

# Spain: betting on education the *Preescolar na Casa* way

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*The author coordinates and organises activities and training of professionals in the *Preescolar na Casa* project, a rural early childhood development (ECD) project that, since 1977, has been operating in Galicia, an autonomous region in the north west of Spain. In the absence of any other provision, the project is centred on training parents to provide the preschool needs of their children. But it is doing so in ways that help to revalidate and revitalise the rural world.*

## **Rural Galicia**

The current rural world of Galicia is complex and contradictory and there are many different rural realities. In addition, it has gone through – and is still going through – many changes. Among these are:

- *The separation of arable farming from cattle-raising, and the parallel weakening of the importance of agriculture and stockbreeding to the country's gross domestic product (the total wealth that the country produces).*

This has diversified rural society, and rural life is no longer automatically associated with the land.

In turn, this impacts on rural social structures: social classes are not now necessarily linked to land ownership; instead more people tend to have occupations. At the same time, there is a weakening of the links between agricultural activity and living in the country: instead of the classic model of small

farmers who live and work on their own land, the rural world is full of people who have no rural background; while owners of arable, forestry and cattle-raising businesses may live in the city.

- *The industrialisation of agriculture.*

The economic activities of family farming businesses have become a kind of agro-industrial chain, both in terms of what they need to buy (seeds, fertiliser, agrochemicals), and in terms of what they sell (meat, milk, grains). And almost all of the links in the chain are pre-determined: the prices, the quantities, the quality.

- *Agrarian specialisation.*

Increasing differences are developing between rural regions because of specialisation in terms of crops and produce.

- *The social and geographical blurring of rural and urban distinctions.*

Added to this in Galicia is the fact that residents of small villages and towns don't lose their links with the rural environment: most of them have family in the countryside and/or still retain rural ways of doing things.

It's possible to identify two determinants of these changes. The first is the loss of the cultural characteristics of the rural world because the urban world is regarded as so desirable. Mass communication media contribute greatly to this, and rural dwellers may reinforce it by becoming contemptuous of their own cultural and traditional beliefs and norms, and by losing their sense of the worth of their own language. They may also encourage their children to study and perform well in school so they have the opportunity to move to the towns and cities, instead of working in the fields.



The second determinant of rural change is imposed from outside. It derives from ideas about development and industrialisation, and results in traditional family businesses trying to compete with businesses that are based solely on an economic vision. This causes a number of problems, including:

- *that rural living has to be subsidised.*  
This doesn't just reinforce dependence and insecurity, but also confronting farmers with the paradox about short-term expediency and consequent long-term problems. There are two obvious examples of this paradox. The first is about using animal feed that was derived from infected animal products and resulted in the mad cow disease crisis. The second is about encouraging intensive production and subsequently trying to promote sensible ecological development.
- *That only large businesses are viable.*  
This increases the difficulty of maintaining authentic rural ways and activities. Such businesses also change the nature of rural jobs: often the men work away from home, in the service sector or the construction industry, while the women run the homes, care for the children and elderly people, and run small-scale farming activities.

All this devalues the rural world and leads to its progressive abandonment: young and more dynamic people move to the cities thereby reducing the viability of services such as schools and public transport – a factor in increasing the motivation to leave the countryside.

This massive depopulation also means that the population is thinly scattered – a key characteristic

of rural life. Some figures help to give a clear idea of the scale of this in Galicia. Galicia has an area of 30,000 square kilometres and a population of almost 3,000,000 people. Of these, about one million are concentrated in the seven main cities. The remainder are distributed among the approximately 30,000 small Galician communities (some 51.2 percent of the total number of such communities in Spain). Over recent years, the reduction of the birth rate and emigration to the cities, have created a middle-aged and remote rural world.

### Rural childhood

Undoubtedly, all this has repercussions on rural childhood. Few people value rural life and children feel this from a very early age. In addition, many of them live with older people where they are over-protected and develop slowly because each of them may be the only child in the community. They have no opportunity to play, or to enjoy the company of playmates of the same age or adults from other families. Only when they start school will they have the opportunity to be with their peers – but at the price of having to leave home early to catch the school bus on its long and circuitous journey around the dispersed communities that the schools serves. And they return very late and very tired from schools that, far from demonstrating respect and consideration for the rural world, are much more likely to distance them from their roots.

This is the context in which Preescolar na Casa tries to make a difference. It is conscious that it can only add stones (such as the promotion and appraisal of the rural world through its educational work) in the

construction of a cathedral (a rural environment that is valued and respected) by a concentration of forces (integrated social, educational, economic policies) that are driven by people who are aware of the importance of their collective efforts.

### Educational and cultural instruments for the revitalisation of the rural world

Faced with a challenge, the normal response of people with low self-esteem is to believe that it is beyond them. But in working with such people, and coming face to face with the classic myth of ‘I do not know’, Preescolar na Casa tries to reinforce the value and bring out the potential of each of them. It tries to rescue and reveal all the possibilities that the rural world contains. It is not a matter of maintaining something that is idealised but out of date, it is about evolution, it is about bringing into play elements and factors that can help to improve the quality of life for the rural people, and it is about preserving their distinctiveness.

#### Rural values

- The relation with the environment.
- Closeness to the realities of life, its cycles and the crucial phases that help us to understand it better.
- The consciousness of the value of things that comes from having lived close to their creation.
- Neighbourliness, acceptance and support.
- Cultural wealth: legends, sayings, songs, stories, traditional festivals.
- Knowledge gained from experience over time.

Perhaps this article may seem to suggest that Preescolar na Casa has the answers to rural challenges. It does not. What it does have, is a long-standing programme that brings education to remote and dispersed rural people by helping them to reflect, individually and collectively, in order to find their own answers. It helps them to abandon the role of victims and change themselves into people who can make a difference, social actors who work together to find answers and look for the best ways to put them into practice.

Up until now, rural development has been determined by outsiders. Through the programme, rural dwellers now analyse what they encounter and look for solutions. The ideas of Preescolar na Casa derive from the concept of supportive education. According to the definition elaborated by Antonio Gandoy, founder of the programme, education is understood as action that has the objectives of developing and perfecting a person’s faculties, developing their capacities, adding to their knowledge and enabling them to devise values via learning and external influences. The point is to enable people to understand the realities of their lives, intervene in them and live in harmony with others and with nature.

Preescolar na Casa is against the concept of a non-challenging or conformist education of the person. Its concept is of a critical education that emancipates people so that – as the great Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire indicated – they don’t simply have rights and responsibilities but are agents in the struggle to attain those rights and meet those responsibilities. That is our utopia.

## Making the bet concrete

Discrimination against rural children in the 1970s meant that there was no access to preschool for those aged four to six years. This caused high school failure rates and precipitated the birth of Preescolar na Casa. As this article should have made clear, Preescolar na Casa chooses to concentrate on improving opportunities for young rural children for young children because, as UNICEF declares:

*The early years should receive priority by governments, as expressed in laws, policies, programmes and resources. But the reality is that these children are not prioritised and this is a tragedy, as much for them as for their countries.*

Preescolar na Casa knows that the environment of the child is critical for her or his development, that affection is indispensable for children's development, and that the family is where children spend the

### How the programme maintains contact

- Encounter Rooms.
- Bi-monthly orientation meetings for parents.
- A bi-monthly magazine.
- A library.
- A travelling games/toy library.
- Locally-generated materials.
- A weekly radio programme.
- A weekly television programme.
- Teletext.
- A website.

majority of their time. So it does its work, not directly with children, but through the medium of their families. Our objective is to support families as the children's main educators, helping them to reflect on how they are performing their work, and thereby discover new ways of being educators who contribute to the harmonious and integrated development of their children.

Preescolar na Casa organises bi-weekly orientation meetings for parents, enabled and mediated by a programme professional (the guide or orientator). These meetings are based on the day to day experiences of the families, and by discussing these experiences between themselves and with the guidance of the orientator, the parents gain a better understanding of their children. This means that they can respond effectively to their children's needs. Parents are also encouraged to see each child as unique, as having particular needs, as an individual who reacts in specific and determined ways. They come to recognise children as being active, not passive, in their development. They recognise that it is through their responses and messages, and through the challenges and situations that they present to their children, that their children will be shaped and confirmed as autonomous people who learn through reflection, and are able to confront challenges and devise responses. Or, on the other hand, will simply be dependent and unable to contribute to change.

The orientation meetings are especially important given the isolation in which the families live. Parents value them because they meet with other people but – much more – because their children can be with children of their own age. The orientators consider

these meetings essential as much for the socialisation of the children as for the learning processes that the families go through. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to organise these inter-family meetings because of rural depopulation. This can mean that the orientators meet with just individual families and therefore have to work harder, travel further and incur higher costs.

In all aspects of the programme, the orientators are crucially important. Their attitudes, who they are, how they behave with the families, all show their belief in the families and that they are valued. Through this, the orientators are fundamentally important to the effectiveness of the programme.

Other means are also used. For example, the Encounter Rooms are especially important here because they are so effective in promoting meetings and energising the rural world. Encounter Rooms are spaces especially designed for encounters between adults and children, without the presence of the professional orientator. They are provided by the programme and launched by the orientators but the families have the responsibility of organising, operating and developing them. Preescolar na Casa supports them via its travelling games/toy library, lending toys and books to underline the importance of play and of reading in the lives of even the smallest children, and to deepen the emotional ties between them and their parents.

## The impact of the programme

What does the programme contribute to the development of the rural world? In the field of



education, it is never easy to see a direct connection between action and effect. However, there are indications that the programme is effective. For example, it is evident that its operations in the rural environment, by taking advantage of what the environment has to offer geographically, culturally and within the families, help to restore a sense of the worth of the rural world. Here it is significantly different from some others: the professionals come to the families rather than the other way around.

Equally, it is clear that, from birth, children can perceive and internalise the value that those around them place on the rural environment and its culture. Changing this is helping to establish the foundation for the progressive revaluing of the rural environment.

To reinforce habits of reflection, reading, exchanging, listening, observation and communication on themes related to infancy, is to help adults see aspects of their own reality, personal just as much as social. To recognise the potential of parents, and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem so that they feel more capable of confronting their problems, not only contributes to the education of their children but also to positive changes in all the environments in which they are actors.

In conclusion, Preescolar na Casa is a contribution to the revitalisation of the rural environment because it works through people. And it is in people that the wealth of each community is concentrated. □

*Taking advantage of what the environment has to offer*



Spain, Preescolar na Casa project | photo: María Xosé Miranda Barros