area. Additionally, it is crucial to continue studying the specific training available to implement, monitor, and evaluate action plans with the rural community and the specific training available to rural leaders in their leadership journey to adapt to their social and educational reality.

In conclusion, this study has facilitated a deep dive into the study of administrative functions regarding the leadership of relations established with the community, from the administrative perception. Thus, this study provides an approach to the importance of leadership as a tool to interconnect the rural school and its surroundings, encouraging educational co-responsibility while highlighting rural culture and resources. The leadership style significantly influences the relationships established at the centre level with the community, encouraging (or not) increasing community participation in school life and local development. It is proven that relationships exist and are bidirectional, prompting positive evaluations from all involved parties and generating a sense of belonging. This contribution sheds light on a community leadership model of interest for any rural educational institution.

CRediT autorship contribution statement

Elena Abascal Obeso: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Carmen Álvarez-Álvarez**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Emma Fernández Gutiérrez**: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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