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**“En lo rural, la realidad es diferente.” – Exploring Teacher
Agency in the Context of Rural Honduras**

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Disclaimer:

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List of Acronyms

CNB	National Curriculum Design
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
PISA-D	Programme for International Student Assessment for Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Abstract

Although Honduran education frameworks categorize rural and urban schools differently, the education policies, such as curriculums and administrative organisation are homogenous for both. In turn, rural schools are expected to follow a plan which does not adjust to their contextual specificities. At the centre of these contradictions between policies and reality, we find the rural teacher as an agent that engages with the environment in which they find themselves in. The following research paper is an exploration of how teachers in rural El Paraíso, Honduras, use their agency to make decisions that adjust education processes to the rural reality. For this purpose, it describes their main challenges derived from the nature of the rural school context, and what strategies are being used to overcome them. Additionally, the research follows a qualitative methodology, delving into the perspectives of six rural teachers from two different schools in the zone.

In the context of rural Department of El Paraíso, Honduras, the findings reveal that teachers are limited by material conditions, such as lack of resources, as well as structural conditions, or lack of methods and frameworks for a rural school context. However, through the interplay between empirical knowledge, the collaborative nature and space for flexible practices that characterise the rural area and schools, and the aspirations for improvements in the education there are providing, teachers have been able to overcome such challenges.

Keywords

Teacher agency; rural education; rural teachers; coping mechanisms; quality education.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Although adjusting education policies to local contexts is considered a significant element in the pursuit of quality education, rural schools contexts and dynamics have been disregarded in this matter. Due to the lack of methods and training adjusted for rural schools, teachers have become the agents that adapt education processes to local circumstances. Because of the structural and material challenges the rural school might present, the teacher's agency and factors that facilitate it become an important element to fill in these gaps. However, is relying on the agency of teachers enough for to achieve quality education in rural schools?

International development entities, alongside countries, have agreed that education is one of the cornerstones of development. Within the Sustainable Development Goals, Goal Number Four "Quality Education" pursues "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2022). The signatories have committed to achieve that goal by 2030, which places emphasis on what exactly is "quality" and what elements are fundamental to achieve it.

The concept of Quality Education is broad and difficult to define due to the various existing approaches to it. Nonetheless, there is a consensus of core interacting elements that influence teaching and learning towards an education of quality. According to "Education for All" Global Monitoring Report Team (2005, p 35), the awareness of context is recognized as an important dimension to achieve quality education. This refers to the interactions between society and education and how particular structural, cultural or material circumstances influences education processes. For example, within context of poverty or instability, may be materially and structurally constrained, providing less opportunities for quality education systems.

Because this element acknowledges that circumstantial factors have a relational influence in education, it is imperative to adjust education processes into the context where they are taking place. Thus, ideally, decisions regarding educational processes should be situated into specific contexts, by considering the specificities of them. A uniform policy for education that disregards different contexts where they are meant to be implemented, results in gaps between the expected and the actual outcomes.

A particular setting where these gaps are evident are in rural areas. Authors such as Daniel (2004, p 4) and Gaudin (2019, p 14) point out that policymakers lack an understanding of the rural and, in turn, forge policies with an *urban bias*. In other words, uniform education policies for both rural and urban areas were likely designed with the urban as a basis, and the rural as an

afterthought. Elements such as diversity in geography, remoteness, access to public services and socio-economic situation in rural areas are ignored. With the exception of some countries that have recognized that rural education has a necessity for a different structure, rather than the traditional urban-led one, in general, there is a necessity for policies that adjust to their characteristics (Echavarría et al., 2019, p 25). Considering the above, if quality education is the goal, and policies adjusted to local contexts is a condition for that goal, then there is a significant debt towards quality in rural education.

In terms of who is filling the gaps left by an uncontextualized frameworks for rural education, we find the teacher. Rural teachers themselves deal with a fair share of challenges intrinsic to geographical, cultural and social nature of a rural setting. A variety of literature affirms that throughout educational systems in the world, there is a lack of proper training to teach in a rural setting (de la Vega Rodríguez, 2021, p 309; Nelson et al., 2021, p 214). Due to the lack of training for rural contexts, teachers are less equipped to work within the distinct characteristics that make a rural area, nor supported with a differentiated curriculum for a rural context. In this sense, a variety of problems may arise for the educators in the teaching process. In general, poor working conditions, isolation due to the remoteness of rural settings and inadequate rewards, are, to name a few, some of these difficulties (Nelson et al., 2021).

In general, the role of the teacher and their performance holds great importance, as they are the agent responsible for the reproduction of content before their students, or the “frontliners” in the impartation of education. Their position, however, holds a multifaceted nature, as they juggle between several roles. Teachers working in government-managed schools, for example, exercise a role of a street-bureaucrat, defined by Lipsky (1969) as government employees who interact with clients directly. In this case, the “clients” are students, and in turn, their parents. As Street-level bureaucrats, they are expected to adopt policies that might not properly align with local realities, such as the challenges previously mentioned regarding rural zones. Consequently, these contradictions between the written policies and local reality can result in unexpected outcomes, creating tension between the “clients” expectations, and what teachers are able to deliver. Teachers, then, become subject to criticism for their “inability to provide” an appropriate service (Lipsky, 1980, 27).

Aside from the circumstances that arise from their role as street-level bureaucrats, the teacher’s role goes beyond merely reproducing scholastic content to their students. In fact, it is said that the teachers also serve as a moral guide in the lives of their students, become a role model for them (Dirsa et al., 2022, p 38). In this sense, their position blurs the lines between merely an

occupation and significant figure on their students' scholastic lives (Spilt, Koomen and Thijs, 2011, p 458).

To begin understanding how rural education has been carried out, much emphasis needs to be placed in the position of the rural teacher. In other words, a study of teacher agency in the context of rural settings, and what facilitates or hinders it, becomes fundamental in rural education studies.

1.1 An Exploration of Teacher Agency

Between the educational policies and realities that do not meet eye to eye, the importance of the agent in the middle – the teacher – has gained more recognition through the years. As such, dominating trends have focused the attention on how to “construct” a teacher that becomes an agent of change through prescriptive curriculums, performance evaluations and teacher formation programmes (Priestley Biesta, & Robinson, 2015, p 1). Honduras, the focus country of this research paper, is no stranger to trends regarding the construction of an “effective teacher”. The Plan Estratégico del Sector Educación 2018-2030, details several instances of ways to improve teachers' performance in Honduras. The Plan emphasizes the need for permanent training of teachers, the development of standards to evaluate teachers' performance and improvement in teachers' hiring processes (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 53).

While these trends might, in some ways, contribute to the goal of quality in education, there is a paradox into wanting teachers to *become* agents of change, while prescribing them *how* to exercise their agency. Additionally, these trends overlook the ways in which teachers are already exercising their agency, by engaging and working within uncontextualized educational systems that do not converge with local realities. According to Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson (2015), such trends overtly focus on constructing an “effective teacher”, while ignoring sociocultural conditions where their agency is already being exercised. Hence, promoting environments where teachers are comfortable in exercising their agency and not constraint by evaluative standards, leads to self-awareness and self-improvement, contributing to the overall quality education (Moreno Carrasco & Roux, 2021, p 19).

Based on the previous argument regarding the importance of allowing teachers to exercise their agency in the workplace, the objective of this research paper is to explore how this agency is constructed in the context of rurality, and what factors are promoting or hindering it.

Regarding rural Honduras as the focus of the study, existing literature about rural education in Honduras, and Central America can be found, but in general, the themes of teacher experiences as rural teachers is hardly explored. This could be the case because governments and international organizations tend to focus on students when researching education challenges. Experiences of teachers, while incorporated in different research, has yet to gain more visibility, especially in the Latin American context, where policies for teachers are deemed as “risky” and “not a priority” (Fundación para la Educación Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu, 2022, p. 8). These gaps in the literature regarding Honduran teachers’ perspective, motivated the research that sheds light into their experiences.

1.2 The Research Question

From the aforementioned objectives, the following research questions emerge: **How does teachers’ agency adapt national educational frameworks to the context of rural Honduras?**

To help answer this question, the following sub-question were elaborated:

- 1 What do rural Honduran teachers identify as their main constraints in practice of their job?
- 2 What coping mechanisms can be identified as a response to their job constraints?
- 3 How do past experiences and future aspirations influence teachers’ actions in the present?

The Research Paper is composed by the following structure: Chapter two condenses a literature review of the challenges faced by rural education, followed by the theories employed as a framework for the study. Chapter three described the current state of rural education in Honduras, the focus country for this research paper. Chapter four elaborates on the methodology, describing the qualitative methods employed for data collection, followed by the limitations and considerations of the study. Chapter five and six delve into findings and data analysis. Chapter five explores the present dimension, or what is currently taking place in the schools of rural El Paraíso; while Chapter Six explore how past experiences and future aspirations of the teachers have, in some ways, influenced their present actions. The last Chapter answers the previous research question and provides some observations and afterthoughts regarding further research and further action for rural education.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

2.1 Challenges of Rural Education – A Literature Review

Though not completely homogenous, education in rural areas around the world seem to share a number of characteristics and challenges. To start, it is essential to note that the concept of rurality is “fluid” (Nelson et al., 2021, p 356) and “ambiguous” (Stelmach, 2011, p 33), making it complex to establish homogeneity between rural education research. Regardless of this complexity, scholars have tried to pinpoint some of the challenges that, in general, are prevalent in rural education settings. Stelmach (2011, p 33) uses an ecological model, categorising the challenges of rural education into three different levels, being the macrosystemic, mesosystemic and microsystemic. The ecological theory argues that certain contexts – in this case, rural settings – are integrated into a larger system that affects it at a macro level. For example, gender inequality, poverty and outmigration constitute issues at a broader scale, and not necessarily exclusive to rural settings. However, because they are a broad scale issues, they do affect rural settings.

On the other hand, the other two levels, mesosystemic and microsystemic, reveal education challenges that relate more to the rural contexts. At a mezosystemic level, we find declining student enrolment and staffing problems (Stelmach, 2011 p 36). Both of these challenges relate to migration of the rural population to urban areas, although causes may vary. For teachers, factors such as inadequate rewards, inadequate training for rural schools, poor working conditions and isolation (Shikalepo, E.E., 2020) may affect their motivation to carry out their occupation. As such, teachers might turnover rural schools and search for opportunities in urban schools. Exposed by a case study in South Africa, teachers who apply to rural schools use it as a stepping stone to later be transferred elsewhere (du Plessis and Mestry, 2019, p 5), situation that might be similar in other countries. Similarly to retaining teachers to stay in rural schools, there is trouble with students dropping out, causing a decline in enrolment. There is extensive literature that evidences, not only enrolment decline but also depopulation of rural areas in general. To name a few, in Chile, there is difficulty in staying in rural areas due to lack of opportunities and jobs, causing a decline in school enrolment and school closures (Muñoz, 2020, p 189). In Puerto Rico, migration of rural population to urban areas was increased due to disasters such as hurricane María, causing a disproportionate closure of schools in rural areas (Hinojosa, Meléndez and Serevino Pietri, 2019, p 17). In other cases, cultural aspects cause students to dropout of schools in rural areas. In rural Pakistan, perspectives from teachers state that early marriages,

common in rural areas, cause girls to drop out from school (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017, p 369). Additionally, in Nigeria and Turkey, there is more interest, from students and parents, for the student to work in farming and agriculture than to continue in school (Ajaja, 2012, p 149; Çiftçi and Cin, 2017, p 695).

Continuing with Stelmach's (2011) categorization of rural challenges, the curriculum relevancy in rural schools comes as significantly intertwined with rurality, making it a microsystemic problem. The previously mentioned case studies alluded to the fact that education does not adjust to the context of rural areas. Historically, curriculums have been developed with contents that favour experiences of urban populations (Ames, 2004, p 32), or an urban bias, as previously mentioned. Though, some exceptions can be found in Colombia, Guatemala and Uruguay, countries which have tried to establish diverse education methods that adjust more to the rural schools. From 1970 to 1990, Colombia, followed by Guatemala, financed by US Agency for International Development (USAID), introduced *Nueva Escuela*¹, an education reform programme to improve rural education. The programme focused on formation of teachers for multigrade settings, provision of instructional materials relevant to multigrade classrooms and facilitation of interactions between rural teachers to prevent isolation (McEwan, 2008, p 466). It should be mentioned that the origins of such programmes have been problematized due to their emphasis on improving rural education as a medium to achieve more economic development (Cadavid Rojas, Acosta Castrillón and Runge Peña, 2019). In 1949, Uruguay, propelled by discussions from rural teachers, recognized a differentiated structure for the rural school, resulting in a rural curriculum that was applied until 2008 (Santos, 2014, p 35). The curriculum offers specificities of rural education, such as the formal recognition of the multigrade modality and the different methods it needs. Although this was a step forward for rural education, the education system in Uruguay started following a uniform curriculum for both rural and urban schools from 2009 onwards (Santos, 2014, p 35).

In other cases, the lack of teacher formation and syllabus for rural settings has resulted in teachers creating strategies to carry out their job that may differ between regions. In Chumbivilcas, rural Perú, teachers give significant emphasis on contextualizing educational content to the location where they teach. Thus, at the start of the academic year, they make a socio-cultural study, not with academic contents, but by meeting and discussing with the community (Almanacin Chacnama, 2019, p 65) Additionally, because academic contents are in

¹ "New School"

Spanish, they make use of the native language of the region to ease up the learning process of their students who do not speak Spanish (Almanacín Chacnama, 2019, p 68). In rural Spain, rather than preparing specific content per grade, the teacher plans content to simultaneously teach every grade in what they call “*plurigrado*” (Brumat and Baca, 2015, p 19), also known as multigrade. From this specific case study in Spain, teachers use methods such as dividing the whiteboard per grade or grouping students according to the classwork they are doing (Brumat and Baca, 2015, p 19). Although there is a broad literature, the previous examples encapsulate some strategies where teachers adapt content and plans that better adjust to the context where they teach.

Finally, the challenge of remoteness is easily linked to geographic dimensions of rurality. Stelmach (2011, p 37) refers to ‘remoteness’ as the “physical distance of rural communities to urban locales”. Although physical distance between urban and rural settings is not the problem in itself, it holds a significance in how it can affect rural education. For instance, difficulty to access services in remote areas or walking long distances to the nearest school, can be a challenge for learners and teachers.

2.2 Defining Rurality

Rural studies offer a broad range of perspectives and methodologies most commonly used to conceptualize rurality, with a variety of overlapping themes between these different approaches. Despite this overlap, there is not a clear-cut definition for rurality and in turn, it becomes imperative to address that due to the fluidity of the term, conducting research on *a* rurality, is not representative of every rurality.

The classical perspective to define rurality relies on positioning the rural vis-à-vis the urban, within a dichotomic categorization of both (Sancho Comíns & Reinoso Moreno, 2012, p 601). In other words, this perspective defines rurality as “what the urban is not” (García Bartolome, 1991, p 88), or the “otherness” of the urban (Nelson et al., 2021, p 356). Moreover, it conceived the rural as a “homogenous” and “traditional” society, as opposed to the “heterogenous” and “modern” nature of the urban (Grajales & Concheiro, 2009, p 148). This black and white perspective towards the rural/urban can be useful for circumstances when a clearcut boundary needs to be set among geospatial areas. For instance, this dichotomous perspective is frequently used by governments to categorise areas for the purpose of policy decisions or resources

² “*Plurigrade*”

allocation (Nelson et al., 2021, p 355). Additionally, the necessity to establish a boundary between rural/urban has been an incentive to research (Sancho Comíns & Reinoso Moreno, 2012, p 602). In other words, scholars and governments frequently use quantitative and qualitative based methodologies in order to define the rural/urban. Some examples of frequent quantitative indicators are population density, number of inhabitants or ratio of agricultural employment (Capel, 1975, p. 10; Sancho Comíns & Reinoso Moreno, 2012, p 603). On the other hand, qualitative criteria relies on certain components, such as legal status, or the presence of certain administrative services in an area (Capel, 1975, p. 10; Sancho Comíns & Reinoso Moreno, 2012, p 603, Berardo, 2019, p 317). Worth noticing is that these measurements precisely define what an urban area is, and conversely, imply that rurality is *everything else* that does not fit into the urban measurements. Such is the case in the National Statistics Institute of Honduras, stating that urban areas are those with:

1. “Population of 2,000 inhabitants and more.
2. Areas that were considered “urban” by the 2001 National Census.
3. Areas with populations between 1,500 and 1,999 inhabitants with at least one of the following:
 - A Study centre.
 - A Health Clinic.
 - At least 10% of sewerage coverage.” (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013)

On the other hand, the National Census defines rural areas as “those areas that do not meet the previous criteria” (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013). The definition shows a combination of both, quantitative and qualitative aspects for urban areas, but as it is observable, implies rural areas as “the other”, that does not fit into the urban criteria.

This classical perspective has been criticised by scholars, mostly because of its outdated nature. Capel (1975, p 1) argues that although before the Industrial Revolution, the differences between the rural and urban could be arguably indisputable, said distinctions have now become unclear. What once were descriptions of the rural as “the agrarian”, or the urban as “high constructions and densely populated cities” has now become vague (Sancho Comíns & Reinoso Moreno, 2012, p 603). Additionally, there was a proposition by classical economics, at the time, that considered *development* as the transition from the rural to the urban; a proposition that, according to Perez (2001, p18), is not adequate anymore.

However, the use of theories that defy the classical approach of defining rurality come with certain limitations, which explains why the classical perspective persists in research and for policy implementation purposes. Such limitations mostly come from the scarce theoretical development (Matijasevic Arcila & Ruiz Silva, 2013). In turn, these approaches are still too vague to be used in this research due to its lack of indicators to bound an area as “rural”.

The subsection elucidates the evolution of the perspectives regarding rurality, but more importantly, it establishes a fluidity in its nature, making it complex to try limit the term into one box in front of the constant change it faces. The research paper will make use of the national definition, or what is officially considered as a “rural area” in Honduras, with the use of their official criteria. As stated before, definitions following a classical and dichotomous perspective offer a clearcut boundary, which is beneficial for narrowing down and selecting cases for research purposes.

2.3 Rural School or School in the Rural?

The previous subsection exposed the difficulty of defining the “rural”. This same complexity is present when defining the rural school, as it is much more nuanced than simply looking for a school in a non-urban area. Fundamental to understand these nuances, is to explore the different schools of thought regarding rural education. On one hand, authors talk about a “school in a rural setting” and, on the other, about a “rural school”.

The first perspective considers that there is no major difference in realities between a school in a rural area and in an urban area, except their geographic position. Barba (2011, p 98) points out that this approach does acknowledge some characteristics that differ between a school in an urban area and a school in a rural area, for instance, the number of students per classroom and spatial and material input, but that they are not enough to suggest that they have a different reality between each other. Based on a historical dimension, Ortega Prieto (1994) argues that since laws about obligatory schooling first appeared in an urban setting, it makes sense to conclude that schools are born from and for urban settings. Conversely, the emerging of rural schools are merely for the process of inclusion of rural workers into the city (Gallardo Gil, 2011, p 4; Ortega Prieto, 1994, p 212). In addition, the previously mentioned changes that have caused the merging of the rural/urban, has prompted discussion of the *‘inexistence’ of the rural school* (Gallardo Gil, 2011, p 4) per se, again, with the idea that educational policies are for and from an urban setting. In summary, the perspective

argues that because schools are an urban phenomenon that cascaded into rural settings as an afterthought, “*we should not speak about the rural schools, but about schools in a rural setting*” (Ortega Prieto, 1994, p 212).

Opposite to the previous conceptualization, we encounter an approach arguing the need to acknowledge the different realities that come within a rural context, referring to the education centres in such, as *rural schools*, rather than a school merely located in a rural setting. Because this research paper intends to explore the engagement of teachers in the rural reality, it becomes unquestionable to opt for a conceptualization that “*defends the rural school as a different reality and a as a point of focus for innovation derivative from their own necessities*” (Barba, 2011, p 100). Following this school of thought, we move into characteristics often found in the *rural school*:

1. The general presence of multigrade classrooms, in which one teacher is in charge of teaching a small group of students that are enrolled in different grades (Santamaría-Cárdaba & Gallego, 2020, p 158).
2. Diversity in economic, cultural, and physical contexts. This means that many schools can be categorized as rural schools, and yet, the differences between the location and dynamics of the agents make schools their own unique entity (Bernal Agudo, 2011, p 5). E.g., a rural school that has access to a road may differ from a rural school with no access to one.
3. Recurrent material and infrastructural deficit or inadequacy (Santamaría-Cárdaba & Gallego, 2020, p 158; Bernal Agudo, 2011, p 5). This inadequacy can be observed, in many cases, in the contradictions of what national curriculums enlist as necessary materials or infrastructures for the correct performance of teaching and learning processes and the deficiency of such in certain settings.
4. Frequently no more than one school for a particular area. (Gallardo Gil, 2011 p 5).
5. Uncontextualized educational programs, plans or curricula, with respect to the rural setting (Santamaría-Cárdaba & Gallego, 2020, p 153).

It is fundamental to recognize that the rural school as such, grants a space for their agents that is more flexible for practices that transcend the limits of a curricula. As expressed by Barba (2011, p 99), the rural school breaks the traditional model of schooling, and becomes one of its own kind and with its own identity, through practices of the agents involved in response to their necessities. In consequence, rural schools begin to have an essential value to the community. For

Santamaría-Cárdaba & Gallego (2020, p 150) the rural school becomes a symbol against rural outmigration, elaborating from Morales-Romo's (2019, p 22) view that rural schools represent an "symbolic value", and, in turn, a closing of a school can be perceived as a "town's decline" for the members of the community. Finally, due to the participation processes that take place in the rural school, the relationships and bonds between the agents strengthen. In the words of Arguedas et. Al (2008, p 165) the rural school "*nourishes the community, but it is also nourished by it*". The above statements help us to reach some final thoughts: first, the rural school exists, and has an identity constructed by the engagement of the agents in it, with characteristics inherent to a specific rural area. Second, rural schools go beyond their educational function and become a medium for where the community engages through social processes.

2.3.1 The Rural Teacher

No discussion about the rural school can be concluded without delving into the characteristics of a fundamental agent: the rural teacher. The beginning subsection of this chapter revealed several difficulties faced by the rural teacher; thus, this subsection will elaborate on the competences and practices that generally characterize the rural teacher.

As happens in most of the literature regarding rural studies, characteristics of rural institutions or agents almost always emerge from a comparison with the urban as their counterpart. Rural teachers are no exception to this comparison, as one of the main starting points when discussing them is how their roles differ from the roles of an urban teacher. From a pedagogical perspective, Hamodi (2014, p 46) states that the rural teacher performs a different function from a teacher in an urban setting derived from the closeness they hold with the community. For instance, teachers who travel back and forth from a city to the rural area where they work, may help the community by bringing products, such as food for the students, materials, medicine, or any other errand needed (Brumat, 2011, p 4). In this sense, the rural teacher becomes a referent in assisting the community beyond their role of a facilitator in educational processes and that are very particular to the rural context.

A tendency in the job of the rural teacher is having to work in a multigrade classroom. As explained before, the multigrade classrooms are composed by a group of students from different grades that are being taught by a single teacher. Some authors point out that the multigrade classroom can be beneficial for students at lower grades, by listening to advanced concepts of higher grades (Hamodi, 2014, p 50), and the promotion of student autonomy (Barba, 2011, p 307). However, the heterogenous grouping of student may be a challenge for the rural teacher regarding their organization of the topics, adapting to the rhythm of teaching multiple grades and

trying to balance and integrated process for every student when teaching (Santamaría-Cárdaba & Gallego 2020, p 158).

In addition, the rural teacher is also bounded to work with curriculums that are not designed for a rural context. There is a perception that every material and administrative document is elaborated according to urban criteria, and yet, must be followed in the rural reality (Brumat, 2011, p 6; Ezpeleta, 1992, p 32). In turn, the rural teacher also has the task of adapting themselves for the teaching process in a multigrade classroom and adapting the curriculum to local circumstances.

Finally, a constant sentiment in the literature regarding rural teachers is the lack of programmes, policies, or initiatives to facilitate training for teachers working in a rural school. Due to this gap, scholars have endeavoured into the identification of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Chaparro-Aguado and Santos Pastor (2018) synthesize five basic skills that the rural teacher has or most likely requires:

1. The rural teacher requires the ability to adapt flexible language, in order to make it understandable to a multigrade student setting.
2. The ability to creatively use the environment that a rural setting offers – E.g., use of surrounding nature resources – in order to foster alternative learning processes.
3. Characteristics of ethics and respect of the local identity where they work.
4. Ability to reflect upon their practices with the community and as an educator.

2.4 Street-level Bureaucracy and Coping Mechanisms

Michael Lipsky (1969) define the street-level bureaucrat as government employees who share three common characteristics: they stand at the front-line, meaning that they interact with citizens – or clients, they have a certain share of independence in their decision making at their job and they could potentially affect clients in the process of their job duties (1969, p 2).

Honduran public-school teachers are government employees, the Street-level Bureaucracy theory provides a framework to explore this particular role, specifically in the context of the challenges they face in their job duties.

Lipsky's theory additionally assumes that Street-level Bureaucrats have to deal with a fair share of constraints at arise from these interaction with clients, which can be categorized into three groups: they are not equipped with adequate resources for the normal performance of their job, the interaction with clients or their working environment in general may pose physical or

psychological threats, and, unclear or contradictory expectations about their job duties may be a cause of tension between clients and Street-level bureaucrats (1969, p 4). It is important to address that the weight of these constraints may vary depending on different contexts, as some may be more prevalent than others. For this reason, research regarding challenges of Street-level bureaucrats in specific zones needs to be determined precisely.

Despite the constraints stated, Street-level bureaucrats attempt to do, in some way, a good job. A pivotal point in Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy theory is the proposition that Street-level bureaucrats develop mechanisms that help them overcome constraints in their job duties – or coping mechanisms. A significant strategy proposed by the theory states that Street-level bureaucrats develop their own routines to ease the constraints in their job. Routines are defined as “the establishment of habitual or regularized patterns in terms of which tasks are performed” (Lipsky, 1969, p 12). These routines function to reduce the complexity of the environment for the Street-level bureaucrats, making it more predictable in their everyday, and it is at this point that they “adapt” policies rather than “adopt” them. Some examples of these “routines” generally mean practices to limit the demands of clients, maximizing the use of the available resources or obtain compliance from clients to do processes differently from what their job duties demand (Lipsky, 1980, p 83).

2.5 Teacher Agency – Ecological theory

The concept of teacher agency has caught the attention of scholars for several reasons. It is said that teachers play an important role in shaping their workplace environment and adapt rather than adopt existing policies (Cong-Lem, 2021, p 718; Darling-Hammond, 1990, p 341; Tao & Gao, 2017, p 346). It has also been stated that teacher agency has a meaningful role in their professional development (Tao & Gao, 2017, p 346), as it provides them with decision-making capacity, and not “merely doing their job” (Tao & Gao, 2017, p 346). The literature conveys a variety of topics in which teacher agency has been studied. These studies are mostly about how teacher agency manifests in certain education processes or subjects, for example, teacher agency in language arts teacher or teacher agency for special needs education (Cong-Lem, 2021, p 719). Some other studies have focused on teacher agency in highly complex situations, such as post-conflict contexts or high-poverty contexts.

A significant theoretical approach has been identified in teacher agency research. The theory is guided by pragmatic approaches regarding agency (Leijen, Pedaste & Lepp, 2019, p 296), an approach focusing on engagement of individuals in relation to their environment (Leijen, Pedaste

& Lepp, 2019, p 296; Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 132). A significant work for this approach is that of Emirbayer & Mische (1998) on “What is agency?”. For them, scholars have focused significantly on “one-sided points of view” of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p 963), such as routines and habits, rather than studying how these dimension may differ within different structural contexts. They make a case that agency should be understood in a temporally embedded process, categorized in three dimensions: The iterational: habits guided by *the past*, the projective: imaginations of alternatives oriented towards *the future*, and the practical-evaluative: the interplay of both in what is ‘acted out’ in *the present*. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p 963). Agency, then, is informed by these temporal aspects and be subject to change depending on context where the actors find themselves in. This approach to agency is tightly intertwined with the specificities of an environment or “ecology” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 137). Naturally, this approach suggests that circumstances within that ecology, or context, may be a driver to how agency manifests, for example, economic, cultural and social resources (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 137). Lastly, this approach to agency understands it as something to be achieved through engagement in a particular context, rather than a power or capacity embedded in an individual (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 136).

Positioning teacher agency within the pragmatic theorization of agency, would imply two major assumptions. First, that actions taken by teachers to shape their circumstances are not an embedded capacity that would be exercised the same way through different environments with different circumstances. Second, it is the past experiences from their life and job, and their views towards the future of their life and job, that, to an extent, will inform the way they act out in the present. This “present” is subject to a contextual background and particular means within, which also holds a relationship with the ways in which agency will be achieved by teachers.

Based on the “ecological” approach to agency, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) elaborated a model of the formation of teacher agency through the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions, and the various aspects that inform them.

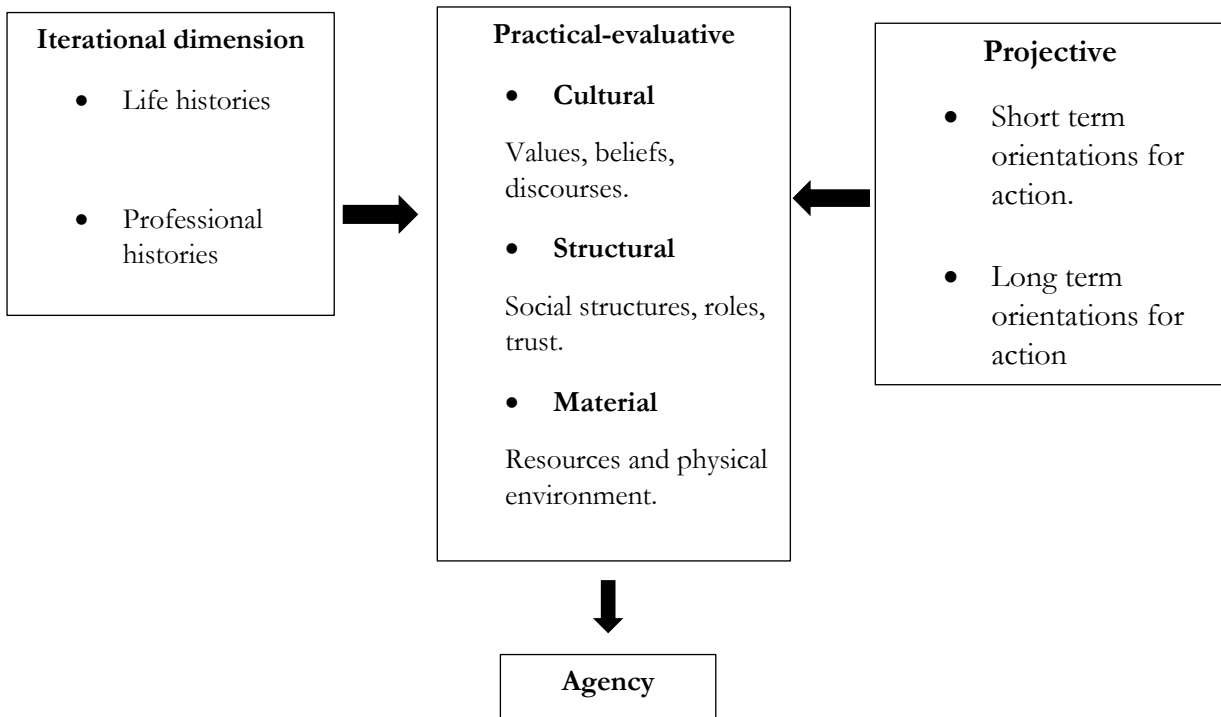


Figure 1 “Ecological model for Teacher Agency.” From Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013). “Teachers as Agents of Change: Teacher Agency and Emerging Models of Curriculum” In: *Reinventing the Curriculum: New Trends in Curriculum Policy and Practice*.

These authors argue that the iterational dimension is composed by past experiences, such as their professional knowledge – bodies of knowledge shared among teachers – and their personal histories – unique personal beliefs of teachers as individuals (Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp, 2019, p 299). The projective dimension, in terms of what teachers aspire for the future of their work can be categorized between short term aspirations and long-term aspirations. The components can be very broad, as “aspirations” of the future of their work can be understood in various ways, for instance, do they aspire something for their career, for their students, or both? Do they aspire to change something or to maintain a “normal desirable state” in the classroom? (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2013, p 192). This can then translate into a variety of nuances with the use of the model. Lastly, within the Practical-Evaluative dimension, they find three main aspects: cultural (beliefs, values, discourses), the structural (roles, trust, relationships) and the material (environment and resources) (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013). The last dimension, situated in the present environment constitutes a mid-point in which the aspects of culture, structure and material will either enable agency or hinder it (Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp, 2019, p 302).

The ecological approach to agency offers a variety of possibilities for teacher agency research when considering some variables. Research with this theoretical approach must lean towards of

conceptualisation of agency as something achieved by the interaction of internal aspects – E.g. past experience or aspirations of teachers – and external aspects – E.g. context of the environment, culture, resources – as opposed to a view of agency as an isolated embedded capacity that would not change had it be situated in another context. Priestley, Biesta & Robinson (2013) ecological model of teacher agency contributed to the theory, as it has been used through exploratory studies of teacher agency in particular contexts is likely to facilitate more research in the coming years.

2.6 Linkages Between Theories

For the analysis, I drew components from the discussed theoretical framework: the rural school and teacher, the practical-evaluative dimension from the ecological theory of agency and street-level bureaucracy theory. The examination of these theoretical components revealed intersectional themes between them (see Figure 2). For example, characteristics of the rural teacher intersected with the challenges of the street-level bureaucrat – E.g., Deficient resources or unclear expectations. Similarly, the characteristics of the rural school and rural teachers are relational to the material, structural and cultural circumstances of the rural setting. In turn, the intersection presented in the factors that are enabling agency in the present dimension. Lastly, actions from the street-level bureaucrats to overcome challenges in the present dimension come about in the form of coping mechanisms.

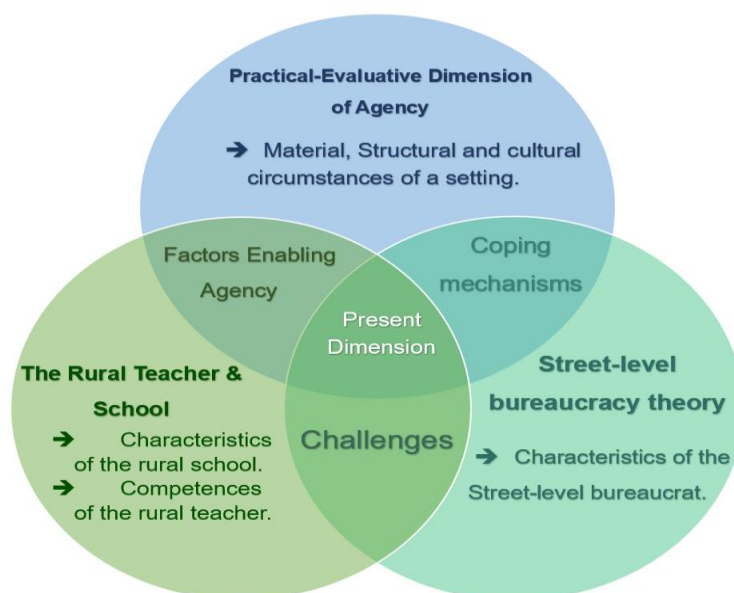


Figure 2 Theoretical components and intersections. Source: Author's work (2023).

Consequently, the first part of the data was analysed through the themes that came from the intersection between the theoretical components. Because initial codes were drawn from existing theories, the data follows a deductive approach (Azungah, 2018, p 391). The identified themes are: the challenges, the coping mechanisms and factors that enable agency in rural schools. The diagram above illustrates the theoretical components I drew from, and their intersectionality through which the data was analysed.

Chapter 3 – Background of the Study: Rural Education in Honduras

3.1 The Honduran Education System: Towards Quality Education

The 1990's were a decade of educational reforms throughout Latin America with an emphasis on access to education of quality, under the umbrella of recommendations from international organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO (Rojas, 2020, p 12). Significant to these transitions, was the World Declaration on Education for All, adopted in March 1990. The Declaration was an effort to reaffirm the commitment of education as a human right for all people, starting with basic education level³ ; in addition, it set a standard towards the meaning of education of quality and universalization of education. To reach these standards, the Declaration establishes the need of supportive policy context and the mobilization of resources, as well as the importance of strengthening partnerships with non-state authorities. Derived from the declaration, came the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, with the purpose of serving as a guide of implementation of the Declaration for national governments, non-governmental and international organizations (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). Both these documents encouraged governments to elaborate long term plans of action, but more importantly, they recognized the need for these plans to multisectoral and multilevel (national and local). The sentiment and principles of the Education for All framework rapidly cascaded into national policies of education throughout Latin America, including the Honduran education system.

In 2012, the Fundamental Law of Education entered into force, bringing what would become the driving principles of the education system of Honduras, as well as a reiteration of the state's commitment to its organization and management. "Quality education" is now regarded as a main principle and understood by this law as "the success of relevant learnings in the realm of knowledge, values, social practices and requirements for the labour world..." (Congreso Nacional de la República de Honduras, 2012, p 3).

It is also worth mentioning, that for the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action, it is imperative that states manage to increase, according to their possibilities, the percentages of GDP expenditure directed towards education to at least 4-6% (World Education Forum, 2016, p 9), for the achievement of SDG goal four: Quality education. As of 2020, the

³ Also referred to as primary schooling. "The main delivery system for the basic education of children outside the family is primary schooling" (World Declaration on Education for All, 1990)

Honduran government expenditure on education consisted of a total of 6.4% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2022), in compliance with the Incheon Framework Agenda. This percentage was only surpassed by Belize with 8.7% and Costa Rica with 6.7% of their respective GDP, making it one of the highest expenditures of the region.

The previous background located Honduras within the global pursuit of quality education. The incorporation of quality principles into national policies and the input of resources is telling of the country's efforts towards the goal of quality education.

3.2 Quality Education in Rural Schools – Incompatible?

Considering the aforementioned, there is no denying of the pressures and efforts made to improve quality education in Honduras. Despite this, evidence suggests that persistent challenges are still present and that a common characteristic surrounding them lies in the problem of inequality. Inequality is a problem at a macro level that cascades into different sectors of society, such as education. Honduras continues to be one of the most unequal countries within the Latin America and Caribbean region (UNDP, 2022, p 94) and particularly in the education sector, inequality is profound between urban and rural areas.

Disparities are observable in performance data of students. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Program for International Student Assessment (PISA-d) reports that Honduran education indicators present a significant difference in performance between students in urban and rural settings; in mathematics and reading, urban students perform better, with thirty-three average points more than the students in rural areas (Dirección General de Currículo y Evaluación & OECD, 2018, p 50). The average schooling of population in rural areas tends to be of three years less compared to urban areas (UNDP, 2022, p 316) and the illiteracy rate is three times higher compared to urban areas (UNDP, 2022, p 316). Regarding inputs towards education, consisting of material and human resources, it is said that rural schools count with deficient teaching and learning materials compared to urban schools (Dirección General de Currículo y Evaluación & OECD, 2018, p 87). In 2020, Honduras was struck by two hurricanes, ETA and IOTA, while simultaneously facing the Covid-19 crisis. These events were catalyst for the gaps between urban and rural education to widen, affecting the latter more. Before the pandemic, rural areas had 20.4% of internet access, only one third of the percentage of urban areas (54.8%). Consequently, this lack of connectivity made it more difficult for rural areas to adapt to the crisis (UNDP, 2022, p 112).

Additionally, a study conducted by Murphy-Graham et al. (2021) revealed causes of secondary school dropouts from rural youth in Honduras. Amongst these causes, it was observed that the

lack of access and financial resources played a significant role in rural student dropouts (Murphy-Graham, 2021, p 8). On one hand, students are facing the constraint of having to pay for supplies, uniforms and books. On the other, the lack of resources is not limited to materials, but also for the possibility of students having access to a secondary school centre. Generally, remote rural areas count with one school that offers education up to the sixth grade. In that sense, when the time comes for students to pursue secondary education, there is a necessity for them to travel or move to other areas that do have a secondary level centre. The research revealed that students are dropping out because of lack of resources to commute or move to another area to continue their education (Murphy-Graham, 2021, p 8). More than lack of financial resources from the students, the problematic is a result of inaccessibility to education in rural areas, aggravated by the geographical remoteness that characterizes them. Associated to this remoteness are other consequences, such as impacts in the health of the students due to long walking distances (Moncada & Larios Bonilla, 2020, p 29) or having to cross dangerous routes, such as rivers, to reach the school. Teachers working in rural areas are not excluded from these dangers.

Not surprisingly, the reports exploring the current state of education in Honduras mention the importance of teachers in the journey towards access to education of quality. These reports emphasize the need of “attracting, developing and maintaining good teachers” (Dirección General de Currículo y Evaluación & OECD, 2018, p78), giving them proper rewards and adequate resources such as proper teacher-student ratios. However, problems with staffing teachers in rural areas has been prevalent in the country because less teachers accept job vacancies in rural schools (El Herald, 2016). To cover job vacancies in rural areas of departments that presented a low score in education performance, such as Gracias a Dios and Islas de la Bahía, some salary incentives were promoted. Despite these incentives, what took place was that the vacancies were mostly covered by recently graduate inexperienced teachers, who would work for a small period of time and then opted to get promoted elsewhere (Fundación para la Educación Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu, 2022, p. 21). This reflects the unattractiveness of teaching in a rural school for teachers.

The current situation of rural education in Honduras can be summarized by the disparities in student performance between the urban and the rural schools, challenging nature of accessibility due to remoteness, lack of adequate resources and staffing difficulties.

3.3 A Blind Eye Towards Rurality

Although some issues, such as deficient resources, are not exclusive to rural schools, it can be argued that these are augmented by the circumstances of the rural areas; or specifically, by the

blindness of policies towards these circumstances. Frameworks that do not adjust to rural settings consequently make it more difficult to reach a quality education.

An example of this is the Honduran National Curriculum Design, (hereinafter CNB). This document states the education levels, their respective mandatory subjects, and details elements that need to be present for the teaching and learning processes – E.g., materials, infrastructure. Although the curriculum serves as a tool to establish the objectives of education in Honduras, it can be argued that it has some shortcomings. For instance, it is a uniform framework that follows traditional schooling methods and evaluation, something that, as the literature suggests, differs from what a multigrade school is. Interestingly, the CNB recognizes alternative education types, such as Especial Needs education and for Adult Education (Secretaría de Educación, 2003, p 56), and the necessity for a different methods to approach them. Derived from this recognition, both types of alternative education now have a differentiated framework from the traditional CNB. For rural education, however, there is no such distinction, from which two consequences derive. First, because there is no differentiated framework of methods or evaluations for multigrade modalities, the rural schools is being held to the traditional school standards. Second, there is a deficit of initial teacher training that attends to the necessities of the rural school (Fundación para la Educación Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu, 2022, p 11). Plans, guides, and textbooks that the teachers are trained to work with are not thought for the rural multigrade school and, in turn, it becomes challenging for the teacher to provide a quality education for the rural population.

The invisibility of rural education in current policies is still persistent. For instance, with the purpose of strategic planning the next steps towards the SDG Goal Four: Quality Education, the government of Honduras elaborated the “Plan Estratégico del Sector Educación 2018-2030⁴”. The plan evidenced the deficiencies of the public education system of the country, stating that “it is evident that the education system is not accessible to every Honduran, as opposed to what the Fundamental Law of Education demands” (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 6). It also provides perspective on the great existing gap between education in urban and rural areas when pinpointing the main national challenges. Such is the case regarding access to education itself, stating that complete coverage of education has been limited due to geographic conditions of the country, especially when comparing urban and rural areas (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 49). Approximately 80% of public secondary schools in the country are located in urban areas, evidencing the gap in the rural zones (USAID, 2019; Orozco & Valdivia, 2017).

⁴ “*Strategic Plan for the Education Sector*”

Consequently, the long-term plan commits to improvement of the education system, with three main strategies:

1. Inclusive access to the education system, measured with an increase in the average schooling rate of the population.
2. Commitment to relevant and effective learning contents.
3. Decentralization and democratization of the education policies.

These strategies commit on focusing more attention onto the distribution of resources in rural population with no access to education (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 101), and promoting compulsory social services as a requirement for teacher trainees close to graduating (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 100). However, there is still an invisibility towards the root causes of the rural school challenges. For instance, when talking about “inclusive access to the education system”, the strategy focuses on reaching “international standards of schooling” (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 50) and certain amount of resource input, which overtly focuses on quantifiable goals. Additionally, the strategy of “commitment to relevant and effective learning contents”, states the necessity for a curriculum redesign that “adjusts to the necessities of the twenty-first century” (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2019, p 78). However, there is no mention on providing plans or redesigning a curriculum with learning contents or methods relevant for the multigrade modality of rural schools.

All this considered, it becomes clear why jobs in rural schools are deemed as unattractive in the eyes of teachers. However, much is to be explored about the teachers who are working under such circumstances and pressures.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

A qualitative approach was the appropriate choice to explore how behaviours of the participants are shaped by the context around them (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p 10). The core nature of the research relies on experiences from rural teachers, thus, a mix of qualitative sources of evidence was used for data collection.

The first source of evidence came from a document review, primarily documents from international organizations (e.g. UNESCO), documents from the Secretary of Education, the National Congress and others relevant material to understand the contextual background of the areas where the research took place.

The second source of evidence were semi-structured one-on-one interviews with teachers from two rural schools located in the Department of El Paraíso, Honduras. The choice for semi-structured interviews relied in two considerations. First, the use of a previous questionnaire will provide a structure in which the researcher can probe for elements from the literature, such as the components agency in the ecological approach. At the same time, it allowed participants go beyond what the guiding questions suggest, in order to properly capture what they consider significant in their experiences as a rural teacher.

Lastly, I used the Autophotography method, to better illustrate and compliment the participants' data, through photographs taken by themselves.

4.1 Document Review

According to Yin (2014, p 173), a document review is beneficial to verify information that may emerge in the stage of the interviews, for instance, names of administrative education institutions and programmes. Moreover, a document review can provide more details to corroborate similarities or contradictions between data sources (Yin, 2014, p 173).

Prior conducting the semi-structured, it was crucial that I familiarized myself with the administrative structure of the Honduran education system. Thus, the selected documents consisted of the relevant education legislation, such as the Fundamental Education Law and its derivative regulations. I found mainly two beneficial aspects of the conducted document review. On one hand, the law categorizes the different types of schools in Honduras – e.g., urban school, rural school – which was a useful starting point for the selection of school that would meet the criteria for the data collection. On the other hand, while conducting the interviews, the teachers

mentioned administrative concepts, such as the organization of grades, the subjects they were assigned to teach and the government institutions in charge of overseeing the schools. Having read about these administrative concepts prior to the interviews was especially beneficial to avoid shifting the conversation from the “every day” of the rural teacher, to a more managerial and administrative.

4.2 Selection of Participants and Interviews

Through the purposive sampling technique, the researcher establishes a basis of what is important to explore about the topic and finds participants with knowledge or experience willing to provide information (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016, p 2). Purposive sampling technique was used to find the first set of participants. First, I had to decided what elements I needed from the participants, considering elements retrieved from the theoretical framework and the document review. Thus, selection of the schools and participants were based on the following elements that were considered as crucial for the research to explore:

1. Location as a starting point.

The schools where the participants teach, had to be located in areas that are considered “rural” by the national Honduran indicators. As previously established in Chapter 2, Honduras recognizes a rural area as those with less than 2,000 inhabitants, or those with populations between 1,500 and 1,999 inhabitants in areas that do not have at least one school centre, health clinic or 10% sewerage coverage (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013).

2. Categorisations of schools based on administration.

The National Statistics Centre of Honduras (2021) conducted a study regarding the educational situation of Honduran households in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The study examined school enrolment of households with children between the ages 3-17. It was determined that 86,4% of children between 3-17 were enrolled in government managed schools, or public schools, and 16% were enrolled in non-government managed schools (2021, p 8). Out of the 86,4% students enrolled in public schools, 51,5% are students from urban areas and 48,5% are students from the rural areas (2021, p 9). On the other hand, within the 16% students enrolled in non-government managed schools, 82,8% are students in an urban area and 17,3% are students from a rural area (2021, p 9).

For this research, it was concluded to focus on rural schools managed by the government considering the substantiality of students enrolled in those particular centres. Other useful aspects from focusing on government managed schools were the accessibility of information regarding how the educational system is structured and organized. Additionally, the Secretary of Education manages an online database by the name Sistema de Estadística Educativa. This database contains information of every government-managed school centre in Honduras, including categorizations of schools according to areas, being rural or urban. In other words, the database was an important tool to cross-check if the selected schools were categorised as rural.

3. Sub-categorization of rural schools.

Based on location, the Regulation of the Fundamental Law of Education (2014), categorises rural schools into two groups. The first type is Rural Schools with Communication Facilities (Secretaría de Educación, 2014, p 175), described as schools located in areas accessible by a paved road or roads. The second type is Rural Schools in Isolated Areas (Secretaría de Educación, 2014, p 176), described as schools located in areas accessible by transitable dirt roads or bridle paths.

For representativeness purposes, at least one set of participants teaching for each sub-category of rural schools were to be selected.

4. Multigrade School

From the subsection “*Rural Schools or Schools in the Rural?*” in Chapter 2, relevant characteristics of the rural schools were determined. Amongst these characteristics, the presence of multigrade models in rural schools was a relevant component to include in the criteria of the research.

With this basis set, and through communication with personal contacts in Honduras, I was able to get in touch with one school that could potentially participate in the research, located in the Department of El Paraíso, Honduras.



Figure 3 pinpoints the Department of El Paraíso in Honduras. Map Generated through Google Earth Pro (2023).

The first school is located in the municipality of San Matías, hereinafter *School “A”*. A neighbour from the zone I knew beforehand, informed me about the school. I contacted the principal, via text messages, described myself and the research objectives and the interest to conduct the data collection within the school she manages. The principal manifested her interest in the research and informed me about the interest from the teachers working in the school. While conducting the interviews *School “A”*, through the use of snowball sampling, I was able to identify another school. Snowball sampling consists of recruiting new participants based on referrals from the initial participants (Shaghghi, Bhopal & Sheikh, 2011, p 88) and it is used when populations relevant to the research are hard to reach. In this case, schools and teachers located in isolated zones could become hard to reach. Teachers from *School “A”* referred me to a second school, located in a mountainous region of the municipality of Danlí, hereinafter referred to as *School “B”*.

Interviews began in the Municipality of San Matías. This municipality is divided into nine villages (Corporación Municipal de San Matías, 2019, p 7). Amongst these, the village of El Robledal, where *School “A”* is located. With an estimated population of 530 inhabitants (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2022, p 24), El Robledal, by the demographic and qualitative national indicators, it is considered a rural area. A paved road was constructed nearby, approximately one minute walk from the centre of the village. Additionally, the presence of the paved road categorizes the *School “A”* as a Rural School with Communication Facilities, described in the previous subsection.

El Robledal has one government-managed school, *School “A”*, where the first interviewees currently teach. Before conducting the interviews, I had prepared four different sets of questionnaires: for the teachers, the principal, the students and the parents. The last two were not possible to conduct, as I could not find any volunteers. As for the teachers and the principals, *School “A”* is composed by two teachers, one principal and one sub principal. The principal and sub principal are serving a double function as teachers in the basic level grades, in addition to their administrative role. This meant that I had to adapt the questionnaire for the principals, by including questions relevant to their job as both teachers and principals.

A total of four semi-structured interviews were conducted in *School “A”*, representing the total number of teachers who currently work in the school. Since the school does not have internet access, the teachers mobilized to a nearby shop, where a neighbour allowed them to use their internet connection. Interviews were conducted via Google Meets, for approximately one hour each.

Pseudonyms	Function	Assigned Grades	Assigned Subjects	Classroom
Sara	Principal and Teacher	Second, third and fifth grade. (First and second cycle)	Science, mathematics, Spanish, art, foreign language.	Classroom 1
Victor	Sub principal and Teacher	First, fourth and sixth. (First and second cycle)	Science, mathematics, Spanish, art, foreign language.	Classroom 2
Keren	Teacher	Seventh, eighth and ninth grade (third cycle)	Spanish, foreign language, social sciences, natural sciences.	Classroom 3, 4 and 5
Linda	Teacher	Seventh, eighth and ninth grade (third cycle)	Technology, mathematics, artistic education, natural sciences.	Classroom 3, 4 and 5

Table 1 Organizational Structure of School A.

School “B” was identified through the referral of one teacher in *School “A”*, who had previously worked there and whose sister is currently working in. The first communication of the description of the research was between the sisters. After obtaining access to *School “B”*’s teachers, I described myself and the research objective, from which they expressed their interest in participating. The school is also located in the Municipality of Danlí, in a small mountainous village named La Zarzalosa. Currently, the zone can be reached through a dirt road, with the nearest village, Santa María, being three and a half hours away by vehicle. Thus, *School “B”* is categorized as a Rural Schools in Isolated Areas.

Interviews were conducted with the total number of teachers working in *School "B"*, which were two teachers. One of them served a double function as a teacher and principal of the school. Due to the remoteness of the area and lack of internet connection, the teachers had to conduct the interviews from their homes in Danlí, the urban area of the department of El Paraíso. Interviews were conducted via Google Meets, for approximately one hour each.

Pseudonyms	Function	Assigned Grades	Assigned subjects	Assigned Classroom
Margarita	Principal and Teacher	First, third and fifth grade	Science, mathematics, Spanish, art, foreign language, physical education.	Classroom 1
Jade	Teacher	Second, fourth and sixth grade	Science, mathematics, Spanish, art, foreign language, physical education	Classroom 2

Table 2 Organizational Structure of School B.

4.3 Autophotography

The last qualitative source of evidence was the use of autophotography. This method consists of the participants capturing images that represent themselves and their daily lives (Noland, 2006, p 2) and helps the researcher and readers observe the world through the participants eyes (Glaw et al., 2017, p 2). After the interviews, I asked the teachers to capture photographs of their surroundings that they considered significant or representative of their position as a rural teacher. The photographs were used to compliment the data gathered from the interviews.

4.4 Positionality and Limitations

4.4.1 Positionality

A positionality statement addresses the researcher's individual's world view and the position they adopted about the research regarding their socio-political or cultural context (Holmes, 2020, p 1). For qualitative research, a process of reflexivity informs the researcher's positionality. During this reflexivity process, the researcher identifies potential influences on the research, based on their social background and assumptions (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p 19). Thus, it is

important to establish my positionality regarding research subject, the participants and the research context (Holmes, 2020, p 3).

The research was conducted by a 27-year-old Honduran female. I myself have not studied nor worked for a rural school or public schools in Honduras. The purpose of the document review process was to familiarize myself as much as possible with the public educational system and the rural locations' context. However, there is a limitation on what reading can provide, compared to what empirical evidence offers. For instance, some aspects found along the way during the data collection, conflicted with the preparation I elaborated. I had to adapt questionnaires for the particular case of the double function that principals/teachers have in rural schools, rather than use a separate questionnaire for the principal, as I had plan. In this sense, I had to adapt my preparation plan to converge with the new elements found along the way.

4.4.2 Limitations

Data collection was conducted in one specific rural area of Honduras. Findings may differ in other rural zones of the country. It is important, therefore, to disclaim that the findings represent the wholeness of rural schools in Honduras.

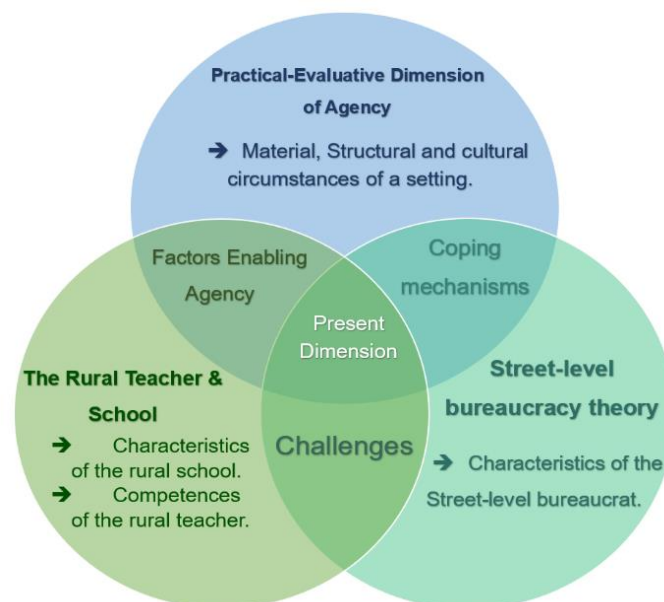
Additionally, the research is also limited to the perspective of the rural teachers, due to the inability to track down other agents that interact within the school, such as parents or students. I address that perspectives from other actors different from teachers would have been valuable. However, the priority of the research was to explore how *teacher agency* manifests in the rural context. At its core, the research prioritizes the perspective of teachers, but also makes room for future research regarding the other interacting actors in the rural school.

4.4.3 Ethical Considerations

Regarding ethical considerations, the participants, at times, expressed some level of discontent or disappointment about their situation (e.g., principals, parents, students) and external elements of their position as a teacher. Thus, I followed O'Leary's (2017, p 70) ethic guidelines, consisting in obtaining expressed informed consent by the participants after describing myself, my student position and the research, and ensuring confidentiality of their experiences with the use of anonymity.

Chapter 5 — Engaging with the Present: Contextualizing current rural El Paraíso Schools through the eyes of rural teachers

To analyse teacher agency from the ecological approach, the first step consists of mapping out the present context of the studied setting and how the teachers are engaging with said context. The identification of these circumstances in the present is referred to as the “practical-evaluative” dimension of agency (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2013). In turn, recalling the Linkages between theories in Chapter 2 (See Below), Chapter 5 thematically analyses the present dimension of rural teachers through the themes: Challenges, coping mechanisms and factors facilitating teachers’ agency.



5.1 Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

The following subsection maps out the main challenges identified in both schools from rural El Paraíso. These challenges represent material, structural and cultural dimensions that could potentially hinder agency of teachers. They were organized by themes, in order from most to least prevalent during the interviews. Simultaneously, it discusses the coping mechanisms identified for each of these challenges. The analysis of such is complimented with the use of the photographs taken by the same participants, also known as the autophotography method.

5.1.1 Multigrade Modality

When asked about what quality education means to them or what do they consider necessary to provide it, all of the participants agreed that the multigrade modality they follow hinders the quality component in education. Particularly, for teachers who exercise a double function as principals, the multigrade modality challenges appeared as more impactful, because they juggle between planning, teaching and managing the school. *“I feel like I cannot expand myself as much as I would like to for one subject, because immediately I have to start another one with another grade.*

That is where quality in education is lost.”, Victor

explained. Conversely, Sara expressed *“Sometimes, due to the attention I give to teaching, I neglect administrative aspects of the school.”* Through their words, it is suggested that their discontent towards the multigrade modality lies in the limited time they get to teach one particular subject to one particular grade.

Moreover, and similar to studies on multigrade rural schools by authors Ames (2004, p 37), it is a common problem that students get distracted as a result of multiple grade grouping and activities taking place at the same time.

Concerning how they make do regarding the multigrade challenges, teachers use a technique they call “direct and indirect work”. This strategy consists of an interplay of passive and active teaching. The teacher distributes classwork for two grades to work on (indirect work) while they actively teach a lesson with the remaining one (direct work). From Figure 4, we can observe that students receiving direct instruction are facing the whiteboard while students performing indirect classwork are facing the opposite side of the room. This suggests that for the direct-indirect method to work, it is optimal to be equipped with a spacious classroom. Additionally, to handle this



Figure 4 shows teacher Saras's classroom. The poster says, "Welcome second, third and fifth grade".



Figure 5 shows a multigrade classroom, divided by grades for idrect and indirect method of teaching.

constant rotation between active and passive teaching, the teachers emphasized the importance of planning ahead and coming prepared to class, in order to avoid space for distraction and keeping the students as focused as possible.

Interestingly, two of the teachers mentioned instances of what Lipsky (1969) describes as “mechanisms of threat reduction”. These consist in the making of practices which help the street-level bureaucrat reduce the chances of ‘threat’ in their job, for instance, the threat of a student distracting the rest of their classmates. Sara mentioned identifying a student who finishes his classwork earlier than the rest and in turn, distracts his classmates. To prevent this risk, she describes planning other activities for him, such as printing word search puzzles, to keep him busy when he finishes classwork. Planning ahead minimizes the risk of her lesson being disrupted. Other teachers exercise their authority by sitting the disruptive student next to their desk to “*keep an eye on him*” or telling them that they will “*lose points*” if they do not stay calm. What these practices suggest is the logic that with more imposed authority, less risk of disruption (Lipsky, 1969, p 7).

5.1.2 Inadequate Resources for an Uncontextualized Curriculum

As mentioned, Honduras has a homogenous curriculum for all localities, the National Curriculum Design. A review of said document, shows several contradictions between how subjects are expected to be taught, the necessary resources and what is really present in the rural schools. Hence, it coincides with theories stating that homogenous education curriculums are elaborated with an *Urban Bias* (Brumat, 2011, p 6; Ezpeleta, 1992, p 32), to such extent that distinctive components of rural education are not considered. Inadequate resource challenges were identified as deficiencies in teaching and learning materials, infrastructure and staffing.

Inadequate teaching and learning materials

The absence of teaching and learning material was the most prevalent disappointment regarding resources. Teachers mostly directed their frustration towards the lack of aid materials for students – such as textbooks. In turn, all of them appeal to multiple ways to “fill in the gaps” of absent materials. For example, all of the participants said they usually print worksheets at home and bring them to school the next day. When asked if the school covered the cost of printing worksheets, all of the participants said no. This suggests that, even though they are deficiencies in their teaching materials, such as textbooks for teachers, their dissatisfaction is directed more towards the deficiencies in their students’ materials.

Moreover, there were some mechanisms used to maximize the existing resources, a practice that is common amongst Street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980, p 83). Margarita, for instance, sits her students in pairs or groups and gives them one worksheet, rather than handing one sheet per student, making the most of the resources available. Sara and Victor recycle and exchange books they have used in previous school years between them.

Additionally, the teachers, mostly from *School "B"* recall the use of networks to obtain materials for their students. Jade, for example, says that they have arranged for donations with her church and friends, not only for schooling materials, but for things that are inaccessible in La Zarzalosa mountain, such as medicines and clothes (see Figure 5). These actions support statements by Hamodi (2014, p 46) and Brumat (2011, p 4) where the rural teacher is performing tasks beyond what is demanded from them and becomes a significant figure for the community prompted by their closeness.

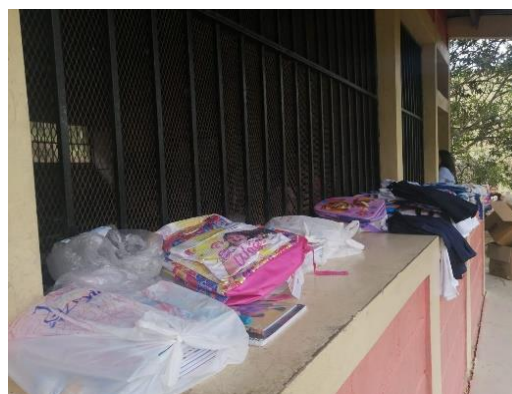


Figure 6 Donations made by teacher Jade's church.

Regarding the aid textbooks or planification programmes that they are instructed to follow, the teachers express frustration towards how the materials are often uncontextualized for a rural setting. *"They [the Secretary of education] sent us some plans to follow. But there were some things we had to omit because the reality is different. The textbook plan said we had to take the kids to a museum, but there are no museums in the rural areas!"* Jade explained.



Figure 7 shows a class assignment from a student in School B, elaborated with dry leaves.

In occasions, classwork requires materials that are not available in rural areas. In these cases, School "B" teachers explain that they make use of things that they can find in the green areas, such as leaves and tree bark (see Figure 6). In this instance, the teacher makes use of the environment that rurality offers, a competence that characterizes the rural teacher (Chaparro-Aguado and Santos Pastor, 2018). This suggests that rural teachers manage the curriculum with flexibility that allows them to engage in creative practices, rather than sticking to rigid ones.

Infrastructure deficiencies

In general, teachers from both schools feel comfortable with the classrooms, specifically in terms of space to divide it for multiple grades.



Figure 8 Shows Principal Sara's Classroom corner, adapted to fit her administrative archives.

Three of them, however, expressed scenarios of dissatisfaction. The principals of both schools said that they do not have a room for administrative archives. Because they have to adapt a corner of the classroom for administrative archives (See Figure 8) they get scared that their students could ruin their documents.

Meanwhile, Jade describes that the grouping of students from different ages in one classroom, makes it difficult to touch some subjects, such as sexuality. Her course of action in this case consists of separating the elderly students from the younger ones. *"I take fifth grades students outside, to the green areas so that they feel relaxed. Also, because I do not think second graders should be learning about sexuality yet"*. Another instance of the rural teacher competences of making use of their surroundings in the rural setting (Chaparro-Aguado and Santos Pastor, 2018).



Figure 9 Shows teacher Jade's fifth grade students outside of the classroom, receiving sexual education class.

Teacher/Student Ratio

Lastly, teachers describe their struggles of not having enough staff members to cover subjects, a common problem for street-level bureaucrats regarding manpower/client ratio (Lipsky, 1969, p 6). In turn, teachers are required to cover subjects they are not specialized in. In the case of Linda, a teacher specialized for artistic classes, is also required to cover technological subjects. *"I am not specialized in this class, so when I go home, I search on the internet about the subject and try to understand it to teach it"*. Sara, principal of School "A", states that the class of physical education, for example, is interchangeable, meaning that it can be taught by any teacher. *"For some subjects, like physical education, we make changes with the teacher who have more affinity for that class, and thus, that is how we distribute that subject."* she said. In this sense, rural schools lend themselves to become a place of

flexibility for curriculums and plans that disrupts the traditional nature of schools (Barba, 2011, p 99).

5.1.3 Tensions with Parents



Figure 11 Mothers from the students of school B, helping with school cleaning.



Figure 10 Fathers from School "B" helping with maintenance of the schools' toilets.

For the interviewed teachers, opinions on the support of their students' parents was mixed. On one hand, they agreed the majority of parents tried to be supportive. However, they stated that this support specifically referred to school activities, such as celebrations, as well as maintenance activities of the school, as we can observe in Figure 10 and Figure 11.

They express, however, that they long for more support when it comes to scholastic activities. When I asked them in which ways do they think they would feel more supported by parents, there was a difference between School A and School B's responses. School "A" teachers manifested that, due to the parents spending a substantial amount of time in their job – mostly the factories nearby the village – they do not spend much time supervising their children's academic obligations. Additionally, they express their disappointment of how the parents allow the use of technology – such as cell phones– for their children, attributing this to the bad behaviour of their students.

The teachers' opinions on technology in rural areas presented contradicting feelings. On one hand, they expressed that it is a cause of tension with the students, suggesting that schools with less access to technology have more "docile students". On the other hand, the use of technology as teaching aid was suggested by them, as something necessary for a teacher in this day and age.

In School "B", the teachers explained that the lack of support from parents in the academic obligations of the students stems from the parents, themselves, having a hard time understanding assignments. *"Parents here do not understand some terms, for example, if I send a homework that instructs to 'illustrate', they do not know what that means. So, I have to use simpler terms"*. Authors Chaparro-Aguado and Santos Pastor (2018) assign the use of flexible language as a competence for rural teachers,

to make content more understandable for multigrade students. From this research, we notice that such flexibility in language does not only apply to students, but to their parents as well.

School “B” teachers also feel pressured to mobilize resources for their students, as described in previous subsections. Their behaviour stems from preventing the parents to unenroll their students from school, commonly caused by the impossibility to pay for materials and uniforms. Consequently, teachers feel the responsibility to organize activities to collect resources to help their students stay in school.

Ultimately, what the teachers consider as a lack of support from the parents in their children’s scholastic needs, translates into them taking on responsibilities outside of teaching. More than a teacher, they have become a moral guidance figure for their students, in accordance with Dirsa et al (2022, p 38). Such phenomenon can be addressed with Lipsky’s (1969, p 7) proposition that street-level bureaucrats work under ambiguous expectations that can come from different actors. In the case of the teachers, expectations may come from higher authorities, such as the Secretary of Education or from their students’ parents and can cause contradictory sentiments in the teacher of how they should perform their job. Because this research paper wanted to focus on the teachers’ experiences, the expectations from other actors, such as their students’ parents regarding how they should perform their job remain unclear. However, it lends itself to a space for discussion for the future.

5.2 Factors Enabling Teacher Agency in rural El Paraíso

The construction of teacher agency, through the lenses of the ecological approach, emphasizes the weight of two elements that, combined, significantly inform a teacher's decision-making: context and time (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson. 2015, p 6). These elements refer to the combination of structural, cultural and material circumstances found within the environment where the teacher is situated at the time. Through the identification of these circumstances, we can begin to explain what, externally, is influencing teacher’s decision-making. More importantly, it aids us in unveiling what elements are allowing or preventing teacher agency in a certain context.

The previous subsections detailed the many ways in which rural El Paraíso teachers are being challenged within the circumstances of a rural setting, and their engagement with these circumstances through the use of coping mechanisms. Most of these challenges focused on material factors, or the available resources. Through their decision-making, they have created

alternative pathways that, to a certain extent, helps the rural school to ‘carry on’. Such display of engagement, allows to conclude that, not only does the rural school lends itself as a place to foster teacher agency, but it also thrives on it. In turn, when analysing what is enabling teacher agency in these schools, two main factors manifest: Space for collaboration and space for flexibility in roles and responsibilities. What follows, then, is a description of these factors.

5.2.1 A Space for Collaboration

“In rural areas, someone’s problem becomes the community’s problem.”

-Sara, 52, principal-teacher from “School A”.

From mobilizing local churches to donate resources for the school, to asking fellow teachers for a ride to your workplace. From the bake sale activity to collect money for the school, to the parents helping in maintenance activities, there is no denying that collaboration between agents of the rural community presents a structural environment which facilitate the agency of the teacher. The emergence of collaboration between rural teachers and the community comes as no surprise, as it has been acknowledged that the rural school constitutes an institution that enables collaboration processes and is nourished by them (Arguedas et. Al, 2008, p 165).

In both schools, there is a dynamic with high levels of trust between the teachers and coworkers. Between them, we can observe relationships that are more horizontal than vertical, a characteristic that facilitates teacher agency (Leijen, Pedaste and Lepp, 2019, p 302). While this may be common in a teacher-to-teacher relationship, the relationships where a hierarchy is supposed to be pronounced, such as a principal-to-teacher relationship, also presents interactions with a horizontal nature. For example, when organizing school activities, the decisions were shared by teachers and principals, rather than independently taken by the principals. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that these relationships seem to be strengthened when the teachers are in more remote areas. Teachers from *School B*, who travel and stay together all week in a remote area, expressed that there are instances where they talk to each other about problems they face in the workplace, despite one of them being teacher and the other, a principal-teacher. It can be argued that this unique horizontal nature between a teacher and principal is caused by the, also unique, function that the principals have in the rural school – doubling as principal and teacher at the same time. Consequently, a case that they identify more with their function of teacher, than their function as principal, can be hypothesized. Additionally,

having to stay together in a remote isolate area may also be influencing the high levels of trust between the teachers.

According to (Bustos Jiménez, 2011, p 107), a factor that can hinder community participation in rural schools is teachers believing that there is nothing parents can contribute to the learning processes of the students. Instead, a staff of teachers that motivates involvement of parents in their children's scholastic lives is the first step to the enrichment of community participation in the rural school. The teachers in both schools acknowledge the importance of the parents' involvement, prompting a beneficial starting point for community participation. There is a shared sentiment of being supported by the parents in school activities, or at times of needed favours outside of school matters. Consequently, supportive teacher-parent structures can lead to enrichment of teacher's agency.

It is noteworthy, however, that there is still room for improvement between parent-teacher support in the two studied schools. The teachers presented high levels of dissatisfaction about what they consider lack of attention regarding academic tasks –such as homework and studying—from the parents.

5.2.2 A Space for Flexible Practices

“The teacher is also the doctor, the psychologist, the counsellor. We are everything.”

-Jade, 37, teacher from “School B”.

In addition to the collaborative nature that can be observed, both rural schools also depend on how much flexibility is given to the teacher at time were decision-making is required. Through the interviews with the participants, two main examples emerge: flexibility in practices and flexibility in responsibilities.

By “flexibility in practices”, I refer to the alternative pedagogical methods that the teachers have created to adapt academic plans to the rural context. From using material resources from the rural environment to receiving classes in open fields, the teachers have been able to continue teaching despite the absence of predetermined practices for the rural school. Authors, such as Hamodi (2014), consider that these alternative practices through the use of contextual mediums, offers a rich learning experience for rural students, that urban students do not have. Additionally, by “flexibility in responsibilities”, I refer to the space for substitution or interchange of workload

responsibilities between teachers. It can be observed that in order to overcome the challenge of low staffing in rural schools, teachers have adapted by dividing the workload between the existing staff operating in the school. The existing staff takes over subjects for which they are not specifically trained to, such technical subjects for high school students or physical education.

Going back to Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2013) teacher agency model, we observe that the present dimension of engagement of the teacher, depends on the cultural, structural and material circumstances of the context where they find themselves in. It is observable that, despite the absence of material resources, teachers find themselves in an environment with space for decision-making in the classroom. This flexibility also translates outside of the classroom setting, meaning that, their role was not limited to teaching, but rather of an agent of community participation, observed through how they engage with the community to help the school with resources, for example. This not only means that the structure of the rural school is characterized by being flexible, but also that it is highly dependent on this flexibility for the continuation of its activities. It can be argued, then, that a rural school overtly focusing on establishing "fixed" responsibilities and practices for teachers may hinder decision-making processes, reflections for improvement and overall, participation of the community.

The objective of this chapter was to identify the present dimension through which rural El Paraíso teachers are engaging, as a first step to answer how teacher agency manifests. For this, it was essential to understand the socio-temporal aspects of the setting. The starting point was to map out what they considered as their main challenges, as it paints a picture of the circumstances that are preventing them from carrying out their objectives as they would desire. We find that, in this area, rural teachers are mostly constrained by material circumstances, such as deficient resources for the necessities of a rural school. Additionally, lack of established methods for multigrade modality and staffing problems suggest a weak structure circumstance in both schools. However, through the coping strategies discussed, it was evident that both schools counted with high levels of trust between teachers, collaboration instances with the communities and a space to exercise flexible practices and responsibilities. Both of these structural and cultural circumstances in this location are significant regarding teacher agency, because through the synergy of both, the teachers have spaces of mobility for decision-making and support to carry their job despite the challenges.

Chapter 6 – Linking Past Stories and Future Aspirations to the Present

Even though agency is enacted in the present, it does not come “out of nowhere”, but rather influenced by past experiences and patterns of the agent (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 136 Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Therefore, past stories of the participants needed to be addressed to better understand their actions in the present.

When discussing with the teachers about their past experiences, a common theme emerged through the conversations. First, it was interesting to find out that all of the participants were born, raised and have their family life in El Paraíso. Second, they also were students in multigrade schools. Finally, most of them come from families with teachers or had an influential teacher figure during their childhood. In this sense, the teachers’ first experience in a rural school did not come from their role of teacher, but as students, which gives them empirical knowledge not only about the rural schools, but the contextual dynamics that take place within rural communities.

While delving into why they wanted to become teachers, all of the participants mentioned the influences of other teachers in their childhood. *“I had an aunt who was a teacher in my school. She used to ask me to help her when planning her classes and I liked it.”* said Keren. *“In those days, parents did not want their daughters to leave the village to study. I remember teachers from my school talked to my parents, told them I had potential [to study]. Thanks to this, I pursued teaching.”*, commented Jade. In general, there was a common sentiment between the participants that expressed great appreciation towards their upbringing and schooling experiences in the rural.

The full scope of agency construction also involves understanding future aspirations of the agent. This is because the way agents act in the present can be motivated by what they intend for their future, either by wanting the present circumstances to change or wanting them to persist (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p 136). Short-term aspirations through conversations with the teachers showed a desire for quality improvement in the rural school. This was observable through various instances of what Schön (1983) defined as Reflection-on-Action, where the agent reflects about previous decisions and considered different approaches for the future. Particularly, the teachers expressed several critical thoughts regarding the topic of quality education, what it means to them and if they think they are providing it. In many instances, when asked to describe what quality education means to them, the teachers provided definitions by negation. In other words, they defined quality education by what it is not. *“Quality is when you do not have to teach*

multiple grades.” *“Quality is not having to improvise a lesson because you have the adequate tools.”*, for example. Because most of their negative descriptions coincided with the challenges they have, the general sentiment was that they consider the education they were currently providing could not be of quality. *“I do not feel like I am giving a hundred percent of me.”*, reflected Sara. Consequently, it can be argued that it is through these reflexive instances that coping strategies are created, to overcome challenges in the present, motivated by improvement for the future rather than a desire to stay the same.

Regarding long-term aspirations of rural teachers, the literature suggested that one common challenge for rural education is problems with staffing teachers willing to teach in a rural area. Remoteness can cause difficulty to access material and services, but also cause psychological isolation for teachers (Stelmach, 2011). It was suggested that the rural school might be used by teachers as a “steppingstone” with desires of getting promoted to leave the area (du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Additionally, due to teacher training focusing more on schools with an urban nature, there is a lack of understanding from the teachers on how to perform in a rural school, prompting aspirations to get transferred to an urban school (Álvarez-Álvarez and Gómez-Cobo, 2021, p 197). In turn, when asking the teachers if in their future aspirations they were aiming to get transferred to an urban area, it was surprising to hear that those were not their desires. *“I am good here, I have my family [in the village] and the work environment is good.”*, expressed Sara. Teachers in *School “B”*, who have to travel to a remote area, expressed that if they had to get transferred, it would be to a school closer to the village where their families and church are, not necessarily an urban school. These suggests that aspirations in rural El Paraíso teachers are staying and being close to their community – E.g., family and church – not necessarily moving to an urban are, contrary to what the literature presented.

6.1 Factors of past experiences and future aspirations influencing present actions

Conversations about past stories and future aspirations unveiled two details about teachers in rural El Paraíso, Honduras: First, even though their training to become teachers was mostly based on methods and plans unadjusted to the rural, their upbringing and schooling experiences, as well as influences from rural teachers, familiarized them with the dynamics of the rural school. Second, this particular group of teachers do not aspire to be transferred to an urban school, as opposed to what the literature of the general challenges of the rural school suggests. This last point also corroborates that with the exception of teacher who grew up in rural areas, other teachers have a difficult time adapting to the rural school dynamics (Fundación para la

Educación Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu, 2022, p. 21). It can be argued that past experiences in the rural, has helped them understand and have a consciousness of the place where they teach, as opposed to teachers coming from different backgrounds. Scholars have pointed out the importance of incorporating consciousness of the place into education, in what they call “place-based pedagogies”. For Gruenewald (2003, p 621) ‘places’ represent learning centres, stating that “as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped”. Consequently, Place-based pedagogies seek, not to dismiss content from generic curriculums, but to situate them into frameworks relevant to the place and community (Page, 2006, p 48; Gruenewald, 2003). Regarding rural education, Authors White and Reid (2008) argue the importance of Place-based pedagogies, stating that teacher who previously experienced life in rural settings know what it is like to teach in a rural multigrade classroom because they themselves experienced it. Such is the case of the teachers in rural El Paraíso. Through their upbringings and contact with the rural school, they have an awareness of the place that then translates into their teaching.

What this implies for teacher agency in the rural settings is that despite lacking frameworks for the local context, it is through this place consciousness that teachers with rural upbringings contextualise existing plans. So much so, that their appreciation of the place can be observed by their aspirations of staying. Regarding the training of teachers with backgrounds unfamiliar to rural settings, the incorporation of place awareness into their practice programmes holds an opportunity that might help them feel attracted, or at the very least, understand teaching in a rural school in a different light.

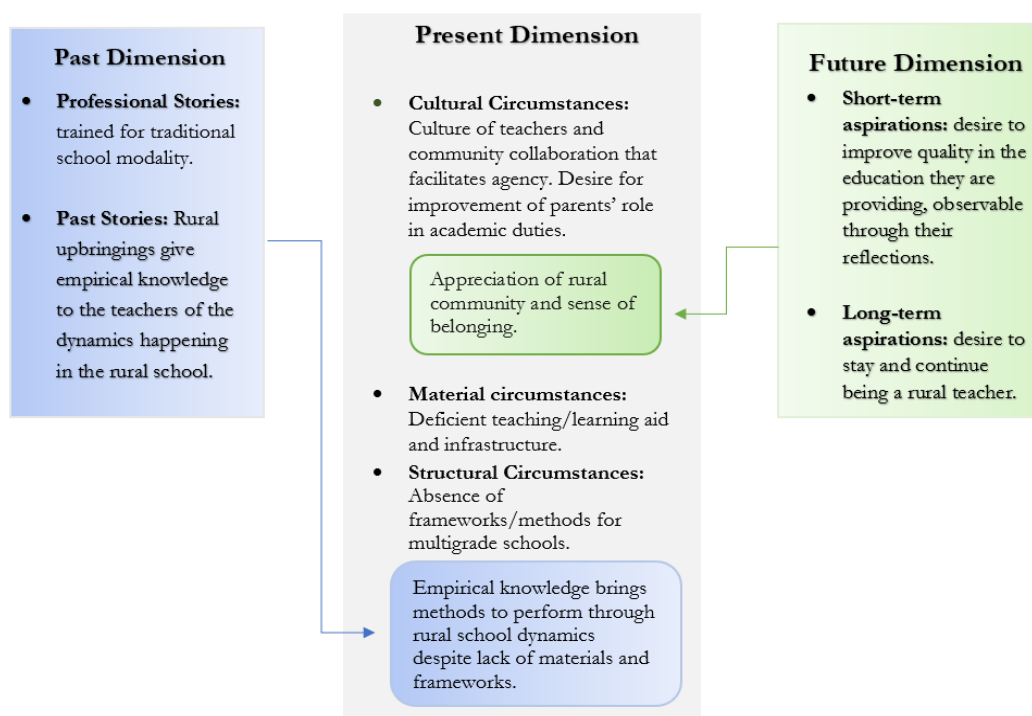


Figure 12 Teacher Agency Dimension in Rural El Paraíso, Honduras” Adapted by author (2023) from Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013). “Teachers as Agents of Change: Teacher Agency and Emerging Models of Curriculum” In: Reinventing the Curriculum: New Trends in Curriculum Policy and Practice.

Figure 8 illustrates and summarizes how past experiences and future aspirations are influencing structural and cultural circumstances of the teachers in the present. For example, methods for a multigrade classrooms was not taught to the teachers, but empirically learned from their experiences as rural students. In turn, this empirical knowledge element from the past, becomes relevant in the present (Figure 8 in Blue). Additionally, short and long-term aspirations are also influencing their present circumstances. A teacher could very well aspire for maintaining the a “normal desirable state” or “playing the game” (Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S., 2015, p 6), preventing change from occurring. On the contrary, the rural teachers of El Paraíso expressed great desire for change and improvement through their reflections, mostly how they aspire for better quality education in rural schools. Additionally, their long-term aspiration of staying and continue working in rural schools denotes an appreciation and a sense of belonging in the area, sentiment that may not be the case for non-rural teachers (See Figure 8 in Green). In turn, these elements from their past and future aspirations influence the way they cope with present challenges.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions and Recommendations

In the Department of El Paraíso, challenges in the rural schools are constraining factors which teachers consider necessary to provide an education of quality. The challenges mainly consist of material circumstances, such as the lack of adequate teaching and learning aid and infrastructure. Additionally, the lack of differentiated methods for the multigrade modality of rural schools, can be argued as a structural circumstance that further challenges the teachers. Despite these challenges, teacher agency manifests through an interaction of past, present, and future factors that make their way into their decision-making processes.

In the present, the rural teachers are committed to fill material and structural gaps, through the use of coping mechanisms that help them navigate challenges. It should be emphasized that such strategies depend on local circumstances that facilitate their reproduction. On one hand, it is observed that the rural schools facilitates a culture of collaboration between the teachers and the community. On the other, the structure of the rural schools appeared to be flexible regarding the teachers' responsibilities and practices. Both of these cultural and structural elements are what allow the manifestation of teacher agency. More importantly, it can be argued that removing one of these circumstances from the equation would hinder how the teacher engages and overcomes their challenges.

The full spectrum of teacher agency cannot be understood without the connection that present actions have with past experiences and future aspirations. For instance, a significant finding of the research was that teacher from rural El Paraíso do not aspire to be transferred to urban schools, contrary to what literature stated. It can be argued that because their upbringings and schooling experience were in the rural, they are familiar with it. Moreover, having been students in a multigrade classroom and interacting with rural teachers in their childhood, granted them a first-hand knowledge of the dynamics, something that traditional training for teachers does not offer.

The interplay between empirical knowledge of the rural school dynamics (past), appreciation and desire to stay in rural areas (future) and engaging with challenges by relying on collaboration and flexibility of practices (present) constitutes the exercise of teacher agency to adapt national curricula to the context of rural El Paraíso, Honduras.

7.1 Afterthoughts and Recommendations

At the end of the interview, one of the teachers said *“Thank you for talking with us about our experiences. Normally, the higher authorities only care about metrics, how many students graduate or so. But not our experience as teachers in rural schools”*. In the beginning stages, the idea for my research revolved around uncovering the strategies used by teachers to cope with the challenges in rural settings. Although descriptions of challenges and strategies constituted a significant topic to explore, I felt that it was quite reductive towards the stories I encountered. This became clear to me when teachers expressed reflections, sentiments of appreciation towards some things and disappointment towards others, their aspirations, and past experiences in the rural. The incorporation of the agency element allowed me to open a space where experiences were not reduced to “what are they doing?”, but rather “why are they doing it?”. As a result, some afterthoughts regarding rural education and local knowledge emerge.

First, it is evident that the figure of the rural teacher has been tried to be fitted into a box where it does not belong, which is that of a traditional teacher. Thus, this calls upon reflection from the authorities of the education system in Honduras, to formally recognize the figure of the rural teacher and the rural school in a differentiated manner and with all the implications that it carries, for instance, a curriculum that is relevant and adjusted to their context. The participation of rural teachers in the construction of new frameworks, methods and evaluations is essential, as disregarding local experiences may once again result in plans with urban biases. Lastly, if they were to be a differentiated structure for rural education, I emphasize the importance of embracing the factors that are facilitating teacher agency, such as the space of collaboration and the flexibility of practices, rather than limiting them with prescriptive means.

Regarding programmes for teacher training, it is unrealistic to expect a teacher trained for a traditional school modality to succeed in a multigrade setting. From what I could observe, there is an importance on having a relational link between the agent and the place where they are situated. This calls upon reflection for the institutions in charge of teacher training programmes to incorporate pedagogies of place into the formation of the future teachers. These should include practices that promote interactions of non-rural teachers with rural settings and rural schools, that may help them familiarize and understand its dynamics before teaching there.

Finally, regarding further research of teacher agency in rural contexts, my intention was to emphasize the fluidity of the term “rurality”. The everchanging nature of rural areas makes one setting different from the other, and in turn, much more can be uncover from location to

location. In other words, further research might uncover additional local knowledge and strategies used by the rural teachers in a different rural area. Additional research about local knowledge from teachers can result in exchange of strategies for rural schools, posing a beneficial outcome for rural education. Moreover, broadening the scope and incorporating other interacting agents, such as students and parents, becomes significant to be explored in future research to understand their roles within the dynamics of the rural school.

Certainly, it is unknown the extent to which these observations would propel rural education into the quality goal. What is certain is that turning a blind eye towards local specificities moves rural education further away from quality.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Guiding Questionnaire for Semi-Structured Interviews (teachers).

<p>General Information and Past Experiences</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is your name and how old are you?2. Where did you grow up?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow-up question: What do you remember about your hometown?• Possible follow-up question: At what age did you leave your hometown? Why did you leave?3. Where do you currently live? Do you leave near your workplace?4. ¿What do you like the most from the place you currently live in? What do you like the least?5. Where did you attend school? What things do you remember from your school?6. Do you consider someone from your past an influential figure for you?7. Are there similarities between your workplace and the school you attended? Which?8. How did your professional life as a teacher start? Where did you study and train to become a teacher?9. What influenced you to become a teacher?10. How many years have you worked for your current workplace?11. ¿Have you ever worked in an urban school?
<p>Professional experiences</p>	
<p>Present Experience</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">12. Which grades are you currently teaching?13. Which subjects do you currently teach?

Beliefs.

Material component: Resources and Physical environment.

Structural: Roles, structures, and trust

14. Approximately how many students are assigned to you?
15. What does 'quality education' mean to you? What do you think is necessary for quality in education?
16. The school is categorized as a 'Rural school'. Do you consider yourself a rural teacher? Why or why not?
17. What do you think could be different between a rural and an urban teacher?
18. Besides teaching, what else do you think you influence your students' lives?
19. What do you like the most of working for a rural school?
20. Can you describe your commute from the place you live to your workplace?
21. Can you describe your classroom? What would you like to change about your classroom?
22. How do you acquire the material resources for your classes?
23. How do your students acquire the materials they need? What happens when they cannot acquire it?
24. How often do you and your coworkers receive training courses for teachers? Do you have to go to another location for them?
25. How often do you travel to an urban location?
26. How would you describe your relationship with your students? Is there something you would like to change?
27. How would you describe your relationship with your students' parents? Is there something you would like to change?

<p>Constraints and coping mechanisms</p>	<p>28. How would you describe your relationship with your coworkers? Is there something you would like to change?</p> <p>29. How would you describe your relationship with the principal? Is there something you would like to change?</p> <p>30. Does the school do activities that involve the community? Can you describe some examples?</p> <p>31. What are your biggest challenges in your job as a rural teacher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up questions: How do you overcome challenges? <p>32. Do you get support from someone within the school? Who?</p> <p>33. Do you get support from someone outside of the school? Who?</p>
<p>Aspirations</p>	<p>34. Do you aspire to continue working as a teacher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up question: would you like to continue working in a rural school or would you like to be transferred to an urban school? Why or why not? <p>35. What do you consider would improve your experience as a rural teacher?</p> <p>36. What aspirations do you have for your students?</p> <p>37. What are your aspirations for your future?</p>
	<p>38. Do you have a final comment regarding your experience as a rural teacher?</p>

Appendix 2: Guiding Questionnaire for Semi-Structured Interviews (Principal-Teacher).

<p>General Information and Past Experiences</p> <p>Professional Experiences</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your name and how old are you? 2. Where did you grow up? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow-up question: What do you remember about your hometown? • Possible follow-up question: At what age did you leave your hometown? Why did you leave? 3. Where do you currently live? Do you live near your workplace? 4. ¿What do you like the most from the place you currently live in? What do you like the least? 5. Where did you attend school? What things do you remember from your school? 6. Do you consider someone from your past an influential figure for you? 7. Are there similarities between your workplace and the school you attended? Which? 8. How did your professional life as a teacher start? Where did you study and train to become a teacher? 9. Can you describe your professional life before becoming a principal? Were you a teacher in a rural school? How was your training to become a teacher?
<p>Present Beliefs</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. What does ‘quality education’ mean to you? What do you think is necessary for quality in education? 11. Do you consider that being a rural school principal is different from being an urban school principal? Why or why not? 12. In what ways do you consider teachers influence their students besides academic content?

<p>Material component: Resources and Physical environment.</p> <p>Structural: Roles, structures, and trust</p> <p>Constraints and coping mechanisms.</p>	<p>13. What do you like the most from working in a rural school?</p> <p>14. Can you describe your classroom? What would you like to change about your classroom?</p> <p>15. How do you acquire the material resources for your classes?</p> <p>16. How do your students acquire the materials they need? What happens when they cannot acquire it?</p> <p>17. How often do you and your coworkers receive training courses for teachers? Do you have to go to another location for them?</p> <p>18. How often do you travel to an urban location?</p> <p>19. How do you consider your relationships with the teachers you manage? Is there something you would like to change?</p> <p>20. How do you consider your relationship with the students’ parents? Do you feel supported by them?</p> <p>21. Does the school do activities that involve participation of the community? Can you describe some?</p> <p>22. What are your biggest challenges in your job as a rural teacher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up questions: How do you overcome challenges? <p>23. Do you get support from someone within the school? Who?</p> <p>24. Do you get support from someone outside of the school? Who?</p>
<p>Future</p>	<p>25. Do you aspire to continue being a rural school principal? Why or why not?</p> <p>26. Would you like to be transferred to an urban school? Why or why not?</p> <p>27. What do you aspire for the future of your students?</p> <p>28. Is there anything that could improve the experience for rural school principals?</p>
<p>Final</p>	<p>29. Do you have a final comment regarding your experience as a rural teacher?</p>

Appendix 3: Additional Photographs from the Studied Schools

School “A”



A picture of the school field where students play.



A picture of the paved road to El Robledal Village.



Additional picture of School A Classroom.



Playground facilities

School “B”



Installations of School “B”



Commute of the teachers in School “B” through the dirt road.



A river nearby the dirt road where School B teachers commute to their workplace.