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## Teachers' Experiences in Schools that Serve Rural Communities in The Dominican Republic: Their Readiness to Respond to Challenges

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TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS THAT SERVE RURAL COMMUNITIES  
IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: THEIR READINESS TO RESPOND  
TO CHALLENGES

by

Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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# TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS THAT SERVE RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: THEIR READINESS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES

Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2020

In 2016, the Dominican Institute for Evaluation and Research of Educational Quality (IDEICE), indicated educational inequalities due to the geographical location of schools in the Dominican Republic. Despite several policies enacted by the Ministry of Education, including curriculum and teacher credentialing reforms, success indicators such as completion rates and academic performance still suggest a major achievement gap. Limitations in understanding the unique characteristics of schools that serve student in rural communities contribute to education policies that may not be sufficiently sensitive to those circumstances. One particular area of insufficient understanding is the manner in which teachers experience teaching in schools that serve a rural context. Very little is known about how these teachers address the circumstances they encounter working with students and families in rural contexts. To respond to the need for better understanding of teachers' actual experiences teaching in schools that serve rural communities, this study used a basic interpretative qualitative research design to engage a criterion sample of 16 teachers currently teaching in schools located in rural communities. Data was collected through open-ended semi-structured interviews to: (a) profile the challenges of

public-school teachers who teach within rural contexts, and (b) their professional readiness to overcome such challenges. Additionally, this study examined how teachers experience and respond to the rural community culture as they work to prepare their students to meet the requirements of the national curriculum. Findings in this research study indicate that the majority of challenges that teachers and schools located in rural communities face, are a collateral result of cultural, behavioral, and socioeconomic characteristics of rural communities. For example, illiteracy among parents limits their ability to collaborate with teachers. Lack of public transportation with access to schools restrict students from regularly attending school, eventually leading to an increase in dropout rates. Low motivation among students is often produced by socioeconomic factors that force parents to migrate, consequently, becoming absent parents unable to supervise children's school attendance and academic progress. Participants in this study described other challenges, such as lack of instructional resources, deficient school infrastructure, unequal distribution of resources, and lack of specialized teachers. While the findings from this study illuminate the challenges that teachers encounter as they teach in rural contexts and the lack of specific preparation they receive to do so, this study also revealed a surprising degree of commitment, creativity, and collaborative support to address such challenges. These research findings aim to contribute with a deeper understanding of the challenges that have the potential to interfere with school performance, students' academic achievement, and teachers' instructional practice when serving schools in rural communities. These findings can assist policymakers in the design of robust and informed future research and policies to positively impact education in rural communities in the Dominican Republic.

## **DEDICATION**

To all the children in the Dominican Republic, because your school experience and academic achievement should never be a matter of luck.

To all the teachers in rural communities giving their all despite all of the challenges I now understand as a result of this study. I admire you for achieving great things every day with your students. Thank you for showing me how privileged I am to practice this profession and serve my students with all the needed resources. Thank you for going beyond your duties, even using your own resources, to assure that every child, in every corner of the Dominican Republic, develops essential competencies for everyday life.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Along this journey, many people have served as motivators, mentors, guides, and helping hands to accomplish the dream of giving a voice to teachers in the rural zones of the Dominican Republic, who are giving their all to teach future generations.

Dr. Reeves, thank you for believing in me. Your words of wisdom, and guidance for the past five years were essential for the completion of this dissertation. I am privileged to have you as a mentor to become a researcher.

Mary Francis, Rossina, and Laura, this journey would have been impossible to walk without the support of a group of strong and brave women who work every day to make this world kinder, and equitable for all. I admire each one of you in your unique and extraordinary essence.

Alex, words cannot describe how lucky I am to have you in my life. Thank you for your patience, kindness, and owning this dissertation as your own. Thank you for the countless hours of grammar review, and being the translator between my ideas and words.

To my family, thank you for your support, and encouraging words easing this journey.

Mom, all I have accomplished in life is because of you. This title is yours.

Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2016, the Dominican Institute for Evaluation and Research of Educational Quality (IDEICE) indicated in a public policy report that educational inequalities prevail due to the geographical location of schools in the Dominican Republic (DR). When comparing rural and urban education in the DR, striking differences clearly demonstrate the existing inequality between these educational realities. There have been attempts to compensate for this imbalance, but it seems the actions have been insufficient in terms of impact. The permanence of this inequality indicates that the rural environment has ceased to be recognized as a transcendental agent for the development of the country.

Many investigative efforts have been conducted in the DR which point to educational disadvantages in the rural areas when compared to the urban areas. For instance, the Third Regional Comparative and Explicatory Study (TERCE) conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2013 on the factors associated with the learning of mathematics and reading comprehension in the third and sixth grades, revealed significant comparative results between rural and urban schools. This study revealed marked disadvantages in rural public schools when compared to urban public schools, arguing that attending a rural school has negative effects on student learning outcomes. A study conducted in 2016 by the Dominican Institute for Educational Quality Evaluation and Research (IDEICE) revealed a correlation between students'

dropout rates and their schools' distance from an urban area; the further the distance of a school from an urban area, the higher the dropout rate. For example, the dropout rate in urban areas is 9.53%, while rural area rates are as high as 19.36%. This alarming gap depicts how rural areas can have more than twice the dropout rate for students than that of urban communities. Similarly, a 2017 report from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) indicated that children and adolescents living in rural areas are more likely to dropout or not attend school altogether. In another report, IDEICE (2016) showed that the urban areas have the highest percentage of students taking the National Tests within the given time frame as established by the Ministry of Education (MINERD). This report indicated that 54% of students in urban areas complete the National Tests within the that timeframe, while completion rates for students in the isolated rural areas decreased considerably to 38%. These reports, however, may or may not present an authentic picture of the differences between the educational outcomes of rural schools as compared to urban schools in the DR.

According to Del Rosario and Morrobel (2011), current demographic data for the country is biased. Current censuses in the DR indicate that the urban population represents 74%, and, by default, the rural population only represents 26% of the total population. Del Rosario and Morrobel expressed that, under the current classification system, the rural and the urban do not have their own verifiable indicators. The urban designation strictly corresponds to every municipality or municipal district decided by legislators, while everything remaining is considered rural. Consequently, each territory is treated as if it were homogeneous in order to establish categories of analysis based on just two exclusionary zones of residence. Under this simplistic scheme, there is no possibility of efficient design for social development policies nor

efficient allocation of public and private resources. As a result, the current Dominican territorial configuration is a distorted illustration of reality.

Such analyses based on official statistics associated with the zone of residence (rural or urban) carry within themselves the rural-urban dichotomy embodied in the laws of the 1950s, and have been assumed since the 1960 census. This dichotomous vision, in addition to being simplistic, ineludibly leads to a denaturalized territoriality; the urban is overestimated, and the rural is underestimated (Del Rosario, 2017).

The design of effective rural education development strategies must start from the acceptance that rural areas in the DR are environments that have undergone important changes, currently showing marked heterogeneity demanding a conceptual and analytical reformulation of rural reality (Del Rosario, Escarrmán, & Morrobel, 2014). Equal opportunities for both rural and urban areas are a basic principle and right for all Dominican citizens. Article 39 of the Dominican constitution refers to the right of equality, specifically stating that all people are born free and equal, and entitled to receive the same protection and treatment from governmental institutions and authorities. Additionally, citizens are entitled to enjoy the same rights, freedoms and opportunities, without any discrimination on the basis of gender, color, age, nationality, family ties, language, religion, political views, philosophical opinions, social or personal status. The constitution also states that the country condemns any privilege and situation that tends to defy the equality of Dominican women and men, among whom there must be no other differences than those resulting from their own talents or virtues.

However, the significant gap in the results of the learning outcomes between rural and urban students is confirmed by the comparative studies that have been carried out in recent years throughout the national territory regarding the educational progress of students (MINERD,

2018). For example, rural public schools differ from urban public schools in terms of school infrastructure, coverage, accessibility and learning resources (UNICEF, 2017). Also, rural schools lack adequate facilities for the preschool level given that, in general, they do not meet the minimum requirements as stated by the Business Action for Education (EDUCA) in 2015. MINERD, in the 2013 TERCE, revealed that most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers and in most cases none at all. Not to mention that rural public schools are often under-enrolled or overcrowded resulting in the creation of multigrade classrooms. Three major factors contribute to the need for multigrade classrooms: the first is the sparse distribution of families in many of the Dominican rural areas. A second is the high rate of students entering school late (after the normal age of school entrance), and the third is the lack of teachers who are willing to teach in rural areas (EDUCA, 2015). Such limitations of the rural context make educational accomplishments very challenging, and educational equality an idealistic idea without solid grounding in reality.

When analyzing the normative instruments that govern the national curriculum, teaching practices, and teacher preparation programs, it is undeniable that the DR is under a completely standardized educational system (EDUCA, 2015) that does not allow a differentiated approach to meet the particular needs of the rural area. Consequently, this results in a marked disadvantage when comparing urban and rural students' educational achievements. The educational system, homogeneous in nature, does not take into account the particular needs of the different communities that coexist throughout the national territory. For example, the current curricular reform advocates for the development of technological competences; however, most rural schools as indicated by IDEICE (2016) lack electricity, Internet, and phone signal which are essential to develop technological competencies. Schools that serve the highest poverty rural

areas of the country, generally have more limited teaching and learning resources and less well-prepared teachers (MINERD, 2013), thus increasing the educational gap between one sector and the other. Hence, poverty and limited access to resources negatively affect the educational process leading to the expansion of educational inequality (Juárez & Rodríguez, 2016). The contrasting educational outcomes and allocation of resources for rural education is the result of regulations that have led the educational system towards homogenization of expectations and policies. Differentiation in resource allocation, strategies, and policies to address the unique characteristics and differences between both contexts seems to be necessary.

On one hand, rural areas of the country are characterized by their marginality, vulnerability, and dependence on the urban areas where there has been the greatest socioeconomic growth. For example, there is a disparity in investment in terms of infrastructure and technology between urban and rural schools given the low concentration of students in rural areas (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011). This situation causes students to conglomerate in schools that are distanced from their communities. Subsequently, students often desert school or delay their entrance to school. These two incidences are some of the causes that generate multiage and multigrade classrooms in rural communities. The significant difference in economic investment in rural communities has developed unjust disadvantages that are manifested in almost all aspects of rural community life. For example, the distribution of population across the country's rural areas results in much lower concentrations of people compared to urban areas. Therefore, low concentrations of people living in remote or difficult to access areas are the causations for the emergence of schools that serve very small student populations (Del Rosario et al., 2014). This low concentration in school population results in the prevalence of complex multigrade structures that impede differentiated work by grade and age within classrooms. These types of



schools generate extra disadvantages for student populations that due to their socioeconomic characteristics, enter school with greater disadvantages when compared to students from more economically advantaged families living (IDEICE, 2016). From this perspective, my research study focuses on rural teachers, to help make their work visible and unveil their needs in the processes of training and continuous training to attend rural schools' characteristics.

## **Background**

### **Problem statement**

Rural areas in the DR are characterized by their marginality of resources, services, and their dependence on urban centers for a significant portion of social and educational services (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011). Additionally, rural communities are economically subordinated to urban areas that have the highest levels of socioeconomic growth. This has resulted in the creation of large and unjust imbalances that are manifested mainly in the distribution of investments and education, causing marked social, economic, and educational inequity between the inhabitants of the urban and rural areas. The Dominican K-12 educational system is designed in a homogenous manner and directed by the Dominican Ministry of Education (MINERD). However, rural schools tend to be much smaller with multigrade classrooms, limited (or no) access to technology, and staffed by teachers who have not received adequate preparation for the unique challenges of serving a rural population of students from families with little formal education and very limited resources (IDEICE, 2016).

For instance, teachers in rural schools are expected to attain the same academic outcomes for students who come from very different backgrounds than students in the urban centers; yet, the national education system and policy does not differentiate educational supports to account for differences in the student population or in the conditions for serving that population. For

example, The Campesino Consortium, through the document "Memories of a Process: The Dominican Rural Zone, Realities and Proposals" identified in 2002 the following problems in rural education: low achievement in reading and writing when compared to urban students; lack of school supplies, electricity and water; children in grades that do not correspond with age; school dropouts; deteriorated classrooms; amongst others.

In terms of spatial distribution in rural areas, rural populations in the DR have low-level population concentrations which means that, in many communities, there is not enough of a school population to have a complete school with all levels or with separate grades. This situation generates incomplete or differently configured schools in three major different dimensions: (a) schools that offer only some grade levels, (b) schools that only offer elementary education, and (c) schools that group students from different grades and ages in a single classroom (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011). Limited grade spans for small rural schools force students who want to continue their education to move to other communities or to quit school. This situation accentuates the vulnerability to which students from rural areas are exposed in comparison to students who attend schools in urban communities that have larger student populations facilitating the offer of single grade level classrooms including high school grade spans.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated in 2003 that the multigrade classroom is the most common feature of Dominican rural schools. In these classrooms, teachers are likely to be responsible for two or more levels of multiple curricular subjects, usually without the required academic training to address the needs of such complex educational environments. Moreover, it is very difficult to attract and recruit teachers given the limitations of rural communities (UNESCO, 2003).

Given that rural areas are characterized by a situation of poverty, along with limitations in infrastructure, social services, and economic opportunity, teaching and learning in the multigrade classrooms is often carried out in very difficult circumstances. This is due to limited resources and support for teachers who must respond to a wide range of student developmental and educational needs, as well as other limitations related to family economic circumstances and limited or no social services (UNESCO, 2003). For all these reasons, equity of educational opportunity is a concern for students who go to school in the rural communities, especially those who are located in the most remote parts of the country. Such remote areas happen to exist in every educational district in the DR, even in Santo Domingo, the nation's capital.

The country has a homogeneous educational policy and system that does not fully respond to the educational characteristics, needs, and challenges of rural areas. This situation limits the capacity to attain the desired educational outcomes in schools that serve rural communities. For example, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MESCyT) indicated in 2016 that the DR has 48 institutions of higher education and, of these, only 32 fall into the category of university. These 32 universities all are located in non-rural areas, according to the official demographic classification of Dominican territories (Del Rosario et al., 2014). Demographic studies, conducted in the DR, concluded that there are five types of territories in the country; predominantly urban, significantly urban, in rural-urban transition, significantly rural, and predominantly rural (Del Rosario et al., 2014). However, teacher preparation programs do not recognize the importance of these different demographic contexts in the teacher preparation curricula, nor do they include courses related specifically to rural education. Teacher preparation programs in the DR are composed of four knowledge areas: general knowledge, specialized knowledge, psycho-pedagogical knowledge, and professional

practice as stated by the Business Action for Education (EDUCA) in 2016. None of these include areas addressing courses of educating children in rural contexts.

After teachers finish their training programs, they are randomly assigned by the Ministry of Education to schools across the country, meaning that there is a possibility of being appointed to work in a rural school. Reeralal's (2014) research on rural school instructional practices found that teachers whose bachelor's degree curriculum did not include aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools, i.e. dealing with multi-age, multigrade classrooms and differences in family and community characteristics, makes it difficult for rural schools to retain teachers.

Kline and Walker-Gibbs (2015) found that teachers' preparedness for working in rural settings is determined by their development of pedagogical expertise, their capacity for professional engagement with parents and the community, and most importantly, a broad preparation and positive notions for teaching in rural contexts. Accordingly, research findings suggest that teachers need to be knowledgeable about rural contexts and strategies for adapting instructional practices to address issues of rural communities. However, since teacher preparation is done almost exclusively by institutions located in the urban centers, these aspects of teacher preparation are not addressed.

Each school has characteristics that represent unique challenges to teachers in order to meet the needs of each student, and these challenges increase when the context in which schools are located have social, demographic, economic, and cultural limitations. However, this should not be an obstacle if teachers develop professional competencies during their teaching preparation programs to address the characteristics and culture of all the contexts in which they might serve. These competencies include the ability to implement matching pedagogical practices and strategies to ensure students achieve the proposed learning outcomes for each grade

level by aligning instructional practices and objectives to the context in which they serve (Saigal, 2012).

Teachers are placed in schools throughout the country after their completion of a standardized teacher preparation program and some begin to practice in more challenging teaching contexts, such as rural schools. Teachers who are placed in Dominican rural schools are likely to experience limited technology access, high rates of grade repetition, multigrade and multi-age classrooms, and low student attendance rates throughout the school year due to school location and lack of public transportation, among other limitations as described by the Secretary of State for Education (SEE) in 2005. Working in such conditions may reveal limitations on the teacher's preparation and readiness to respond to the needs of rural schools. Cornish and Jenkins (2015) argued that teachers should not only be trained with a realistic vision of the rural context, but should also be trained with an impartial vision that allows them to address emergent situations, typical of a rural context. Without specific preparation for teaching in rural contexts, however, many of the above-mentioned characteristics of rural schools are likely to take novice teachers by surprise and find them ill prepared to adjust.

Currently, there is a teacher recruitment deficiency in the DR school system, and this situation has forced the ministry of education to create even more complex school configurations, such as multigrade and overpopulated classrooms (MINERD, 2004). This is especially prevalent in rural schools that find it even more challenging to attract teachers to fulfill school needs. This condition denotes that rural schools seem to be forgotten by an educational system that delivers limited opportunities for students in rural areas when the opposite should happen. According to Masinire et al. (2014), "quality teachers are the touchstone for sustainable education and rural development" (p. 148). Therefore, teachers should develop

competencies and acquire knowledge that enable them to meet the need of each context in which they serve.

The same argument can be made when prospective teachers from rural areas migrate to the city to obtain their professional degree and end up being placed for their preservice teacher training in urban school settings. Not only may these teachers who come from remote rural areas be unprepared for teaching in classrooms that serve more urban raised children, but the lack of an opportunity to do preservice training in schools that serve rural populations also limits their opportunities to develop professional readiness for teaching in rural contexts as well. This does not mean that there should be competing teacher preparation programs. Instead, studies suggest that teacher preparation programs should include complementary courses to specifically address the challenges of both rural and urban teaching, and that teacher development programs should include both residential and fieldwork for teacher interns, so they acquire experience in both urban and rural settings (Masinire et al., 2014).

### **The current state of research on teacher preparation for rural settings**

Arnold, Dean and Gaddy (2005) indicated that there is an absence of high-quality research on rural schools, reduced findings for rural education research, and incongruences when defining “rural.” Their research findings state that only 21% of the studies regarding rural education met the requirements of employing a comparative research design to pursue an investigation regarding rural education problems. More specifically, researchers stated that “there is no topic with a sufficient body of research. Therefore, policymakers and practitioners cannot make decisions regarding the likelihood of success for any given intervention with a high degree of confidence” (p. 16). Also, research findings in rural education have provided relatively little evidence about purposeful efforts to prepare teachers for rural classrooms (Arnold, Dean,

Gaddy, & Newman, 2005). Challenges such as poverty, isolation, teachers' living conditions, among others, seem to interfere with teachers' ability to deliver quality instruction in rural schools. These conditions also contribute to challenges recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers which, in turn, results in further challenges for improving student achievement in high poverty rural settings (Saigal, 2012). According to Heeralal (2014), the content in the curriculum of the bachelor's degree in teacher preparation programs rarely includes aspects that relate specifically to teaching in rural schools. This lack of attention to preparing teachers for serving in high poverty rural settings adds to difficulty for rural schools to attract, recruit, and retain teachers.

Other study findings indicate that preservice teachers' rural experiences produce some significant attitudinal changes for teaching in rural contexts, vanishing misconceptions about living and teaching in rural communities (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Moreover, researchers discovered that preservice teaching experiences in rural settings contributed positively to urban preservice teachers' perceptions toward working and living in rural communities (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Ajayi, 2014; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Bales & Barbara, 2004; Blake, 2009; Cornish & Jenkins, 2015; Jones, 1987; Kline et., al. 2012; Masinire et al., 2014). Findings from additional studies support the fact that to have teachers who are willing and professionally prepared to teach and live in rural communities, they must first experience what is like to teach in a rural school and live in communities with characteristics that greatly differ from those in an urban setting (Adie & Barton, 2012). These studies suggest that including curriculum and field experiences for teaching in both rural and urban settings could improve new teachers' understanding, willingness, and preparation for making more informed decisions about where to seek and accept teaching positions.

While studies that look into teacher preparation for serving both high poverty rural and high poverty urban schools offer general insights into the importance of specific preparation for the unique contexts that teachers might serve, these studies have been conducted primarily outside of the Dominican context. Thus, there was a need for specific understanding of the challenges that teachers prepared by the Dominican teacher preparation system face when they are assigned to teach in remote and high poverty rural communities. This is especially important to inform both future changes to the teacher preparation system and the MINERD's professional development and support for rural teachers already serving those communities. In order to gain insight into the specific challenges these teachers encounter in their rural school assignments and develop policy responses that address those challenges, further studies were needed.

### **Purpose Statement**

Based on previous research in the DR, there is a marked educational inequity when rural and urban communities are compared. Accordingly, research on this matter suggests that the educational approach should be differentiated in order to meet the needs of each area; however, this is not the case. Currently, teacher preparation programs nation-wide are homogeneous and there is a lack of content in the teacher preparation curriculum specifically addressing teaching in a rural context, despite the fact that the DR is predominantly rural (Del Rosario et al., 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this research study was twofold. First, to profile the challenges for teachers who teach within rural contexts, and second, to investigate teachers' professional readiness to work within that context. Specifically, this study addressed teachers' professional readiness to adapt to the various conditions and characteristics of rural classrooms in the DR.

School learning outcomes decrease when the context has characteristics that affects school dynamics (Azano & Stewart, 2015). However, this should not predict negative outcomes



if teacher preparation programs address the development of professional competencies to manage the characteristics and culture of rural contexts, thus, equipping teachers with matching pedagogical practices for students to achieve the proposed learning outcomes (Azano & Stewart, 2015).

To conduct this study, I used a basic interpretative qualitative study approach through individual teacher interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss that interpretative qualitative studies include the naturalistic characteristics of qualitative research, and through those characteristics, the researcher seeks to discover and understand the perspectives and views of others regarding an experience or topic. The interviews for this study focused on providing teachers the opportunity to describe their actual experience while teaching in rural schools in the DR. These interviews contributed to a deeper understanding of the conditions that affect teachers who work in rural schools in order to produce a profile of the conditions and challenges teachers experience in Dominican rural schools, and to gather their own perspectives on how they are prepared to manage these characteristics.

### **Research Questions**

This research study aimed to profile the challenges for teachers who teach within rural contexts through the exploration of their rural teaching experiences. Additionally, this study intended to understand teachers' perceived level of preparation for serving in rural schools. The overarching question in this research study is: how does a criterion sample of Dominican rural public school teachers' experience rural school challenges, and how does their academic and professional preparation help them meet those challenges to meet the requirements of the national curriculum? The sub-questions for this study are:

1. How do the teachers describe the culture of the community they serve and how do they describe their acclimation to that culture?
2. How do the teachers describe their level of preparation for teaching in the rural public school context?
3. How do the teachers describe the ways in which they adapt to and address the characteristics, challenges and needs of the rural schools they serve?
4. How do the teachers describe their motivation and aspirations for teaching in rural schools?
5. How do the teachers make sense of and act upon the requirements and expectations of the national curriculum and education policies of the Dominican Ministry of Education?

### **Conceptual Framework and Narrative**

Previous research findings in rural education have provided relatively little evidence about purposeful efforts to prepare teachers for rural classrooms (Arnold, Dean, Gaddy & Newman, 2005). Challenges such as understanding community dynamics, merging of the personal and professional life, and impact of the rural context characteristics on instructional practices seem to prevent teachers from delivering quality instruction in rural schools (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011). Thus, the lack of qualified teachers is a significant challenge to elevating students' achievement (Saigal, 2012). According to Heeralal (2014), the content in the curriculum of Dominican teachers' undergraduate degree programs rarely includes aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools, making it difficult for rural schools to attract, recruit, and retain teachers. This is due to the professional preference to teach in schools that receive more funding, contain greater resources, and are not located in remote areas where access is difficult and limited.

This study elicits descriptions of Dominican teachers' experiences as they serve in rural schools and explore how they assess their readiness to adapt to the various conditions they encounter. This study provides Dominican rural teachers with an opportunity to give voice to their experiences, talk about their instructional practice through the lenses of place-conscious pedagogy and reflect on their understanding of how adequately prepared they were to teach in the rural context. According to Ajayi (2014), a fundamental aspect of teacher preparation programs in the rural communities is to "prepare student teachers to develop the knowledge and skills to relate their pedagogy to the people, culture, and social practices in the rural communities" (p. 251). Obtained data was analyzed to produce a description of the current teaching conditions in rural schools, as perceived by rural teachers. This analysis intends to inform decision makers to adjust teacher preparation programs to address the characteristics and needs of rural schools.

Place-conscious pedagogy aims to move educational approaches and systems away from standardized teaching practices toward a more place-based education to promote consciousness of place by drawing connections between the local context and what is being taught (Fraser, 2016). Pioneering researchers in place-consciousness pedagogy share the belief that place-conscious pedagogy provides a broader social, educational, and environmental benefit than current conventional instructional practices (Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003; Somerville et al., 2011).

Place-conscious pedagogy is an overarching theory, while place-based instructional practices consist of the methods and pedagogical resources used to implement the place-conscious pedagogy theory (Fraser, 2016). Place-based instruction puts emphasis on connecting teachers and students through meaningful experiences and reflections while engaging in the local

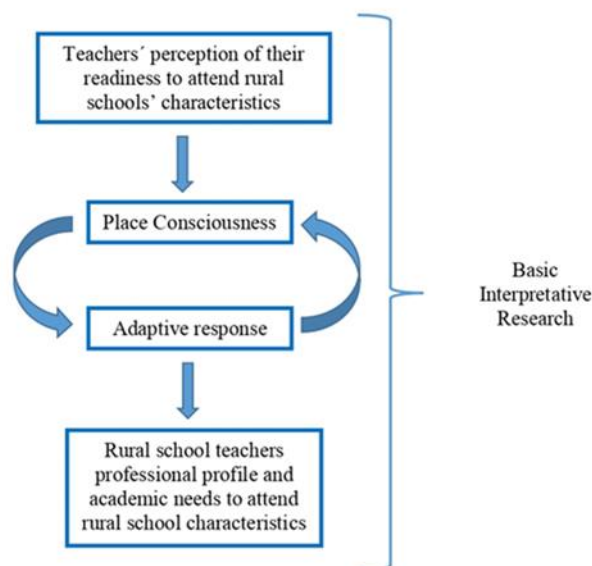
area, culturally and ecologically (Gruenewald, 2003). Greenwood (2013), throughout his research work about place-conscious pedagogy, discusses that current instructional practices and methods at all levels do not satisfactorily practice the concept of place. For example, Fraser (2016) explains that universities provide students with a career-oriented education instead of a place-based education that seeks to improve students' ability to connect their education to the real world. Subsequently universities are required to play an active and major role to develop in future professionals a sense of place during their teacher preparation programs by incorporating place-consciousness into the curriculum.

The concept of place-conscious pedagogy applies to the focus of my study, because it addresses the importance of the place where the learning processes are occurring and the potential benefits place brings to the learners when teachers understand and purposely integrate the context to a given classroom. According to Greenwood (2013), place is an image of the human experience on a specific locality and a human perception that teaches and defines every one of us. It is also a mixture of the physical characteristics of any given setting and the human connections that we, people, make to specific places (Fraser, 2016). Therefore, place is not defined by size, it can be as small as a 100-person community or as big as a city of 1,000,000 families. Lastly, there is a symbiotic connection between people and place. That is, "people make places and places help to make people" (Fraser, 2016). Places are important to people's daily lives, consequently, resulting in important and inevitable learning environments.

For this study the concept of "Place-Conscious Pedagogy" was used as an interpretive lens for the inductive analysis of data because current comparative studies in the DR demonstrate that rural schools show significant disadvantages in the national test when compared to urban students from the same grade. Moreover, public rural and urban schools comparison in terms of

infrastructure, educational resources, community culture, and school structure also demonstrate significant disadvantages. Thus, teachers' perception of their professional competencies, academic readiness, and teaching experience attending rural schools could shed light to identify, if necessary, areas in which teachers have difficulties. Consequently, rural schools and teachers academic needs to attend rural school characteristics through the lenses of a basic interpretive research study was explored. This study resulted in valuable data for teacher preparation program authorities to address rural teachers' academic needs (see Figure 1).

For the purpose of this study, I presented the definition of this concept and explained how that concept applies to the focus of my study. In Chapter 3, I explain how I used the concept along with my emergent analysis of participant interviews to provide some of the inductive lens for my study.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework (Columna, 2020).

## Chapter Summary

Currently, the DR demonstrates marked inequalities when rural and urban education are compared. For example, IDEICE (2016) indicated that educational inequalities prevail due to the geographical location of schools in the DR. There have been some attempts to compensate for this imbalance, but it seems that the actions have been unsatisfactory in terms of impact. The Ministry of Education (MINERD) in the 2013 Regional Comparative and Explicatory Study (TERCE) revealed that most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers and in most cases none at all. Not to mention that rural public schools are often under crowded or overcrowded resulting in the creation of multigrade classrooms given the late entrance to school students and the lack of teachers that are willing to teach in rural areas (EDUCA, 2015.) Such limitations of the rural context make educational accomplishments very challenging.

Research findings in rural education have provided relatively little evidence about purposeful efforts to prepare teachers for rural classrooms (Arnold et al., 2005). Challenges such as understanding community dynamics, merging of the personal and professional life, and impact of the rural context characteristics on instructional practices seem to prevent teachers from delivering quality instruction in rural schools (Hellsten et al., 2011). Thus, the lack of qualified teachers seems to drastically represent a significant issue to elevate students' achievement (Saigal, 2012). According to Heeralal (2014), the content in the curriculum of Dominican teachers' undergraduate degree programs rarely includes aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools making it difficult for rural schools to attract, recruit, and retain teachers. This is due to the professional preference to teach in schools that receive more funding, contain greater resources, and are not located in remote areas where access is difficult and limited.

Subsequently, this research study explored rural teachers' experiences teaching in Dominican rural schools and their perceived level of preparation of serving in those schools. Specifically, this study examined how teachers experience and respond to the rural community culture as they work to prepare their rural school students to meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter commences with a detailed definition of the concept of rural, emphasizing the different existing perspectives to provide an in-depth and holistic understanding of the rural context concept. This chapter also describes the different theoretical discussions that illustrate the concept of rurality and how these cannot be homogenized since rurality is a situated construct rather than a generalizable phenomenon. Then, there is a discussion from the political, epistemological, cultural, and social perspectives present in the DR, to clarify the assumptions and conceptual constructions that revolve around rurality and its dependency to the urban communities.

Topics related to the limitations and challenges that rural schools face today, resulting from its contextual characteristics are addressed and compared to urban schools. This way, a general understanding of the current situation of rural schools in the DR can be acknowledged. Additionally, the characteristics that influence pedagogical practices within classrooms can be compared between rural and urban schools. This chapter is supported by government official reports and international entities' investigations about the aspects that negatively impact the academic performance and outcomes of students in rural contexts.

Moreover, to address issues of the rural context, it is imperative to understand the role played by the setting in the social construction and dynamics of a community. As such, among the emerging topics in rural education is the disconnection between the addressed curriculum and



the needs of daily life in rural communities. Therefore, the importance of contextualizing the curriculum to generate a connection between context and learning is addressed.

Lastly, this chapter addresses topics that permit the understanding of the figure of the rural teacher; the challenges they face in rural contexts and the existing literature about the academic offers currently practiced around the world to cover the needs and characteristics of rural schools.

### **The Concept of Rural**

Although in practice the concept of rural seems as if it were a "truism," its definition is complex given the diversity of characteristics that are particular to each country (Del Rosario, 2007.) Consequently, every country owes themselves the construction of their unique concept of rurality that is true to their circumstances. As Faiguenbaun (2011) affirms, there is no universal definition of rural, nor a definition shared by all countries, not even those within the same region. Each country's concept varies significantly from one to another because of their own geographical criteria and in some cases deficient statistics due to quantitative data limitations generating differentiated concepts (Candia, 2011). Furthermore, in many countries the definition of rural does not even exist, corresponding to a "residual" category, defined by default, in other words, everything that is not urban, without referring to its characteristics (Del Rosario et al., 2014).

This wide variety of definitions of the concept of rural is notable in countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. In general, the criteria used for these definitions might be grouped into five types (Del Rosario et al., 2014):

1. Demographics - The size of the population does not reach the level established for urban territories.

2. Administrative - This refers to populations that are non-resident in major cities, municipal districts, or another type of political or administrative entity of importance.
3. Functional - An absence of basic services, such as water, electricity, communication, schools, hospitals, sewerage, streets and transportation.
4. Economic - A proportion of the population employed in primary activities, such as agriculture, mining, forestry, farming, grazing and fishing.
5. Legal - Based on provisions of the law, without considering the characteristics of the geographical area nor population size and density.

In this perspective, it is important to note that the definition of rural is not independent on policy outcomes. Although in reality there is no single definition of rural to cover all the effects of policies, the chosen definition for rural can have unexpected consequences on target populations (Coburn et al., 2007).

Yet, the rural-urban dichotomy has severe limitations in order to grasp the current territorial reality because it refers to inaccurate analytical conceptualizations (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011). Rodríguez and Saborío (2008) presented some significant limitations of this conception:

- It limits the recognition of populations that are not entirely rural nor entirely urban, which may constitute most of the territories, in many countries.
- It introduces ambiguity in the classification of territories with mixed characteristics.
- It does not allow for sufficient understanding about the dynamics of the territories, especially on their economics and development.
- It hinders the opportunity to identify the interdependencies between territories which favor urban-centrist approaches (e.g., urban bias in public investment).

- It does not facilitate the analysis of trade flows or allow to see geographical changes in employment patterns.
- It limits the possibilities of analyzing the relationship between changes in the pattern of human settlements and demands for public services.
- It limits the reinforcement of regional competitiveness approaches concerning the dynamics of national and international markets causing the generation of over-representation one setting over another.

As a result, the rural-urban dichotomy bias in the DR distorts the design of policies oriented towards the rural sector, thus limiting the development of its potential (Del Rosario and López, 2007.) Similar to what happened in other Latin American countries, this way of seeing the rural setting has contributed to its underestimation, consequently, presenting Latin America as a highly urbanized region. This situation has affected many policy decisions and international assistance, generating an "anti-rural" bias (i.e. urban bias) in the plans and development programs for the region (Dirven et al., 2011.)

Chomitz et al. (2005) stated that the popular perception of the Latin America region being 75% urban is deceptive. Official census criteria, although inconsistent among countries, tend to classify settlement conglomerates of less than 2,000 people as urban. However, many of these settlements are embedded in a territory whose productive base is agriculture. The notion of rural as a synonym of agricultural activity is still present. Yet, since the beginning of the 1990s, it has been shown that productive diversity (agricultural and non-agricultural) is a characteristic of Latin American rural territories (Berdegúe et al., 2000; Ferranti et al., 2005; Grammont & Martínez, 2009; IICA, 2000; Kobrich & Dirven, 2007; Klein, 1992; Rodríguez & Meneses, 2011; Rodríguez & Murillo, 2008). Contrary to this notion, the rural territory is multisectoral.

The sectors most directly linked to natural resources, which mark the essence of rurality, have long exceeded the agricultural activity. For example, mining, tourism, agribusiness, marketing, construction, infrastructure, services to companies, personal services, including government and financial services, all account for a sophisticated and rich scheme of the investment and labor markets (Del Rosario, 2009). Subsequently, the rural economy is not entirely an agricultural economy, which does not mean that the primary economy has become irrelevant; as mentioned, they continue to define rurality (Echeverri, 2011).

The DR is not different from this reality. Even in official statistics, non-agricultural activities employment ascends to as high as 67% according ENFT (2009), 73% according to the 2010 census, and 59% according to ENHOGAR (2011) of the total employed in the rural area. In consequence, rural areas have vastly changed in recent decades and today's rural phenomena is referenced in many ways, such as new rural areas, peri-urban and urban-marginal areas (Faiguenbaum, 2011). These boundaries between rural and urban increase the flow of people and goods bidirectionally and increase the interrelations of all kinds between both areas (Dirven et al., 2011). The verification of this complex reality of goods trading, services, cultural intertwining and identity sharing between rural and urban areas in a particular space has been a reason to raise a different vision of rural development based on the concept of "territory" (Echeverri & Ribero, 2002; Schejtman & Berdegúé, 2003). The single concept of territory expresses a complex reality. Indeed, as Rodríguez and Saborío (2007) stated the notion of territory transcends space. Rural territories are geographical areas with their own history having a common base of natural resources where agriculture activity takes place. Also, there are socio-cultural, technical-economic and political-institutional relationships that link agricultural actors with each other, the natural environment, other non-agricultural activities, and with urban

centers. Therefore, the concept of territory is necessary in the analysis in order to articulate and interpret the processes that define the current rural dynamics (Echeverri, 2011).

According to Dirven (2011), this territorial approach to rural development has important advantages for the design of policies, programs, and projects aimed for rural evolution since it:

1. Facilitates the understanding of the interrelations that occur in the territory and, as a consequence, creates the need for coordination of the different sectorial visions and actions.
2. Obliges policymakers to have a multidisciplinary approach for territory development.
3. Gives meaning and content to the development of projects for a particular territory based on the convergence of interests and wills giving a sense of identity and purpose shared by multiple public and private agents.
4. Is presented as an opportunity to build in a participatory and consensual manner among the actors involved (the State, the business community, organizations, and the population) in the development of initiatives required by a given territory.

The processes of constructing the concept of territory establish a tradition in which identity and territoriality are supported (Echeverri, 2011). This process of appropriation of a particular area results in a diversity of territories with specific characteristics that cannot be understood within the framework of the conceptual narrowness of the rural-urban dichotomous vision.

### **Toward a new conceptualization of rural**

To eradicate the misleading nature of the dichotomous conception of the rural-urban concept, efforts must be directed towards the development of conceptual alternatives different from what official censuses and surveys portray (Rodríguez & Saborío, 2007). This means that it

is essential to define rural territoriality based on analytical criteria that captures the complexity of rurality, including territorial heterogeneity ranging from areas with rural predominance to areas with urban predominance (Berdegué et al., 2010; Chomitz et al., 2005; Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011; Rodríguez & Saborío, 2008; Sabalain, 2011). From a territorial vision, with the intention of overcoming the urban-rural dichotomy, Echeverri (2011) proposed several essential characteristics to define rural:

1. A territory is rural when the historical processes of its social construction are based on natural resources and maintain this structural dependency.
2. A territory is rural when it is dependent on natural resources and its economic base is structured around its environmental richness. This indicator includes population concentrations in rural territories, urban centers with rural functions, and economic sectors that coexist in this type of territory beyond agricultural activities or their direct linkage to it.
3. The rural economy is a territorial economy. This is an economy that is defined by the logic of localization of productive processes. In the case of the rural economy, natural resources predominantly define this localization process. Agriculture, for example, structures the productive base around which populations and diverse economic activities are located in a particular territory.
4. Territorial economies are structured by agglomeration economies: linkages, interdependencies, integralities, and complementarities. In turn, the territorial economies structure sociodemographic and institutional networks in a particular territory.
5. The territorial economy is multisectoral. Even though agriculture continues to be the main component that defines rurality, a large part of the economic income of rural

territories is generated in non-agricultural activities as a result of agglomerated economies.

6. The rural economy is also determined by environmental economy. In other words, it is the recognition of the multifunctionality of the rural territory which refers to the multiple uses of the rural land. Agriculture is one of the most important uses, however, as affirmed by the IDIAF (2003) the revaluation of rural space also implies the recognition of tangible and intangible goods, for which preservation society is willing to pay.

Considering the characteristics of rural territoriality, interesting experiences of rural reconfiguration have been developed for different countries of Latin America (Berdegúe et al., 2010; Candia, 2011; Chomitz et al., 2005; Ferranti et al., 2005; Rodríguez & Murillo, 2008; Rodríguez & Saborío, 2008; Sabalain, 2011) aiming to create a typology of rural territoriality that overcomes the prevailing rural-urban dichotomy. This typology is a construction that expresses itself as a gradient from the very rural to the very urban.

As Chomitz et al. (2005) defined, rurality is a gradient, not an exact condition. Besides, these gradients can be expressed through different combinations of economic, demographic, physical variables and access to services, allowing the establishment of a differentiation within rural areas, and between rural and urban areas to visualize interconnections between both realities. Variables such as population size and density, distance to main urban centers, land use and occupation of the population, amongst others, have been used in the design of this rural reconfiguration process (ECLAC, 2012.) Using this new way of approaching rural, accounts for the emergence of significant ambiguities in official documents. For example, in the case of Brazil, Da Veiga (2002) stated that the country would be less urban if it were calculated

according to international criteria. It emphasizes the fact of how territories that are considered urban have an unequivocally social, economic, cultural and political rural dynamics.

Additionally, one of the most interesting findings of the study by Ferranti et al. (2005) applying the criteria of Chomitz et al. (2005) in Latin American countries, is that there is a difference in the size of the rural population concerning official statistics. They suggest that by using analytical criteria, the size of the rural population is approximately doubled of that expressed in official statistics. In other words, rurality is an adaptable concept that needs to be analyzed and constructed within the studied territory and not assigned by default using the rural-urban dichotomy (Rodríguez & Meneses, 2011.)

### **Rural gradients**

The construction of an alternative model for the reconfiguration of rural territories implies the need of defining a set of functional indicators. Rurality must be expressed in gradients that allow the identification of territorial specificities within the heterogeneity and complexity of the Dominican territoriality (Del Rosario et al., 2014). In this sense, the authors have identified five indicators to characterize territories:

1. The size of the population,
2. The distance to main urban centers,
3. The density of the population,
4. The occupation of the population, and
5. The use and coverage of the land.

The degrees of each of these indicators are associated with a conceptual type of territory. For example, small population size, a considerable distance to important urban centers, low population density, high level of occupation in agriculture, land use predominantly for primary



economy activities and significant forest land covering would be indicators for a predominantly rural territory. Inversely to the before mentioned, we would be in the presence of territories with predominantly urban characteristics. Between one end and the other there is a set of territories in transition; some that are significantly marked with rural characteristics and others with urban characteristics. Thus, by assessing each indicator an index is created as an expression of a gradient that differentiates territories from the perspective of the rural-urban dichotomy (Del Rosario et al., 2014). These gradients are summed into:

1. Predominantly rural,
2. Significantly rural,
3. In rural-urban transition,
4. Significantly urban, and
5. Predominantly urban.

From the perspective of territorial characteristics, and despite the legislation that delimitates regions in the country, the DR is not an urban country (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011.) If only the new municipal entities created during the period 2002-2010 totaling 161 are analyzed, it can be pointed out that there is a higher proportion of municipal entities with rural characteristics. Additionally, the predominantly rural territories would almost double if compared with the total of 386 existing entities until 2010. Conversely, 88% of the new entities are classified as urban and only 12% are classified as rural. That is, the process of urbanization of rural territories became more acute in the last intercensal period, which resulted in a higher number of people acquiring the urban category but residing in rural territories (Del Rosario, 2007.)

Naturally, these results contrast with the socio-territorial structure based on the official dichotomous belief of the urban and the rural. The 2010 Census, indicates that there is an urban population of 74%, and, by default, the rural population only represents 26% of the total population. Under this structure, the rural and the urban do not have their verifiable indicators. The urban strictly relates to every municipality or municipal district decided by legislators, and all that remains are considered rural. Each zone is treated as if it were homogeneous in order to establish categories of analysis based on two exclusionary zones of residence. Under this simple structure, there is no opportunity of efficient design for social development policies and the effective allocation of public and private resources (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011.) As a result, the current Dominican territorial structure is a distorted expression of reality.

The analysis based on the official statistics associated with the zone of residence (rural or urban) carries within itself the rural-urban dichotomy embodied in the laws of the 1950s and assumed since the 1960 Census. This dichotomous vision, in addition to being simplistic, ineludibly leads to a denaturalized territoriality; the urban is overestimated, and the rural is underestimated (Del Rosario, 2017.) With this, fundamental errors are generated in the design of development policies and strategies in detriment of rural territories.

The process of political territorial division in the DR has a degree of irrationality, and the use of the proposed methodological tool by Del Rosario et al. (2014) has the possibility of improving this situation. Article 30 of Law 176-07 states that any creation, modification, suppression or merger of municipalities requires that a viability study is carried out beforehand by the National Congress. This is to justify the change, in which its social, political, economic and administrative convenience is demonstrated, taking into consideration its economic potential and its identification as a territorial area of development. Apart from the population size

requirement, as well as the capacity to generate income in a certain proportion for both, municipalities and municipal districts, there are no quantifiable objective criteria for the creation of these entities, nor is there any criterion to designate a territory as urban. That is to say, it remains to the subjectivity of legislators, according to their convenience (not necessarily the one that the law intends) the creation of municipal entities and the consequent definition of the urban areas (Del la Rosa, 2011.)

### **Rurality in the Dominican Republic**

In 1956, the Dominican law defined a new territorial category introducing the concept of the urban, and by default the rural in the process of political and administrative division of the country (De La Rosa, 2011.) With the 1960 Census, the application of this categorization was officially assumed and, with this, rural appears in the registers as an empty concept, lacking any type of identifiers, which are associated with numerous statistical treatments that result in misinformation (Del Rosario et al., 2014.) This way of treating rurality is not surprising since it is consistent with the historical prejudices of Dominican society that have devalued the rural population (San Miguel, 2011.)

The reality is that the Dominican rural world has not disappeared, as opposed to popularized expressions such as "there are no more people in the countryside," "the countryside is empty," "people left to the city," "there are no longer peasants" (Del Rosario, 2007.) The distortions expressed in official statistics have strengthened this way of thinking about the rural, recreating a series of prejudices that prevent viewing the rural world as a territory of opportunities for regional and national development. It is evident, then, that a new conceptualization is required; the Dominican rural world is now substantially different from what it was in the past (Del Rosario & López, 2007.)

Indeed, especially since the 90s, the Dominican rural society has been significantly transformed socially, economically and culturally, as can be seen in the rest of the countries of Latin America (Del Rosario, 2009.) This "new rurality" cannot be apprehended through the conventional conceptualization that has prevailed since the late 50s. The dichotomous nature of this conceptualization of the urban and the rural impedes capturing a rural reality that is heterogeneous, multisectoral and with various links to the urban centers (Del Rosario et al., 2014.) Hence, under this conventional scheme, there is no possibility of designing development policies that tend to uncover the potential of the rural world by more significant social and territorial cohesion.

Consequently, the persistence of structural phenomena of rural reality is not fortuitous; poverty, income inequality, unemployment, territorial inequity, food insecurity and the absence of basic services are not attended accordingly (Del Rosario & López, 2007.) The way of conceiving the rural can create overwhelming distortions in the results of policies designed for a “nonexistent” reality. For example, the National Statistics Office (2013) recognizes that rurality in Latin-American countries share commonalities such as persistent poverty that has produced the phenomena of migration from the countryside to the city, or to other countries outside the region. The definition of rural, predominantly based on the political and administrative division, contributes to make invisible the basis for public policies directed to rural territories (Del Rosario et al., 2009.)

In the case of the DR, an administrative criterion is assumed in a conventional manner, indicating that the municipal districts are urban, and the rest is rural. As stated by Rosario and Morrobel (2011) it is a definition that assumes rural areas as homogeneous space; that is, without differentiating between types of territories and particular socioeconomic characteristics.

In fact, in terms of census statistics not taking into consideration quantity, 50 years later there is no difference between the rural population registered in the 1960 Census and the 2010 Census (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2010.) This deficiency in the conception of the rural leads to the use of generic terms whose contents are not precise, for example, "rural population," "rural remnant," "poor rural households," "rural economy," among many others appearing in official documents as if the rural was a homogeneous territory whose population dynamic has frozen in the time (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2010.). Worse yet, the term rural itself has no content of its own having important implications from the perspective of the socio-territorial reality of the country (Del Rosario, 2017.)

In an exercise to reevaluate rural Dominican territory, del Rosario and Morrobel (2011), also using the criteria proposed by Chomitz (2005) and OECD (2006) to define the rural territory, established a territorial configuration with a typological gradient that goes from the predominantly rural to the predominantly urban. From this configuration and a strictly operative perspective, they propose that the rural territory is a socially constructed geographical space with a predominantly open landscape. The results of this analysis differ substantially from how official information is presented in terms of the socio-territorial urban-rural configuration, the size of the rural population and its application in topics such as the territorial configuration of poverty and unsatisfied basic needs (Del Rosario et al., 2009.)

This type of treatment based on territorial gradients has solid arguments for its adoption. For example, Berdegué et al. (2010) highlighted that:

- The definitions of the rural-based on one or two criteria are not very efficient to capture the complexity of that reality and define adequate development policies for rural territories.

- The dichotomous vision between the rural and the urban is a simplification that does not allow visualizing the current rural reality.
- Rural territoriality is heterogeneous. There is no single type of rurality.
- The border between the rural and the urban is increasingly blurred.
- It is necessary to understand where the population is located, what its characteristics are and what interactions a particular place has with urban centers.

In summary, there are sufficient arguments in the literature and in the results of the official policies that support the need to construct a new conceptualization of an operational nature of rurality in the DR, different from the official convention (Del Rosario et al., 2013; Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011; De La Cruz, 2011; De La Rosa, 2011; Del Rosario, 2007; Del Rosario & López, 2007; Morrobel & Martínez, 2009). Authors agree in the fact that a new conceptualization would have several fundamental objectives:

1. Redefine the socio-territorial configuration.
2. Increase the interpretative capacity of the analysis of rural dynamics.
3. Improve the process of defining territorial development policies.
4. Multiply the social impact and the allocation of public and private resources.
5. Achieve greater social and territorial cohesion.

Therefore, maximizing the regional and national development potential of rural territories.

### **The origin of the concept of the urban and rural areas in the Dominican Republic**

The particular way in which the DR assigns urban and rural denominations to territories through administrative-political mechanisms without well-founded criteria, creates distortions in official territorial statistics (Del Rosario et al., 2014). The discussion about what is an official

urban territory in the DR initiates from the implicit concept derived from the law, assigning a category of municipality or municipal district to a particular territory, automatically changing it from rural to urban (De La Rosa, 2011.)

The conception of urban and rural territories in the DR is not based on well-defined criteria (Del Rosario, 2007.) The Constitution of 1844 establishes that the Dominican territory is divided into five regions; these are subdivided into provinces. Presently, it is divided into 10 regions and 31 provinces. However, the Dominican municipal history has its beginnings with Law 5189 since 1913, which instituted communal organizations which today is known as the Dominican Municipal Organization (Santana, 2007.) Law 5189 established the Municipal District as a territorial unit whose creation depended on the city council of the common. Until its creation, it was only determined by law following Law 125 about territorial division in 1939. Subsequently, Law 3455 in 1952 established the possibility of creating one or more municipal districts within each municipality. It also establishes that the law will determine the territory that constitutes each district, as well as its name and town hall location. Moreover, it determines that municipalities are divided into sections that also have to be created, suppressed, or modified by law.

Law 4400 of 1956, later repealed by Law 5220 of 1959, generated a new pattern of territorial division. This law gave rise to the conception of urban and rural in the DR. In effect, what Law 4400 determines is that a territory is assigned as urban by its municipality or municipal district designation. In this law, it is defined as cities: the country's capital, provincial cities and any other conglomerate of 10,000 inhabitants or more. It also defines populations sizes of 1,000 inhabitants or fewer as villages and 1,001-10,000 inhabitants as towns. By nature, urban and sub-urban areas correspond to cities and towns respectively (municipalities and municipal

districts.) That is, they compare to conglomerates of 1,001 or more inhabitants. The law must establish the territorial limits of each one of the areas that are thus defined. Implicitly, the populations of territories that do not have the category of city nor town are therefore categorized as rural (territories with less than 1,001 inhabitants corresponding to villages.)

Paradoxically, urban and rural populations are as illusory as the laws that create the municipalities and municipal districts (De La Cruz, 2011.) With the creation of a hollow concept of rural and urban, size population strictly determines urban centers while the rest, by default, falls into rural, therefore, acquiring urban and rural territories treatment in terms of political administration.

Under the before mentioned scheme, significant indicators such the size, density, occupation of the population, the agglomeration economies, and connectivity, among other indicators, are not relevant to provide an urban character to a rural territory (Del Rosario, 2007.) In general, legislators' decisions concerning the creation of municipalities and municipal districts lack previous and well-founded technical studies (Del Rosario et al., 2014) contrary to what the Constitution mandates. For example, in Literal D of Article 93 National Congress has the responsibility to create, modify or delete regions, provinces, municipalities, municipal districts, sections, and places and determine everything concerning its geographical and administrative limits and communal organization.

It is recognized that this phenomenon of the creation of municipal entities is marked by political decisions, often in response to clientelism (De La Rosa, 2011.) This way of conceiving the urban and "rural by default" prevents the definition and useful application of development policies through the allocation of public resources and private investment (Del Rosario, 2007.) It excludes territories that have noticeably rural characteristics, yet their municipal city distinction



classifies these as urban. Also, territories that have urban characteristics are assigned as rural because they are not municipalities or municipal district cities, therefore do not match the law classification (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011.)

As a result, from 1960 to date, national statistics have been marked by the concept of urban and rural territoriality originating in the 1950s. The most critical derivation of this situation has to do with the distortions in the territorial social configuration related to the political-administrative division of municipal entities (Del Rosario & López, 2007.) This situation results in the confusing phenomenon of abrupt change of the residential zone where a previously rural population that is now urban, still has the same rural characteristics (Del Rosario, Morrobel, & Escarramán, 2014).

According to the official definition of urban, many agricultural towns are classified as urban territories. Then, any population size larger than 1000 could be urban. This conception of what is urban and what is rural is manifested in national census. Population agglomerations residing in agricultural towns and cities which were previously categorized as rural residents are now classified as urban residents; still residing in the same territory as a consequence of political decisions, therefore, altering the reality of national census data (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011.)

The urban character of these agricultural towns strictly occurs due to a decision regarding population size and not for the type of principal productive activity nor its growth potential. This situation explains the apparent contradiction between the growth of commercial agriculture and the reduction of the rural population, as a result of the law (Del Rosario et al., 2014.)

### **Educational Challenges and Limitations in Dominican Rural Schools**

Rural education is understood from the scope of this investigation as the proposal of pedagogical management and instructional practices that has as radius of incidence in rural areas.

Accordingly, the Dominican teacher is supposed to be trained with instructional competences and provided with appropriate incentives to develop an educational program that satisfies the needs of the students they serve and to adapt their teaching practices to the context of their students (Castillo, 2005). In other words, teachers must be provided with all the required resources, tangible and non-tangible to offer quality education, regardless of the sector they are assigned within the DR.

However, rural public schools greatly differ from urban public schools in terms of cultural context, school infrastructure, coverage, accessibility and learning resources (UNICEF, 2017). To worsen the situation, rural public schools are often undercrowded or overcrowded resulting in the creation of multigrade classrooms given the lack of teachers that are willing to teach in rural areas and late entrance to school (EDUCA, 2015.) Additionally, rural students' parents often deserted school or did not attend at all which causes student dropouts and aggravates late entrance to school (IDEICE, 2016). School buildings in rural areas also often lack electricity, Internet, and phone signals, among other basic resources such as water and furniture in safe conditions (IDEICE, 2016.). Such limitations of the rural context make educational achievements very difficult for the whole learning community.

Official documents from non-governmental organizations indicate that rural areas lack adequate facilities for the preschool level, and, in general, the facilities do not meet the minimum requirements (EDUCA, 2015). For example, The Campesino Consortium, through the document "Memories of a Process: The Dominican Rural Zone, Realities and Proposals" identified in 2002 the following problems in rural education:

- Shortage of transportation for students,
- Low achievement in reading and writing when compared to urban students,

- Absence of school supplies,
- Children in grades that do not correspond with age,
- Lack of electricity and water at school,
- School dropouts,
- Deteriorated classrooms, and
- Unsuitable conditions.

In addition, the Dominican Ministry of Education (MINERD) in the 2013 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) revealed that most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers and most of the time none, in areas such as arts, physical education, foreign languages and technology. To make matters worse, other documents specify that the rural population of the country has a low concentration, consequently, many of the communities do not have enough students to have complete schools with all grade levels, nor sufficient teachers to even separate grades. This situation generates incomplete schools in a triple dimension: (1) schools that do not offer all the grade levels simultaneously, resulting in interrupted grades until quorum is achieved to open the next grade; (2) those that only offer elementary school; and (3) schools that group in a single classroom students of various grades and ages (multigrade classrooms). These situations result in inadequate and incomplete school offer, therefore, rural students have very limited or no options to complete their education (CIDE, 2006.)

Also, other socioeconomic, cultural and even climate challenges interfere with rural students' educational achievement (UNICEF, 2017.) For example, given the absence of a nationwide public-school transportation program and that the DR has a tropical weather, there is a frequent interruption of instructional hours when it rains making it impossible for families to

send their children to school. Moreover, students' families and teachers in rural contexts have also identified other limitations such as school distance, lack of classrooms, teen pregnancy, and the poor state of the classrooms, limiting their efforts to send their children to school until high school graduation (IDEICE, 2016.)

The Strategic Development Plan for Dominican Education 2003-2012 recognizes the necessity to achieve equity in schools, especially those located in rural and marginal suburban areas. Similarly, Torres (2005) stated, as all the regional reports show, the urban-rural difference is the second most important factor of educational discrimination in the Latin-American region in terms of access, quality, and infrastructure after the socioeconomic differences. Ironically, in relation to citizen participation for the improvement and innovation of the quality of education in rural areas, Valera (2004) states that schools located in rural areas do not have participating agencies that work towards the improvement of this situation; Seemingly, due to the low educational levels of the rural population and their poor understanding of their role as actors involved in decision making in educational matters. It is clear that the problem is documented, however, a concrete and targeted plan has not been designed to address rural education limitations and challenges (CIDE, 2006.)

### **Comparative studies in the DR regarding urban and rural educational achievement**

The third Regional Comparative and Explicatory study (TERCE) conducted by UNESCO in 2013 on the factors associated with the learning of mathematics and reading comprehension in the third and sixth grade of primary school showed significant comparative results between rural and urban schools. This study also revealed noticeable disadvantages between rural and urban public schools while arguing that attending a rural public school has negative effects on learning outcomes in the areas of mathematics and reading comprehension. Likewise, the Dominican

Institute for Educational Quality Evaluation and Research (IDEICE) conducted a study in 2016 on school dropout using as reference the socioeconomic characteristics of households near schools. The results of this study showed that the urban area has the highest percentage of students taking the National Test within the established time, which amounts to 54%. In contrast, the isolated rural area decreases considerably to 38%. It should be noted that the areas of the country where there are urban areas, students are more likely to complete school on time and that the area where students live is a relevant factor for their academic performance and achievement (IDEICE, 2016.)

The report on educational progress carried out in 2015 by the Business Action for Education (EDUCA) states that the gap in educational inequality significantly widens in the levels of preschool and secondary education. This report found that children and youth from the lower quintile in the income indicator and residents in rural areas present a significant educational achievement difference when compared to children and youth from the urban area, confirming previous studies' findings on the impact of the social context on educational achievement. Unquestionably, many research efforts have been made in the country, pointing out a significant educational disadvantage in the rural area compared to the urban area. However, when the normative and formative proposals of our public educational system are analyzed, the standardization becomes evident, therefore, there are no adjustments to remedy the proven disadvantages that students have in rural areas. This demands a systematic and contextualized approach aiming to close educational gaps as well as ensuring quality education to each Dominican student regardless of the area of residence.

### **Legal framework related to teacher preparation programs in the DR**

Training policies are understood as the legal norms or regulations that govern the training practices in a given educational system as stated by the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) in 2006. In its report “Education for All,” The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2002 revealed the incidence and interest of various international organizations to ensure all those regulations correspond to conceptions and objectives of innovation and transformation of educational activities in a global context. In this sense, ECLAC (1998), UNESCO (2002), and Declaration of Havana (2002) presented a favorable framework for teachers to participate autonomously in magisterial processes, as well as in the externalization of their demands and needs, and in leading the processes of management and change that are linked to their training.

Education Law 66-97 establishes in its Title VI the professionalization, statute, and teaching career in the DR. Specifically, in chapter I, article 126 refers to teacher training, indicating that the Dominican state will promote and guarantee the training of teachers at a higher level for the integration to the educational sector at all levels and the different existing modalities, including the strengthening of specialized centers for such purposes. Moreover, the National Education Council will establish the operating rules that will govern the state teacher training centers, their admission, graduation requirements and their study plans. Article 127 explains the need to develop the ethical conscience in all its dimensions as well as the need to educate taking into account the values of good, love and justice as means of social promotion. Moreover, Article 128 values the teaching status as a guide to motivate the pedagogical action and strengthen the professional training of Dominican teachers.

In this context, Article 129 states the creation of the National Institute for Teacher Training (INAFOCAM.) For the fulfillment of INAFOCAM purposes and functions, this institution must coordinate with all higher education institutions and others of scientific or cultural nature (national or international) the implementation of teacher training programs, such as bachelor's degrees, specializations, master's degrees, doctoral and postdoctoral programs. Article 130, states that the magisterial studies will be taught at the level of higher education along with the guidance, approval and coordination of the Ministry of Education of the Dominican Republic (MINERD.) Lastly, Article 131, proposes that teacher training programs at all levels offered by MINERD will be free for teachers.

Additionally, education Law 66-97 establishes in its Article 73, the different functional sectors of the Dominican educational system. Among them is the National Council of Education, which is the highest decision-making body in matters of educational policy, and, together with MINERD is the one in charge of establishing the general orientation of Dominican education in its levels of competence while guaranteeing unity of action between public and private institutions that perform educational functions. More specifically, Section D of Article 78, states that it is a function of the Board of Education to know and approve the national educational development plans as an expression of the general policies established to educate the nation and to carry out periodic reviews and updates that make it functional and dynamic. Consequently, the Dominican state, through MINERD and its international cooperation offices, manages the funds for the development of educational innovations all across the country.

### **The national pact for the educational Reform**

The National Pact for the Educational Reform in the Dominican Republic, signed in 2014, started as a civil movement in 2011, demanding the government the minimum percentage

investment for education as mandated by Law, and also a comprehensive re-conception of the quality of the educational system. To achieve this reform, Dominican citizens organized a campaign to increase the amount of gross income spent on public education. At that moment, the budget for education was 1.3 billion dollars, which was only 2.4% of the gross domestic product of the nation. According to a law passed in 1997, 4% of the GDP was to be allocated to education (MEPyD, 2016.) The DR, at that moment, spent much less on public education than most countries in the region. For example, Cuba was at 18.7%, el Salvador at 8%, Jamaica 6.1%, Mexico 5.3% and Costa Rica 5.1%. Only two countries were below DR, Haiti and Ecuador at 1.4% and 1% respectively (UNESCO, 2014.)

The campaign aiming to obtain 4% for education was launched by various civil groups and was aided by advertisements featuring local celebrities urging people to come support various protests, wearing yellow pieces of attire. Large yellow umbrellas with a “4%” printed in black were displayed on balconies around the capital. After a couple of years of civil movements and protests, the Dominican government assigned the 4% of the GDP to raise the quality of education; however, there was no plan to properly execute the approved budget. Consequently, on September 30, 2015, the World Bank Board of Directors approved another US\$50 million in financing to support the DR’s efforts to improve the quality of pre-university education through The National Pact for the Educational Reform. The project, in general (1) aims to recruit and train elementary, middle, and high-school teachers; (2) assess student learning; (3) evaluate early childhood development programs; and (4) decentralize public school management, as described in the National Pact for the Educational Reform (2014.)

According to a 2009 regional student assessment, on average, 78% of third-grade Dominican students did not achieve the basic level of competence in reading, and 90% of



students performed below the minimum level required in math (EDUCA, 2015). From years 1989-2009, DR was the Latin American country with the lowest expenditure in public education (UNESCO, 2014.) Nonetheless, the recent approval of the Education Pact for Educational Reform elevated education as a top priority for the Dominican society. This project is currently being implemented by the Ministry of Education (MINERD) with World Bank investment to finance over a period of five years, with a 24.5-year maturity period and an 11-year grace period.

### **Improving teacher policies through the National Pact for Educational Reform**

In terms of teacher preparation programs, the National Pact for Educational Reform (2014) aims to improve the capacity to recruit and train elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Moreover, to carry out a comprehensive revision of MINERD's teacher recruitment and training activities based on professional standards.

Therefore, among the project objectives and components, the teaching career plays a major part as declared in the National Pact for Educational Reform (2014.) In terms of teacher training the project focuses on:

- Improving the quality of the public teaching staff through a more rigorous selection of applicants to teacher training institutions, the application of training standards, and changes in the pedagogical and subject-specific contents of curricula.
- The professionalization of the teaching career, using evaluation, induction and certification processes as tools to make the career both attractive and challenging.
- Creating a system of in-service training and professional development for different education levels and curricular areas, responding to needs emphasized by schools.
- Training of school directors to develop true pedagogical leaders as well as administrative managers.

The envisioned outcome of this teacher training component at the end of the project is a teacher policy framework that would make the teaching profession more attractive and challenging. This includes revised and recognized standards for the teacher training programs with clear expectations in at least some areas such as pre-service training, in-service training, directors' training, and informed by students' performance in national assessments.

As stated in the National Pact for Educational Reform (2014.) The teacher training section is divided into four components and subcomponents:

1. Pre-service training: (a) the revision of the Superior Institute For Teacher Training Salomé Ureña (ISFODOSU) teaching degree curricula and competency profiles, (b) the creation of specialized degrees for high-school teachers, (c) the implementation of a quality assurance and monitoring system for ISFODOSU, (d) the implementation of a scholarship program to attract high-performing high-school students to ISFODOSU pre-service degrees, (e) the implementation of a revised corrective program for admitted students with skill gaps, and (f) the revision of the career structure and promotion schemes of ISFODOSU teachers.
2. Human resources management: (a) the design and implementation of a competitive entry exam and selection process for public school teachers, administrators and counselors, (b) the launch of an online teacher recruitment system, and (c) the launch of web-enabled management information systems.
3. The teaching career: (a) the design and adoption of guidelines for the teaching career, (b) a revised teacher evaluation based on international best practices, and (c) the implementation of key aspects of the teacher career, including a certification system.

4. In-service training: (a) the development and piloting of in-service training programs for current teachers through the Nacional Institute for Teacher Training (INAFOCAM), (b) the revision of guidelines and evaluation of existing in-service programs, (c) institutional capacity strengthening for the INAFOCAM evaluation office, and (d) an impact evaluation of INAFOCAM in-service programs with randomized assignment.

As of 2019, the National Pact for Educational Reform signed in 2014 is currently working towards achieving these objectives. Yet, there are no official documents that have measured the impact and progress of the pact on raising the quality of teacher selection and training programs. Needless to say, this revolution in the educational system of the DR does not contemplate in its official documents nor in implementation of new policies, the characteristics, reality, and dynamics of the rural schools, teachers and community.

### **Teacher training in the Dominican Republic**

The training of the Dominican teacher is an interesting topic that generates many opinions and debates across the numerous sectors involved in the management of the education system, nationally and internationally (CIDE, 2006.) For example, there is a growing discussion in Central America and the Caribbean, specifically, in the DR regarding the quality of education. However, despite the importance and efforts to raise the quality of teachers' learning, their recruitment, selection, training, retention, and support; in most of the countries in the region, these initiatives are still inadequate or poorly developed. However, all these countries recognize their own deficiencies in teacher training systems and are therefore making efforts to improve (PREAL, 2015.) For example, reforms are taking place given the necessity to improve teaching quality and raise the number of specialized teachers at the higher education level in the DR.

Nevertheless, regulations and quality control of teacher training institutions by national authorities are still not efficient (EDUCA, 2015.)

Currently, the DR offers education degrees in 25 universities (MESCyT, 2018.) These teacher training programs are regulated by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MESCyT.) These programs are currently undergoing major changes due to the implementation of the National Pact for Educational Reform. However, all these teaching training programs do not have a structured system of accreditation and certification.

As of 2019, in order to be accepted into any of the teaching degrees in any university in the country, aspiring teachers must take a competence exam called the Academic Aptitude Test (PAA). Students that fail this test are required to take a leveling course and re-take the exam. If a failing score is obtained for a second time, the student is dismissed and unable to enter the teaching career. During the teaching training program, the required practicum hours vary depending on the institution (CIDE, 2006.) Additionally, an aspect that is currently negatively impacting instructional practices is the discrepancy between the training offered to teachers and the curriculum content in schools. For example, there is a fragile relationship between what the national curriculum mandates and what future teachers learn early in their training programs, directly impacting their teaching methods and content knowledge (CIDE, 2006.)

After graduation, there is some progress in terms of establishing a teacher recruitment and selection process that is more selective on the desired profile helping to bring the best teachers to the classrooms. For instance, the country is currently implementing a competitive job application process to fill teaching vacancies for public schools. Also, the country has implemented various standardized tests to evaluate teacher's mastery of academic and pedagogical competencies as a criterion to be eligible and assigned to public schools. This

practice reached a high of 16,354 applicants in 2013 according to MESCyT statistics and is currently divided into three stages. First, a logical reasoning exam. Second, an exam on pedagogical knowledge and planning skills in specific areas of interest. Lastly, an interview.

Due to this augmented meticulousness to select teachers, in 2013 only a third of the applicants got promoted to the second stage of the evaluation process. After the recruitment, selection process, and being hired by the government, teachers are not necessarily assigned to a school that is within their community; needless to say, the school could be located in another city, town or village, whether it be in a rural or urban area. As for teacher development, to improve the quality of teaching practices, the Nacional Institute for Teacher Training (INAFOCAM) offers scholarships year-round to all teachers of the public sector to pursue graduate level studies. However, the Program for the Promotion and Educational Reform in Latin-America and the Caribbean (PREAL), conducted a study in 2015 comparing four countries in Central America in 2015. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and the DR were evaluated on several indicators regarding teacher quality of instruction. Of these countries, the DR, in general, had higher ratings; however, the article indicates that there is a lot of areas for improvement in order to reach quality of instruction as known internationally. For example, in the measured index regarding teachers' readiness for adequate and effective teaching practices, the study found that there were standards set for teachers. However, teachers in the DR lacked awareness of such standards and were, therefore, unable to address them. Another index concentrated on whether schools managed for good performance and to what extent. Researchers found that there is no regular teacher assessment established and no incentives to teach in underprivileged areas, including rural and/or low-income communities.

Within the framework of Fiallo and Germán's (1999) reflections, the training of teachers has been characterized by its dispersion and anarchy, not having a clear criterion to focus, for example, in the areas of science and technology. On the other hand, Valdez (2002), explains that the multiplicity of profiles proposed in programs financed by World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, such as the Program for the Development of Primary Education (PRODEP) and the Professionalization of Pre-service Teachers (PPMB), as well as the curricular transformation, makes it difficult to establish a frame of reference on the needed teacher profile. In his research on teacher training in the DR, Valera (2003) recommends promoting processes to improve the design of initial and continuing teacher education curricula including content and pedagogical approaches that strengthen education for social responsibility.

The National Human Development Report (2005) reveals that the deficiencies in teacher education and training in the DR are reflected in the teaching-learning processes that create a circle where the poor training of teachers is reinforced by underpaid salaries, which in turn are used to justify performances below expectations, both from school leaders to teachers, and from teachers to students. It is also important to mention the research of the Pontifical Catholic University Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) and the Center for Research in Education and Human Development (CIEDHUMANO) in 2005, in which they point out that if improvements in the quality of teaching are to be made, evaluation by performance and the professionalization of teachers should be of uttermost importance.

### **Training teachers for rural schools**

The rural context in the Dominican geography preserves very particular and distinct characteristics in comparison with the urban area and other environments (Del Rosario & López, 2007.) Thus, it is obvious that this space should be the object of attention of educational

programs and research. However, there are few documents that focus on the subject from that perspective.

In the 1950s, Organic Education Law No. 29-09, Chapter XII, addressed the topic of the rural teacher as relevant; specifically, in Article 56, for that Fiallo and Germán (1999) highlighted the studies of the Normal Teachers, emphasizing the urban and rural areas as intervention spaces for educational management. With the implementation of the 1981-1985 Education Development Plan, among other measures, the need was elevated for raising the average level of trained teachers for rural areas (CIDE, 2006.) With the enactment of the General Education Law No. 66-97 and decree No. 427-200, which converts the Normal School System into the Higher Institute of Teacher Education and the implementation of Ordinance No. 1-95 for a new curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school, the Dominican educational system radically breaks that traditional vision applied since 1879 (Dauhajre & Escuder, 2002.)

Nonetheless, there are reports, research, and specific experiences that reflect a certain level of approach to that context. In the investigations of Fiallo (1999) on the Training of Teachers in the DR (1844-1992), the concern of the MINERD regarding the rural education sector is perceived when it issued Resolution No. 231-50 in 1950 that established the programs for the First Course of the Normal Rural Teaching in that decade. In this sense, the same document states that through the Departmental Order No. 842-50, special centers for the training of teachers are created. Consequently, the Rural Normal Schools of San Cristóbal, Licey, and Santiago emerged and worked with public schools for pedagogical practices. Resolution No. 1860-61, which established a new study plan for Rural Normal Schools; No. 31-67 legalized the provisional study plan of the Rural Normal Schools and the Departmental Order No. 19, of May 26, 1969, provided for the completion of teacher professionalization courses during the summer

period of that year. Similarly, Order 31-69, regulated the form of qualification of teachers in the rural teachers training plan.

Later, during the early 1990s, the education sector was going through a serious institutional crisis. This situation made it possible that during the period between 1992-2002, the Dominican Ministry of Education (MINERD) executed the Ten-Year Education Plan that proposed a set of measures in order to strengthen the Dominican educational system in five major areas: quality, democratization, modernization, innovation, and actors. Among the proposed initiatives, the Professionalization Program for Pre-Service Teachers (PPMB) implemented by MINERD in the period 1993-1997 is highlighted. In this sense, the work of Mora (1997) is relevant, which in its evaluation of the impact of the PPMB, states that the program achieved positive results because it was designed, executed, and evaluated with a high technical level. Among other aspects, the increase of the capacity and acknowledgment of the community improved the relationship between teachers and students making the school community more harmonious.

The work titled "The Report on an Innovated Multigrade School of the Dominican Republic" (1999) which refers to the program for strengthening educational management, promoted by MINERD is a noteworthy research highlighting the protagonist local actors in the identification, planning, action, and evaluation of educational problems. It also values the importance of this experience in the interests of a Dominican curriculum that is more appropriate to the contexts in which it is developed, regardless of being urban or rural.

On the other hand, in his many investigations on the subject, Fiallo (1999) reaffirms, based on what is said in the document summary of the Ten-Year Education Plan, that even though changes have been made in the curriculum, they have not taken into consideration the



socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the population nor the poorest low-income contexts. Consequently, the Ten-Year Education Plan does not correspond to all the social demands of the DR. On the contrary, the curriculum of that era was formed by rigid units that do not facilitate the adaptation of the different regional realities and do not contemplate experiences of creative learning.

Today, in spite of the innumerable modifications, the National Pact for Educational Reform financed by World Bank, and the budget increase from 2.4% to 4% of the gross domestic product allocated towards education, current laws do not include, in a concrete way, policies aimed at the training of teachers for rural contexts. Above all, there is no department or unit in MINERD that deals in a differentiated manner with rural schools. Needless to say, the National Pact for Educational Reform neither contemplates rural schools' characteristics nor refers to the rural population.

### **Working definition of rural schools for this study**

In the DR, the government defines rural communities as discussed in this literature review. The Ministry of Education (MINERD) does not specifically attempt to define rural schools as they are classified according to the geographic location of the school's physical structure. For example, if the community is categorized as rural, then the school is considered rural. In other words, the community defines the category of the school. Official data documents from MINERD classify schools by:

- Region (location within the country),
- School district (location within the region),
- School number code,
- School name,

- Public/Private,
- Levels (preschool, elementary, middle school and secondary school),
- School schedule (morning, evening, night or extended school),
- Province,
- Municipality,
- School direction,
- School telephone number,
- School latitude, and
- School longitude.

Although, MINERD does organize schools predominantly by location aspects, these do not allow for easily identifying a school as urban or rural. To worsen the scenario, given the heterogeneity of the country, it is possible to have rural and urban communities within the same region, or even within the same city. For example, Santo Domingo, the capital of the DR, classified as “urban” by national statistics contains communities with predominantly rural characteristics and these in fact can include one or more schools. Therefore, to classify a school as urban or rural it is essential to visit both, the community and the school in order to accurately assess the rurality indicators of the community.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

This study was designed as a basic interpretive qualitative research. According to Stake (2010) qualitative means the research relies on human perception and understanding, emphasizing on personal experiences in described situations. Yin (2011) proposes qualitative research as studying people's lives in the real-world context. In accordance, this basic interpretive qualitative research study profiled the challenges for teachers who teach within rural contexts through the exploration of their rural teaching experiences. Additionally, their perceived level of preparation for serving in rural schools.

#### **Research Design, Approach and Rationale**

Research is an inquiry and the use of a careful study seeking to understand phenomena (Stake, 2010). Merriam (2002) and Stake (2010) indicate that qualitative researchers make meaning of what people have constructed through their experiences while attempting to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective. In qualitative research, the research participants are the experts and not the researcher (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), while the researcher is seen as the primary research instrument (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011). Being the researcher and the principal research instrument leads to the concern of developing bias throughout the research data collection and interpretation. Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicate that the challenge faced by the researcher is to demonstrate that personal understandings or interests do not bias the study. However, one can never avoid his or her research lenses (Yin, 2011) since the researcher's experiences influences how he or she

makes meaning of the study data (Saldana, 2009). To diminish possible bias, Merriam (2002) recommends having constant monitoring of the researchers' biases and maintaining reflection on how the researcher's own experience may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the research data.

To conduct this research, I selected a basic interpretative qualitative design. This type of qualitative research approach suited my study because it allowed me to collect multiple perspectives to create a full description of the actual experiences of teachers in Dominican rural public schools; therefore, describe their experiences about teaching in the rural context, of the DR along with a profile of their professional needs for serving the student population who attends rural schools.

In a basic interpretive qualitative study, the researcher is interested in how people make meaning and interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that basic interpretative qualitative studies are appropriate when the researcher seeks to have an insight on the perspectives and views of different categories of people regarding their experience on a topic. The data obtained from multiple participants with different perspectives on the same experience contributed to create a profile of those common and unique conditions that affect teachers who work in rural schools. This data helped me produce a profile of how the educators who serve in Dominican rural public schools respond to their experiences teaching in the rural context and how they portray their professional needs for serving in those schools.

The focus of this basic interpretative study was the experiences of teachers serving in rural schools in an effort to profile their professional needs to meet the characteristics of the rural school community. Merriam (2002) indicates that basic interpretive qualitative study is always

framed by some concept, model, or theory. The interview questions and data analysis for this study were based on place-consciousness theories.

### **Trustworthiness**

Some strategies identified in the literature on basic interpretive qualitative studies and other forms of qualitative research relate to the topic of trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (1985) summarized how trustworthiness occurs when the researcher carries out the inquiry in such a way that the findings are likely to be credible and are approved by the participants. Trustworthiness is explained further when Guba and Lincoln discussed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness is a matter of concern to consumers of research reports (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The following sections describe the strategies used to enhance trustworthiness in this study.

### **Reflections on my identity**

To minimize researcher bias in this study, I used a reflective journal to capture my thinking and perspectives throughout the conduct of data collection and analysis. Reflexivity is vital when conducting qualitative research studies. It allows the researcher to acknowledge and address possible bias (Creswell, 2013). According to Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen (2006) reflexivity demonstrated through the use of a reflective journal helps the researcher recognize his or her biases. Reflexivity is examining how one's subjectivity influences one's research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003.) According to Saldana (2009) what the researcher thinks and feels during the research process should be recorded and is also considered data. Other researchers can better evaluate one's conclusions if one's perspectives are made known, such as through the reflexive journal (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The researcher should refer to this journal during the data analysis process (Ary et al., 2006).

Therefore, I included entries from my journal for this research study as part of the audit trail, along with analytic memos I wrote as I summarized and synthesized my thinking. Also, I used my log trail to examine how my personal beliefs, professional experience, education, race, gender, class, and ethnicity might be influencing my perspectives toward rural teachers, and influencing how I understand the experiences and perspectives they share with me. I also used my memos to make notes of how rural teachers responded to me as the researcher, and looked for clues about how they perceived me as a researcher. These memo exercises helped me understand any impact that participants' perceptions of me might have on the information they provided during interviews, or any other type of engagement during the course of conducting this study (Ary et al., 2006.) Finally, I used my memos and field notes to guide my data analysis and ensure that my findings conform to the data (Ary et al., 2006.) I also used the journal to make decisions about conducting the research.

Practicing reflexivity actions allowed me to become aware of my role and impact as a researcher; thus, increasing the trustworthiness of the data collected, and the integrity of my research findings and conclusions. To begin the process of reflexivity, I summarized essential aspects of who I am and how my identity as a researcher and previous experiences relate to the purpose of this study.

### **Credibility**

Several strategies have been recognized that promote the credibility of a qualitative study. I used a strategy called peer debriefing. Peer debriefing occurs when colleagues of the researcher assess whether or not the findings make sense based on the raw data (Merriam, 2002). Peer debriefing allows for researcher catharsis because the colleagues of the researcher may help the researcher find the next steps in the study if these stand unclear (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). In

this study, peer debriefing occurred after the first draft of the final write-up. I asked a colleague to review the initial draft and the raw data in order to provide questions and comments.

### **Transferability**

In qualitative studies, the question of transferability rather than generalizability often arises. One can use what was learned from a particular in-depth situation, transfer and subsequently apply the knowledge to another situation (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) discusses reader generalizability (also called case-to-case transfer) where the readers determine the extent to which findings of a study can be transferred to other contexts. Guba and Lincoln (1985) noted the burden of transferability is less on the researcher and more on the reader. A researcher must provide a thick description in order for readers to quickly identify and match their contexts to that of the study to see if a transfer is a possibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To address transferability, I took care to present both background characteristics of study participants and the schools they serve. I also presented in-depth vignettes of each participant's story in Chapter 4 to assist readers in determining transferability to other given situations of teachers who teach in the Dominican rural context.

### **Dependability and confirmability**

Qualitative researchers seek to consider the factors of instability in a study as well as factors of change from the design (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The researcher is also interested in whether or not the data was confirmable. One strategy that addresses both dependability and confirmability is the audit trail. The audit trail relates to the transparency of methods (Merriam, 2002). It is the residue of records from the inquiry (Lincoln Guba & Lincoln, 1985.) As researcher, I examined and described the process of inquiry during data collection,

interpretations, and recommendations. I maintained a detailed audit trail in this study in order to attend to and record step-by-step provisions for dependability and confirmability.

I also used member checking to support both, dependability and confirmability. Each participant was given the opportunity to read their profile to confirm there was any important piece of information missing. Then, each participant profile was translated and presented verbatim.

### **Population, Sample, and Setting**

I recruited a sample of 20 subjects to participate in this study to achieve saturation of the data, or redundancy. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), redundancy usually occurs by the 12th interview and definitively by the 15th. I anticipated that 15 participants would be appropriate for this study. I recruited the study sample from the 06 education region of the DR education system. This region is composed of four school districts which, together host 326 schools. There are approximately 3,200 teachers distributed across those 326 public schools. From these 326 schools, I recruited study participants from schools that are located in rural communities.

I employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who have experienced working in rural schools for at least three years. To recruit teacher participants for this study, I only considered schools that are classified by the Dominican Ministry of Education as “rural.” I narrowed the pool of schools from which I recruited teacher participants to the five most rural schools from each school district based on the Dominican system for classifying schools as rural. This selection of schools provided a pool of approximately 200 Dominican K-12 rural public school teachers. From this pool, I conducted my recruitment to achieve a sample of 16 participants who meet the following criteria:



1. Either female or male teachers with a minimum of three full years of professional practice teaching in rural schools.
2. Teachers who have completed a bachelor's degree in education at a Dominican university.

To start the participant recruitment process, I secured the gatekeeper letter included in Appendix A from the regional director who oversees the schools in Region 06. This letter verified that I could send the recruitment letter in Appendix B to the regional director and she would distribute it to the district teachers in each rural school through the district technicians who visit each school weekly. The letter provided potential participants with my phone number and email, so they could contact me directly for more information about the study. When potentially interested teachers contacted me, I informed them via telephone about the study sample selection criteria, the research purpose and answered their questions. I personally met with those teachers who were still interested in participating in the research study to review the consent form (see Appendix C for version in Spanish and English) and proceeded with the interview if they agreed. I accepted the first 20 teachers who met the inclusionary criteria of my study into my participant pool, and started the interview process with the first 16 who signed the consent form. I put on hold the scheduling of the remaining five teachers in the event of needing more participants to reach saturation or redundancy.

### **Instrumentation**

I used an in-depth semi-structured qualitative interview protocol (see Appendix D for the interview protocol in Spanish and English). The interviews were conducted in one-on-one meetings between the interviewee and myself to gather in-depth information about teaching experiences and professional readiness for rural school settings. I guided the interview

conversation with a pre-determined list of questions. However, I also allowed the interviewee some freedom to provide relevant information about the topic discussed not covered in the questions.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection method in this study was by semi-structured interviews. Stake (2010) indicates that an interview is an instrument to obtain information about the things a researcher is not able to observe. Frequently, researchers are interested in the stories of other people (Seidman, 2006). “At the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Additionally, interviewing enables people to make meaning through language and the construction of participants’ experiences within the topic in question (Seidman, 2006).

Therefore, to collect the data, I used an in-depth semi-structured qualitative interview protocol (see Appendix D for interview protocol). Individual interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes each. If needed, I scheduled a follow-up interview with participants to probe deeper around points of interest from the first interviews. Follow-up interviews did not exceed 30 minutes. Creswell (2013) indicates that “as researchers anticipate data collection, they need to respect the participants and the sites of research” (p. 89); thus, I communicated with the participants to find a time and location that best accommodated their schedule and access.

I used pseudonyms to represent each participant and ensure anonymity. I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview in order to prepare the data for analysis. I used Microsoft OneNote to record my researcher memos and log my researcher journal. While conducting this study, I maintained the data in digital format with an encrypted, password protected storage device. I will transfer this device and my research log trail and code book to the University

research archives for the period required by Western Michigan University (three years) after the completion of this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step to coding is recognition. Recognition is where the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in the interviews are found (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Rubin and Rubin (2005) also defined concepts as words or terms that represent essential ideas. Themes are defined as summary statements and explanations. Events are occurrences that took place and topical markers as names and essential numbers. Coding involves systematically labeling these concepts, themes, events and topical markers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The individual responses to each question by the participants are considered an important unit of data for coding. I used the theoretical lenses of place-consciousness theory as an inductive lens for identifying codes within each transcript. I extracted and organized the identified codes compose into coding categories and, eventually, used those categories for the identification of themes.

I carried out the process of analyzing the obtained data in five steps: (1) I read the written transcript several times to get an overall sense of meanings and key ideas; (2) I highlighted significant phrases and sentences that are directly linked to my study purpose and research questions. These were my *in vivo* codes; (3) I extracted those highlighted phrases and sentences (i.e., codes) and developed meaning-based clusters of significant statements or codes; I examined multiple ways to cluster and organize these codes until they crystallized around common topics from all of the participants' transcripts; (4) then I used the emergent or crystallized topics and any sub-topics that formed within those topics to develop an in-depth and detailed description of the participants' common experiences and the meaning they derive from those experiences related to their preparation to teach in rural schools; and (5) finally, I used member checking to

let the participants read and validate my in-depth and detailed descriptions, after which, I extracted the significant thematic elements from those descriptions into a set of themes and sub-themes that represent the essence of participants' experiences and meanings from those experiences (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, my emergent analysis of the participants' interviews was guided by place-consciousness pedagogy theory. I categorized and organized emergent topics based on the description of the location, emotions and school practices associated with the characteristics and limitations of rural communities and school itself; also, how physical traits of the community and the school, including cultural dynamics and beliefs of the rural community shape instructional practices.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this study were (a) the location of the schools and (b) the political-labor context of the interviewed teachers. The remote location and difficult access to some rural schools was a limitation when selecting them, because it resulted in the elimination of potentially meaningful data sources. Also, due to the political situation and vulnerability of rural areas, teachers could have felt limited when responding freely to the interview questions, resulting in a database with superficial inputs. I needed to work on developing trust and empathy with study participants to overcome this possible limitation and listen for opportunities to probe deeply when participants offered a promising line of conversation.

The delimitation for this study focuses on the rural context, specifically teachers who have been trained in teacher training programs in the DR, and who work exclusively in the rural public education sector

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PARTICIPANTS AND SCHOOL PROFILE**

This basic interpretative study used open-ended semi-structured interviews to (a) profile the challenges of public-school teachers who teach within rural contexts, and (b) their professional readiness to overcome such challenges.

Before presenting the data obtained from the interviews, I briefly present participants' personal experiences on how they ended up teaching in a school in rural contexts, and their academic preparation. Some highlights of their first school year as a novice teacher, and how their acclimation to rural contexts are also depicted. Introducing teachers before presenting the analyzed data will help the reader understand the profile of the teachers who participated in this study through information that acknowledges their highest academic level achieved and helps the reader comprehend their current level of expertise to manage challenges present in rural communities that affect the school performance. I present the analysis of participants' experiences and the composite themes and sub-themes that characterize those experiences in Chapter 5.

#### **Participants and School Overview**

A total of 16 teachers were interviewed for the purposes of this research study. These teachers represent a varied range of experiences in multigrade classrooms (See Table 1 for details). In summary, 13 teachers have less than 10 years of teaching experience, and three teachers have more than 10 years of teaching experience in rural contexts. Of the 16 teachers interviewed, only one has previous teaching experience in a school located in a non-rural area,

while the rest have been practicing professionally in rural schools since their first appointment in the public education system by the Ministry of Education (MINERD).

During the course of the interviews, only two teachers were not currently assigned to a multigrade classroom, both stated they had have taught multigrade classrooms in the past. The reasons for those two teachers not currently teaching multigrade classrooms during the 2019-2020 school year was due to one teacher being pregnant and the school believing that a single grade classroom would be “easier to handle,” and the other teacher was not t required due to a decrease in enrollment. Five of the 16 teachers have three or more grades mixed in the same classroom. All 16 teachers are currently teaching elementary grades, including a range of grades from kindergarten to sixth grade. The schools this sample of teachers serve are all located in rural contexts.

The teachers in this study belong to five different schools located in rural communities, all distributed throughout different rural communities in the DR. These schools are all classified as rural, however, their access, enrollment, and teacher-student ratio vary (See Table 2 for details). Four of these schools are classified as schools of “difficult access” due to the lack of reliable transportation to access the school or, at least, the school community (some students walk long distances from one community to another to access public education). Schools classified as “difficult access” are schools where the only means of access is by way of an all-terrain vehicle or walking. Needless to say, public transportation available in rural communities are not designed as all-terrain. Consequently, public vehicles will not go to this type of school. Only one school did not have multigrade classrooms due to a recent construction to expand the school. Two schools are considered remote because they are located outside of the community and surrounded by wilderness.

Table 1

*Teachers' Professional Characteristics*

Teacher Pseudonym	Teaching Certification	Years Teaching	Years in the Public Education System	Years Teaching in Rural Communities	Grades Currently Teaching
Ana	Elementary Teacher	4	4	4	Multigrade Classroom 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> grade
Bob	Elementary Teacher	3	3	3	Multigrade Classroom 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade
María	Elementary Teacher	3	3	3	1 <sup>st</sup> grade
Pedro	Preschool Teacher	4	4	4	Preschool
Maye	Elementary Teacher	5	5	5	Multigrade Classroom Preschool and 1 <sup>st</sup> grade
Luis	Elementary Teacher	6	6	6	Multigrade Classroom 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade
Emi	Elementary Teacher	7	7	7	Multigrade Classroom 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> grade
Frank	Elementary Teacher	3	3	3	Multigrade Classroom 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade
Ava	Elementary teacher	15	5	5	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade
José	Elementary teacher	6	6	6	1 <sup>st</sup> grade
Magda	Elementary Teacher	6	6	6	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade
Jesús	Elementary Teacher	4	4	4	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> through 5 <sup>th</sup> grade
Vale	Elementary Teacher	18	18	18	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> through 5 <sup>th</sup> grade
John	Elementary Teacher	6	6	6	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> through 5 <sup>th</sup> grade
Karla	Elementary Teacher	7	7	7	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> through 5 <sup>th</sup> grade
Paco	Elementary Teacher	12	12	12	Multigrade Classroom 1 <sup>st</sup> through 5 <sup>th</sup> grade

Table 2

*School Demographics*

Teacher Pseudonym	School Zone*	Type of School**	School Grades	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
Ana	Rural-remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	56	5
Bob	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	56	5
María	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	56	5
Pedro	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	56	5
Maye	Rural	Multigrade Rural	Kindergarten through 6th grade	78	3
Luis	Rural	Multigrade RuralRural	Kindergarten through 6th grade	78	3
Emi	Rural	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	82	5
Frank	Rural	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	82	5
Ava	Rural	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	294	16
José	Rural	RuralRural-Difficult Access	Kindergarten through 6th grade	294	16
Magda	Rural	Rural	Kindergarten through 6th grade	294	16
Jesús	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	1st through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	65	5
Vale	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	1st through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	65	5
John	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	1st through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	65	5
Karla	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	1st through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	65	5
Paco	Rural-Remote	Multigrade Rural-Difficult Access	1st through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	65	5

\*Rural-Remote: the school is not located within a community and is surrounded by wilderness

\*\*Rural-Difficult access: there is no public transportation to access the school



### **Participants Profiles**

At the beginning of each interview session, teachers were invited to briefly address how they were assigned to work in a school located in rural communities, and their current academic preparation. Additionally, they briefly described their first school year in a school located within a rural context, and how they recalled their adaptation to the rural culture and community. The remaining interview questions were utilized to develop the categories and themes which provided answers to the research study questions that will be presented in Chapter 5.

In summary, 14 teachers have been working in the same school since they were appointed by MINERD, one teacher has been assigned to two different schools in rural communities. The stories of teachers were varied but somehow similar in terms of the hiring and appointment process. That is, all teachers were randomly assigned by MINERD to a school in a rural context without acknowledging their school zone preference. Several teachers stated that they were never informed of the characteristics of the school they were assigned to until way after being appointed in the public education system. They also mentioned not knowing about multigrade classrooms or had never even heard about the concept prior to their assignment. In addition, teachers were asked to indicate if they felt motivated working in a school located in a rural community, and if they would change to another school if given the opportunity. Most teachers reported they felt happy and motivated in their schools; however, if they were given the opportunity to change to another one, they would. Consistently, the reasons mentioned were factors external to the school such as the lack of public transportation, and the remoteness of the school.

Biographical narrative inquiry was selected as the method to present teachers' profiles. According to this method, biographical narrative inquiry tells stories about others,

and usually is presented in a first-person narrative (Kim, 2016). In Kim's (2016) words, the researcher plays a "midwife" role in an attempt to deliver the story of the protagonist of the story to the reader to maintain fidelity and stay away from the traditional position of the researcher as the authority who present what she or he considers to be important. Also, this method of presenting data, and, in congruence with my purpose statement, seeks to "honor the participants, their voices, their feelings, and experiences" (p. 119). Therefore, each of the 16 participants' profiles listed in this chapter are written in a first-person narrative in order to provide the reader with a more vivid representation of each participant's story.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, and when translated, cultural translation was kept true to what the teachers expressed. This way, a first-person narrative allows me to present teachers' in their own voices without making inferences or including interpretations when narrating their academic profiles, how they arrived at a school in rural zones, and how they feel about working in their schools. I also chose to present these participant profiles in first person, to avoid diluting the essence of each participant's voice by speaking in my own. This way, each participant's story can be consumed as a whole rather than through sporadic quotes that I might offer to illustrate certain points. With this approach, I hope to transmit teachers' vivid feelings, experiences, and cultural communication style. Other reasons that teachers highlighted as challenges when working in schools located in rural communities will be discussed and deepened in Chapter 5.

### **Participant No. 1: Ana**

"I pursued a bachelor's degree to become an elementary teacher five years ago. Right after I graduated, I submitted my candidature to the Ministry of Education, and I won my placement into the system. Since I am from this community, the school principal helped me get assigned to this school because there are teachers who work here who are not from

this community. It is much better for the students when the teacher is from the same village as the school because if anything happens in the school, the teacher can go the student's home because they already know the community residents.”

“In my first year, as you might know, I already had a little knowledge about what I have to do as a teacher because I had the opportunity to do an internship to obtain my bachelor's degree. Because of this experience I knew what to expect once I entered the school. I also enjoyed my first year because I had a great collaboration system within the school staff. The school principal was always present and helped me a lot. My colleagues were already veteran teachers with a lot of experience, and they were very open when I needed some help. I usually asked them when I had difficulties, and they gave all of their support and taught me how to handle things. Thank God, from that first year to now, I have had a great teaching experience.”

“I feel motivated to work in this school because I like what I do and I feel motivated to be the best I can for my students to learn. In the case of changing schools and if I would do it, I would do it because we have to experience new things. Learning in a different context would be unique for me, and I know it would help me in my life a lot.”

“I live in this region of the country, but I am not from this exact rural community. The culture here is beautiful and pleasant. People are very close and collaborative; they work very well in teams. When the community organizes to do an activity or anything else, they try to integrate everyone. As a teacher, what we want is the well-being of the community. Teachers here are always included, and we collaborate in everything we can. Everyone likes to be taken into account and be treated well, and that is something that I take into consideration.”

### **Participant No. 2: Bob**

“I pursued a teaching career to become an elementary school teacher. To be assigned to a school in the public education system, the first thing I had to do was to compete with other teachers and take the exams which I passed in the first attempt. This process accredited me as competent to work in this professional area. I was appointed to this school directly, and since then, I have stayed here. I feel motivated to work in this school. Although it is rural, it is a school where we all support each other and there is a lot of motivation. The director always motivates us, and that is an excellent thing. If I were allowed to change to another school, I would do I but, I would also stay if the government fixes the road because it is nice to work here.”

“Regarding my first year as a teacher, I have to say it was a bit difficult, but I was able to quickly adapt. It wasn't very easy because what you learn in college is very different from what you experience in a real classroom. For example, my teaching practice was not in a rural school, and I did not have the experience until I arrived here.”

“As for the culture of this rural community, although I have different traditions, and it might seem to be a little challenging to adapt, it has been easy for me. I feel that I adapted quickly because I have a lot of interaction with the community through a cultural dance group I belong to. Also, I grew up in both areas, the urban and the rural. I was born in the city, but at the age of 15, I came to live in a rural area.”

### **Participant No. 3: María**

“I studied to be an elementary school teacher. I got to work at this school because I live nearby. First, I took the exams to be eligible to work in the public system. Once I earned my place in the system, the principal of this school made it easier for me to be

assigned to this school. Also, I did my internship at this same school, so it was so much easier for me.”

“Regarding my motivation, I can say that I feel good. If I could change to another school, I would do it because maybe I could have more work benefits. Besides, my husband works in the city, and I work here, therefore, we can only see each other on weekends, and that isn't very easy. But for everything else, I feel very comfortable and satisfied because the enrollment is lower than in the city, and it is easier to work with fewer children in the classroom.”

“Regarding my first year as a teacher, I would describe it as challenging. Although I graduated with a bachelor's degree in education, I had many obstacles because the practice is what makes the teacher. Then, over the years, I developed and acquired more skills, and now I can even help other colleagues who arrive new to school just as other veteran teachers helped me when I first came here.”

“About the community, I was born and raised here. I would say that the culture here is welcoming. People here are very close, cheerful, and friendly. Also, they are always motivated to participate in all of the activities the school organizes.”

#### **Participant No. 4: Pedro**

“I went to college to get a teacher's degree to teach elementary school grades. I arrived at this school after taking the exam to enter the public education system. I feel very motivated about working in this school, I like my school, and I feel welcomed here. If I could move to another school, I would do it with pleasure because I believe that each person should live new experiences.”

“As for my first year as a teacher, I would describe it as a year full of challenges. During my first year, I was assigned to work in a multigrade classroom where I had

kindergarten and first grade together. Since they are very different grades with very different routines and instructional strategies, it was tough to manage.”

“Regarding the culture of the community, I would describe it as a very positive community because when there is a family or a patriotic activity, the community integrates very quickly and gives a lot of support to the school.”

**Participant No. 5: Maye**

“I studied early childhood education and came to work at this school when the ministry finally decreed my appointment into the public education system. I didn't know that they were going to send me to a rural school. Later I learned that my school district received my file, and it was they who decided where send me. I feel very motivated working here, and I would not change this school even if they allowed me to do so.”

“My first year as a teacher was a bit difficult, but that is normal because all beginnings are difficult. For me, I think it was more difficult than usual because when I started working here, I was assigned to a third grade, and my degree is in early childhood education. Although it was challenging, I was able to get through the school year successfully.”

“Regarding the culture of this community, I could say that it was challenging for me to adapt. This community has very different behavioral patterns from mine. When I saw the precariousness with which families live here, it was a bit shocking, but I have already become used to it. Besides, I can help these children somewhat because they need it, and parents do not support even knowing that everything we do is for the benefit of the children.”

**Participant No. 6: Luis**

“I pursued a degree in elementary education. My assignment within the public system was to this rural school ever since. I feel very motivated working here, and I would not change to another school.”

“My first year as a teacher was tough and challenging because I had no idea how I was going to work with two different grades at the same time. But, as time went by, I adapted until I managed to feel comfortable working two grades within the same classroom. Regarding my adaptation to the culture of the rural community, I think it was good. Students arrive with behaviors different from those I am used to, but as time goes by you get to adapt to them. Also, you guide the students, and they too adapt to you.”

**Participant No. 7: Emi**

“I entered the university to pursue an administrative career. Then, I completed the teacher qualification program for professionals, and when I finished, I participated in the exams to be assigned to a school within the public education system. My designation was directly to this school, and I have been here for many years already. I like working here; in fact, I love this rural school, and would not change it for another school.”

“My first year as a teacher was hard and challenging. It was not easy for me to adapt since I came from a very different professional area. I had to seek a lot of help to adapt to the school environment. As for the culture of the rural community, I would say that I feel neutral. When I arrived, there was no problem. The community was good to me and welcomed me immediately.”

**Participant No. 8: Frank**

“I pursued a bachelor's degree in education to become an elementary teacher. After I graduated from university, I took the exams to earn a place in the public education system.

After I got positive results, they assigned me directly to a rural school. I feel motivated working here because I like to help the community, and one way to contribute is to be an educator. But, if they allowed me to change to another school, I would do it.”

“Regarding my first year as a teacher, I can say that the first months were tough. I felt like it was an uphill battle. There exists a widespread belief that when you arrive to a school as a new teacher you are given the "leftover" classroom or subjects that are missing specialized teachers. So, I was the chosen one. I started here teaching natural science class in seventh and eighth grade, me being an elementary teacher. There were many contents of those course programs that I didn't even know myself. I had to look for people in the school and school district technicians to be able to move forward. Thank God my children did well in the exams.”

“As for the culture of the community, I would describe it as good. I was raised in this community, but I was assigned to another rural school at the beginning of my teaching career. At that time, I did not know the community, but through the students, other teachers, and meetings with parents, I learned and got to understand the culture of the community. Based on those interactions, I was able to work better and became closer to my students. In other words, you have to observe and study the environment to work better. You know that in some communities you have to go step by step learning the community language without breaking its traditions abruptly, so you are not rejected.”

**Participant No. 9: Ava**

“I studied early childhood education. My designation when I took the exams was directly to this school. I feel good working in this rural school, but if I have to change schools, I would not care much because wherever I arrive, I will do my job. In the event of having to change schools, I would like it to be in the city.”



“My first year as a teacher was not easy because when I arrived at this school, they required a math teacher for seventh and eighth grade, and they gave me those courses. That is, I had to work really hard because I was assigned to a subject and grades I was not prepared for.”

“As for the culture of the community, I can say that it was effortless to integrate because everyone wonderfully welcomed me. I did very well, thank God.”

**Participant No. 10: José**

“I studied elementary education and started to work at this school because I was appointed by the ministry of education after I took the exams. I can say that I feel good about working at this school. I like it here. When I first started working here, I already had experience working in a school, not a rural one, but I had some school experience. For me, getting myself involved with the culture was not difficult. Even though I am not from the rural area, I am from this region, and I think I understand people very well here.”

**Participant No. 11: Magda**

“I studied to become an elementary teacher. In order to be assigned to this school, I had to take the exams from the Ministry of Education. As I understand it, new teachers supposedly have to go to rural schools first, and then they get placed in another school inside the city. However, my first year as a teacher here, I describe it as excellent.”

“Regarding the school, I feel good working here. If I could go to another school, I would like to go to one in the city but not because of factors that have to do with this school in particular but for example the road that must be traveled to get here. I get along very well with the community. Since my arrival, they welcomed me and made me feel good. It’s just how difficult it is to access the school what I really dislike.”

**Participant No. 12: Jesús**

“I left my rural community in 1988. I asked God to help me work for my village. I didn't know I was going to be a teacher, and here I am. I went to a multigrade school; in fact, I went to this same school. So, I had some knowledge about how teachers worked here, and I implemented the same with my students. I got to work at this school when my brother went to my house one day and told me that there were no teachers here because the teacher at that time suffered an accident, and that is how I arrived here. At that time, it was not required to have a teaching bachelor's degree. I am talking about the year 1992. During my first year as a teacher, I had an excellent experience. I remember that when I arrived here, first-grade students had Spanish language books, and I was able to teach them how to read and write that first year. At that moment, I had several grades mixed. Specifically, I had first, second, third, fourth, and fifth-grade students altogether. I felt delighted at that time, people were very obedient, and students paid attention to their assignments. I remember that at that time, we did not have any cleaning personnel. On weekends the students and I would come to the school to clean it. The school had a dirt floor, and in general, the school was very deteriorated. The main precariousness I had was the salary because it wasn't enough for me to return to my home daily. Instead, I had to stay in the community during the week.”

**Participant No. 13: Vale**

“I studied to become an elementary teacher. When I passed the tests, I was assigned to a rural school. I didn't know where the school was located, and I had never heard of this school before. When I started working here, it was not so tedious for me because I came from the private sector, and for certain situations, I worked more than one grade in the same classroom... The academic conditions and circumstances that I encountered during my first

year, I tried my best to solve them as quickly as I could. First, I analyzed the situation and identified the most critical and urgent situations to meet my expectations from my students because I entered during the middle of the school year and had no time to lose.”

**Participant No. 14: John**

“I pursued a bachelor's degree in elementary education. When I took my exams to enter the public system, I got appointed directly to this school. I was not told in advance what type of school it would be or that I would be dealing with a multigrade school... When I arrived at this school, I realized that I did not know what a multigrade classroom was at all. But, like almost all things, the beginning is difficult, but then one gets used to it. In other words, it was not easy at the beginning, but, thank God, it all has passed. On the other hand, I can say that I like my school, but the distance to get here is an issue. I have a small child, so traffic on the street does not offer child safety; it is dangerous.”

**Participant No. 15: Karla**

“After I studied to become an elementary teacher, the school district asked me if I wanted to come to this school. I didn't know where exactly the school was located, whom I was going to teach, or that the school was multigrade. They never specified to me those details. Although I already had classroom experience, this was completely different because I had too many children and mixed grades. However, I can say that it has been an enjoyable experience. I have been able to learn a lot from my students.”

**Participant No. 16. Paco**

“I studied because I wanted my community to develop. Back then, it wasn't very easy for teachers to come here or even agree to teach here. A teacher would come one day and leave the next day; nobody wanted to be in this situation. The school is too remote, and to worsen the situation, there was no public transportation that would come here. So, what

happened? Teachers would come here and leave without finishing the school year. No one wanted to be here that long! That is when I said this has to stop. This is my community, and I want to help it. So, I left this rural community and obtained my high school diploma and came back to teach. But, I never imagined that it was my turn to work multigrade... My first school year was very tough. I had four grades, mixed together, and the school principal only came to school sometimes. We were alone! I just said Oh, my God! What am I going to do now? Then I studied education while I was already working at this school. But, at first, I felt helpless because even though I had the experience of working in a school, I never imagined that it would be so difficult. But, time passes, and one adapts ... one is molded into the situation. Today I can say that it is super easy for me. Now a multigrade classroom is the same as a single-grade classroom.

#### **Chapter 4 Summary**

These profiles will serve to better contextualize interview data collected from each of these 16 teachers. Their willingness to briefly share how they were appointed to work in a school located in rural communities along with some stories about the rural community they serve, and their motivation to stay or leave schools located in rural communities, have provided the reader with some understanding of these schools located in rural communities' contexts in the DR. The following chapter will present these experiences in a deeper and more detailed manner.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THEMES**

A sample of 16 teachers currently working in rural zones in the DR were interviewed individually; this chapter presents the results subsequent to the analysis of the conducted interviews. School challenges in rural contexts, and teachers' readiness to address such challenges are the primary focus of this study. Accordingly, this qualitative research study was narrowed by examining the collected data in order to obtain responses to address the following questions:

1. How does a criterion sample of Dominican public school teachers' currently working in rural zones experience school challenges, and how did their academic and professional preparation help them meet those challenges to meet the requirements of the national curriculum?
2. How do the teachers describe the culture of the community they serve and how do they describe their acclimation to that culture?
3. How do the teachers describe their level of preparation for teaching in the rural public school context?
4. How do the teachers describe the ways in which they adapt to and address the characteristics, challenges and needs of the schools they serve in rural communities?
5. How do the teachers describe their motivation and aspirations for teaching in schools located in rural communities?

6. How do the teachers make sense of and act upon the requirements and expectations of the national curriculum and education policies of the Dominican Ministry of Education?

Two categories and associated themes were identified: (a) school challenges in rural contexts through the lenses of teachers, and (b) teachers' professional practice in rural contexts. Each category will be presented by exploring the themes that emerged. Each theme will be richly illustrated through interview quotations to provide a deeper meaning.

### **Data Analysis**

For the purposes of this research study, both inductive and deductive analyses were conducted. The participants' reflections of their experience teaching in schools located in rural contexts were explored through open-ended interviews. These interviews included 16 teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience in schools located in rural contexts, and a bachelor's degree in education from a Dominican university. Each teacher's response to the interview questions were considered an important unit of data for coding.

For the deductive analysis, first, interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times to achieve an overall sense of key meanings and ideas. Second, transcribed verbatim transcripts were highlighted to extract significant phrases, key sentences, and meaningful ideas. Third, participants' highlighted raw answers were grouped into segments of information when similar topics arose. Grouped raw-answers were then condensed into more robust units of data. After summarizing raw answers, inductive analysis of data was used to construct the themes that emerged across all of the research questions. The inductive analysis session consisted of labeling the segments of condensed information until meaning-based clusters of significant statements or codes developed. The identified codes were reduced to eliminate redundancy and overlapping data. For this, I executed

numerous ways to cluster and organize the codes until categories emerged. Subsequently, categories crystallized around common themes and sub-themes. Emergent themes and sub-themes to develop an in-depth and detailed description of the participants' common experiences were addressed to provide answers to this research's questions.

### **From Schools Located in Rural Communities to Schools Located in Rural Contexts**

Before deepening into Chapter 5, a few things must be addressed to comprehend the nature of the schools located in rural contexts. At the beginning of this research, the teachers, students, and schools were labeled with the word rural (Chapters one, two, and three). That is, they were called *rural teachers*, teaching *rural students* in *rural schools*. However, during the data analysis in Chapter five, exciting findings were emerging. These findings were shaping a new perspective towards the teachers, students, and schools that are the objects of this research. This new perspective led me to understand and look at teachers, students, and schools in rural areas from another focus. I stopped identifying teachers as rural teachers and started calling them teachers in rural contexts. Also, the students also stopped being called rural students, to be identified as students living in rural communities. Finally, I stopped identifying schools as rural; they are now identified in this study as schools located in rural communities.

The reality is that the teachers, students, and schools do not cease to be what they are because of the area in which they are exercising their functions. The teacher is still a teacher, the student is still a student, and the school is still a school. The only variances are the characteristics of the area in which they are located, and how these characteristics typical of the rural area have side effects regardless of being positive or negative in the educational efforts of a country. Therefore, after much reflection and analysis, I concluded that when we label teachers, student, and schools, the root of the causes that currently affect

schools is overlooked. The community and its characteristics are determinant factors to the school configuration and how it functions. Therefore, at the moment when the school is characterized, taking into consideration all of the external factors that influence school performance, it is possible to rethink the nature of the school to generate measures that contribute to remedying the ailments that afflict it.

### **Themes and Sub-themes**

To assist the reader in understanding the common themes and sub-themes that emerged from my analysis, I created the flow chart illustrated in Figure 2. In the flow chart, the two categories of “Challenges” and “Teacher Practices” break down into an array of themes and sub-themes. There are eight themes and seven sub-themes associated with the category representing challenges the teachers described related to teaching in a rural context. There are an additional five themes and six sub-themes associated with the category of practices the participants have developed to adapt to teaching in the rural context. The next sections discuss these themes and sub-themes.



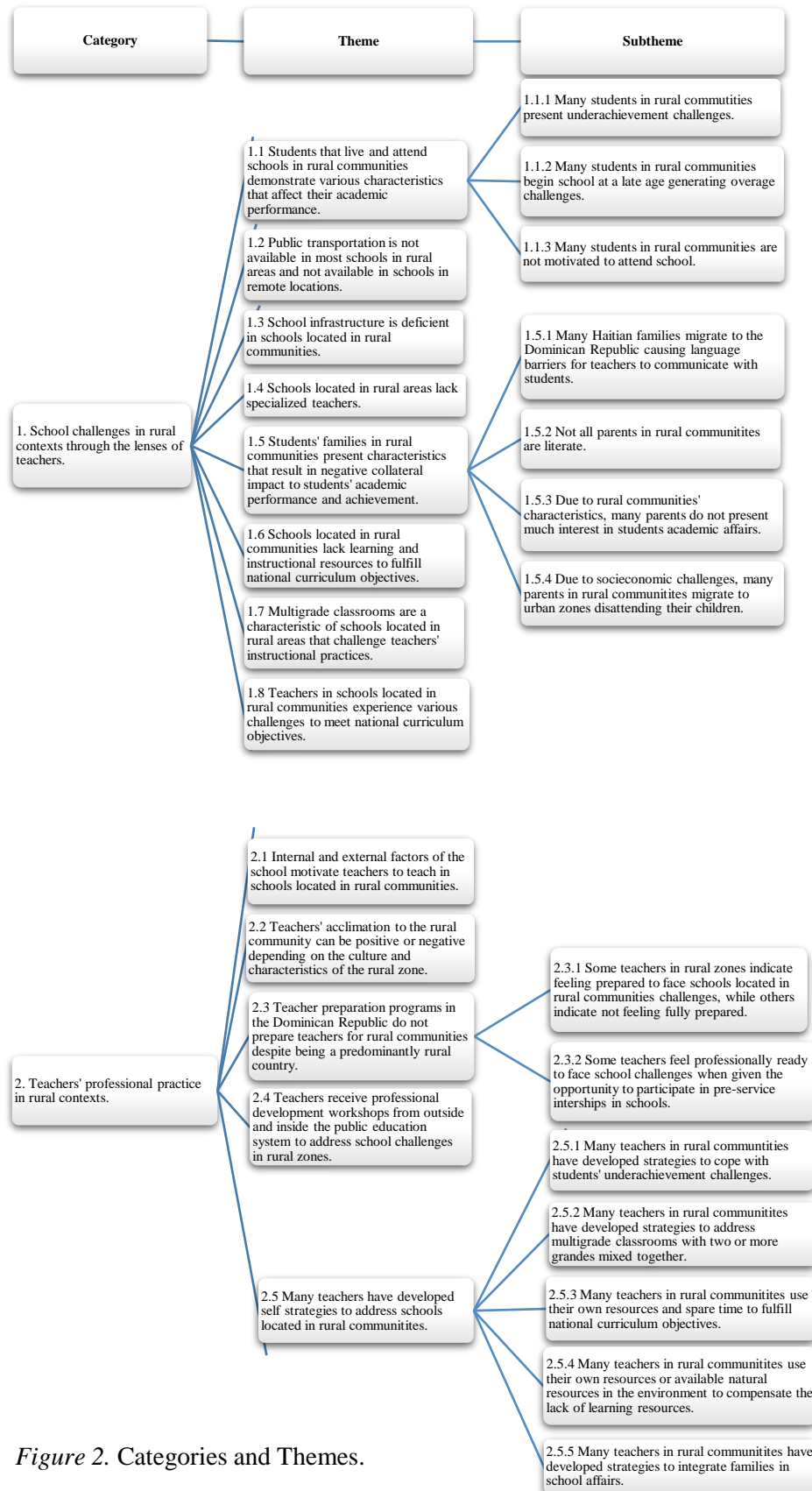


Figure 2. Categories and Themes.

### **Category 1: School challenges in rural contexts through the lenses of teachers**

This section presents the data collected from each of the 16 participant teachers as they describe school challenges in rural contexts. The primary topic of this study, *school challenges in rural contexts through the lenses of teachers*, is not presented in any particular order. Still, emergent themes in this category present a strong correlation among them given that some challenges, as described by teachers, are the collateral result of other challenges, or the conjugation of various challenges, either internal or external to the school. For example, one teacher spoke described some of the various challenges present in school in rural communities.

There are a lot of challenges here; nutritional needs, clothing needs, lack of parental involvement, and also medical needs. There are children here that get sick and nobody takes them to a hospital. We have to take up the role and medicate our students even though we know we shouldn't, because, we know that at home they will not get medical attention. So, there are lots of needs here. There is a need for affection because parents do not usually demonstrate affection. There is no parental help either. For example, I can't ask students to tell their parents to help them read at home because parents don't know how to read themselves. We work alone here. We also have a huge Haitian population. You ask for a parent to come to school and they do not understand what you are saying. Some children already speak a little Spanish but there are others who don't. I think multigrade schools are the ones with the highest Haitian population. (Pedro)

Accordingly, eight themes captured the challenges expressed by teachers within the *school challenges in rural contexts through the lenses of teachers'* category:

- 1.1 Students that live and attend schools in rural communities demonstrate various characteristics that affect their academic performance.
- 1.2 Public transportation is not available in most schools in rural areas and not available in schools in remote locations.
- 1.3 School infrastructure is undefined in schools located in rural communities.
- 1.4 Schools located in rural areas lack specialized teachers.
- 1.5 Students' families in rural communities present characteristics that result in negative collateral impact to students' academic performance and achievement.
- 1.6 Schools located in rural communities lack learning and instructional resources to fulfill national curriculum objectives.
- 1.7 Multigrade classrooms are a characteristic of schools located in rural areas that challenge teachers' instructional practices.
- 1.8 Teachers in schools located in rural communities experience various challenges to meet national curriculum objectives.

**Theme 1.1. Students who live and attend schools in rural communities demonstrate various characteristics that affect their academic performance.**

Interviewed teachers discussed several characteristics present in students who live in rural contexts that interfere with teachers' instructional practice, and overall school performance; thus, negatively impacting students' academic achievement. Teachers raised three mayor challenges that include: (a) literacy underachievement, (b) being overage, and (c) limited motivation. These three challenges revolve together causing a vicious circle. While being overage is not solely caused by underachievement, being overage negatively impacts

students' academic progress, and school motivation. That is, one challenge generates another challenge, and vice versa.

***Subtheme 1.1.1: Many students in rural communities present underachievement challenges.*** While discussing the challenges regarding student performance, underachievement in literacy was raised as a big concern in 10 interviews. For example, Karla stated that “when you arrive at the school you find great challenges. ...the majority of my students didn’t know how to read and they were already in third grade,” while John added that “children achievement is critically low, especially in literacy. When I arrived here, I found children in sixth and seventh grade who didn’t know how to read yet.” Also, José indicated that “a child who is raised in a village is not the same as a child who is raised in the city, they do not have as many resources as those who have the world in their hands” signifying the social disadvantages students in rural contexts face.

When deepening into the underachievement in literacy topic, teachers indicated that this situation is due to motivational and overage factors. For example, Vale made an important observation when expressing that “often times we have overage students in classrooms, not because they fail the grade and stay behind, but because they enter school late. Sometimes we think that overage is due to student’s underachievement, but it is not.” This situation indicates that students who enter school late end up in a classroom with other students who have different interests, and do not share the same learning developmental stage; therefore, causing greater disadvantages in academic achievement.

***Subtheme 1.1.2: Many students in rural communities begin school at a late age generating overage challenges.*** Seven teachers indicated that students being overage is a challenge that is present in almost every school in rural contexts, and caused by cultural and behavioral patterns of rural communities. For example, Ana indicated that “parents do not

send their children on time to school and this is the reason why we have overage challenges, because they don't send them on time." María further expanded into this topic and added other factors that influence overage.

The biggest challenge we have here is that we have a lot of overage children, because, you know! Children who come from rural zones have to travel long distances to arrive here and their parent's jobs force them to quit school often... So, you know! This is the situation here; this is the reason we have so many overaged students. (María)

For example, regarding parents' economic and employment situation, Bob discussed parents' lack of motivation in their children's academic progress.

When parents move from one village to another they say they will enroll their children in another school, but they don't. So, that child will quit school until the next school year. Then, the next school year that child will be considered overage. Overage is not only a child who shows learning difficulties and stay behind, there are a lot of factors that influence that situation. I believe that there are just a couple of schools located in rural communities whose classrooms do not have overaged students. (Bob)

This challenge is raised as a big concern by teachers because it interferes with their instructional practices, students' academic achievement, and motivation.

***Subtheme 1.1.3: Many students in rural communities are not motivated to attend school.*** Twelve teachers discussed motivation as a challenge, raising school absenteeism as a big concern. For example, Emi indicated that "in my case, motivation is my biggest challenge. Students are not motivated; they don't care if they fail the grade. For them is the same to pass the grade or to fail it." Jesús added that students do not only miss one or two

days of school, they can become absent for as long as a month, or just stop attending altogether.

We have children here that miss an entire month of school, or students who only come once or twice a month, then, they fall behind. Every time you stop a parent to ask why their children are missing school, their answer is that children don't want to come to school or other silly answers. It doesn't matter how much you motivate them. For example, this school year I have a child that only came the first two days of school and I see his mother every day walking by in the village and they just don't care. (Jesús)

Overage, motivation, and underachievement seem to be challenges that merge, feeding each other in a vicious cycle that worsen school academic achievement in general.

**Theme 1.2: Public transportation in rural communities is not available in most schools in rural areas and not available in schools in remote locations.** Teachers who have to travel long distances to arrive to school, or teachers who live near the school but have students who have to walk long distances, indicated that public transportation in rural communities is not due to the lack of cars, buses or motorcycles. Instead, it is because the public vehicles available are not designed to travel on unpaved roads or to cross rivers. In this matter, 12 teachers indicating public transportation being an issue in rural communities. For example, Karla discussed that public transportation is unable to reach the school because there is a river that students must cross by foot every day.

Oh, rainy days... you saw the river, right? We are fighting with the government to get a bridge constructed here. You have to cross the river by foot to come here.

Also, the road is unpaved and in really bad condition, public transportation won't come here. (Karla)

Bob discussed that students must walk long distances because schools are located far from their communities, stating that “challenges are always present and will always be present. Schools never only teach students from nearby communities, students from other communities also come here.”

Pedro added to this statement indicating that, walking long distances demotivates students because when they arrive to school, they are already tired.

The biggest challenge in schools located in rural communities is the distance students have to walk to come to school. Students have to walk three kilometers just to come to school, everyday! So, when they finally arrive to school they are already exhausted and unmotivated to study. This situation leads them to desertion. (Pedro)

**Theme 1.3: School infrastructure is deficient in schools located in rural communities.** School infrastructure emerged as a concern by 11 teachers who teach in rural contexts. The lack of suitable school buildings causes other challenges such as multigrade classrooms given the lack of available classrooms. Also, forcing students to travel long distances to attend another school far away from their community is another challenge. For example, Luis discussed infrastructure limitations.

We have 78 children here. Space is very limited and there is no more space to solve this situation. In this side of the school we have the river and in this side we have the road. Plus, we can't construct on top of the school building because the infrastructure does not support a second level. We can't receive more children even if we wanted to. We have multigrade classrooms because we do not have many classrooms available. (Luis)

Infrastructure deficiencies causes other challenges such as demotivation to attend school, and multigrade classrooms even when there are sufficient teachers to have single grade classrooms.

**Theme 1.4: Schools located in rural areas lack specialized teachers.** The lack of teachers in rural contexts often forces schools to assign subjects to teachers who are not trained in such subjects. This was raised as a challenge by 14 of the 16 interview teachers.

When I arrived to this schools located in rural communities it was hard. I had to start studying all over again. After I finished every school day, I would go straight to my house to study math because that subject was not within my range of expertise and I was assigned to teach math. (Frank)

While this is often the case, other teachers willingly assume subjects because otherwise their students will miss that part of the curriculum. Consequently, ending up not meeting the standards described in the national curriculum.

Within school distance and other challenges, we don't have language teachers and students are missing that. I can understand we don't have teachers for afternoon hours, that is why we are adopting those hours. But, language teachers and physical education is a great deal because it is part of the curriculum. (Ava)

The lack of specialized teachers in schools, force teachers from other academic areas to assume subjects they are not trained to teach. This situation leads us to think if one of the contributing factors for low performance of students on national tests is due to subjects not being taught by teachers trained in the respective subjects.

**Theme 1.5: Students' families in rural communities present characteristics that result in negative collateral impact to students' academic performance and achievement.** Families in rural contexts, as described by teachers, encompass several



characteristics that interfere with their instructional practices, and the school's overall performance; thus, with students learning outcomes. Challenges, as discussed by teachers are: (a) language barriers, (b) illiterate parents, (c) limited involvement in student's academic affairs, and (d) absent parents. While discussing these topics, connections with student underachievement arose, indicating a bigger picture when analyzing factors such as overage, student motivation, and literacy underachievement.

***Subtheme 1.5.1: Many Haitian families migrate to the Dominican Republic causing language barriers for teachers to communicate with students.*** La Hispaniola is an island shared by two neighboring countries (Dominican Republic and Haiti) with different cultures and languages. Haiti, a country whose official language is French, force families of low socioeconomic status to migrate to the DR to access free health care, free education, and other benefits from Dominican government social programs. These families enroll their children in public schools, despite not being able to speak Spanish. Since public schools in the DR do not offer any special program for children who do not speak Spanish, teachers are forced to address the challenge of language barriers without any special training or speaking the French language themselves. Five teachers brought this topic when discussing about family challenges.

I've had students who do not know a single word in Spanish so I have to go to other classrooms and get other Haitian students who speak a little Spanish so they translate for us. Also I ask them to teach me basic words so I can use them later in my classroom. But, it is really hard to understand them. (María)

***Subtheme 1.5.2: Not all parents in rural communities are literate.*** Another challenge raised by seven teachers that interfere with school performance, and is directly

connected with student's academic achievement, is the family's academic level in rural contexts.

We call parents to meet with them and discuss students' academic matters. Even though there is illiteracy among them, we don't care, we still ask them to motivate their children because it is not the same when a parent stands up and asks to see if the homework is done. ...Even parents who don't know how to read and write we ask them to act as if they knew in front of their children. ...When we send homework home, we limit ourselves, we try to make it easy for parents. (Luis)

Other teachers, indicated that, among all challenges, parents' illiteracy is their biggest concern because they can't help us teachers at home to follow up with school assignments.

***Subtheme 1.5.3: Due to rural communities' characteristics, many parents do not present much interest in students' academic achievement.*** While teachers discussed the challenges they face with families in rural contexts, parental involvement was mentioned more than once in 15 interviews. Some teachers even indicated the lack of parental involvement as being the biggest challenge in schools located in rural contexts. For example, Magda stated that "we have a lot of challenges here but the biggest one is that parents do not want to get involved in school affairs." Meanwhile, another teacher elaborated more and indicated that:

We have big and multiple challenges here: lack of parent's affection, economic situation, and sometimes the lack of specialized teachers. There are so many difficult situations here. But, I would say parental involvement is the biggest. Parents do not follow up with their children's progress. I constantly tell school

coordinators to demand parents to check their children's homework and to get more involved. (José)

Teachers also indicated that, over time, the lack of parental involvement in school affairs leads children to leave school—a response that the Dominican educators call “desertion.” “Since students do not have support at home, over time, they see less and less the necessity to educate themselves. So, little by little desertion happens.” (Karla)

Lastly, teachers indicated that their job, given the lack of parental involvement, extends to the point where they have to purchase school supplies, a responsibility that belongs to parents. For example, Maye stated that “I work really hard here for eight straight hours doing my best. But when they arrive home everything goes to waste. The following day, a lot of students come to school without pencils, without homework, and without notebooks.”

Similarly, Vale indicated that their role as teachers has evolved to the point where they have to assume parental duties sometimes.

It is not easy! We have to work really hard, we have to be everything for them. We have to buy pencils, notebooks... This is not an easy task! People think we have it easy here but it is not. Here we have to be a lot of things, tailors, dentists, hair dressers, everything! Everything! We even have to medicate children.

***Subtheme 1.5.4: Due to socioeconomic challenges, many parents in rural communities migrate to urban zones disattending their children.*** Six teachers indicated that parents' lack of involvement in school affairs is not the only challenge they face regarding family presence in school. They also indicated that family structure sometimes is complex given the necessity to migrate to the city to find better jobs to support their children.

Academic achievement is divided. There is a small percentage of students that do very well academically, but the rest are children who live with their grandparents.

There are children who live alone because their parents are divorced and their mothers work in the city to buy all the things they need. So, you know! A child on their own. We do our best to take care of that child, and we try and find a neighbor who supervises the children every now and then, or we call the parents in advance so they can ask for one-day permissions at their jobs to come to the school. (Jesús)

This situation, as indicated by teachers, is a factor that contributes to children stopping from attending school. For example, one teacher stated that “very often, mothers have to migrate to work and children simply stop attending school. When a student misses school for two, three days, or a week, when the student comes back to school, they are behind and you have to make up for those missed days” (Vale).

**Theme 1.6: Schools located in rural communities lack learning and instructional resources to fulfill national curriculum objectives.** Fourteen teachers stated that their biggest concern regarding their instructional practice is the lack of learning resources for students to manipulate, and the lack of instructional resources at their disposal for planning lessons to achieve all the standards as mandated by the national curriculum. In their own words, “you have to take from your own resources to make all this work” (Pedro). Also, that “one of the biggest challenges here in schools located in rural communities is the lack of pedagogical resources. Classrooms here are not equipped as they should be” (Magda).

Among all of the resources that lack in schools, teachers raised a big concern regarding technological resources. Not only because they lack technologically equipped classrooms, but in rural zones, electricity and reliable internet connection are not a stable

resource. For example, John stated that “the curriculum talks about technology and we don’t even have computers here, most of the time we don’t even have electricity.” While Paco added to this statement indicating that “technological competence is the hardest to achieve here because we do not have the resources for that...”

Another big challenge teachers must address given the lack of resources is how to achieve all of the areas in the national curriculum that require certain types of resources, such as science.

Access to resources is one of the biggest challenges here and that does not help with academic achievement. For example, I want to do an experiment with my students for science class, and I just can’t do it because I do not have the resources I need.  
(Emi)

Another challenge within the lack of resources that teachers addressed was the absence of available learning materials in rural contexts. For example, to compensate for the lack of resources, teachers expressed their willingness to buy whatever their children needed with their own resources. However, the situation worsens when there are no available suppliers to buy resources from in the rural community.

The context here is less favorable and you have to work in accordance with the context. So, it is not the same when I do not have a resource here, I have to go to the city. For example, here you don’t have the option of just going to a nearby store and buy the materials you need for your class, here it is more difficult to access resources because there are none. (Luis)

Teachers, given the lack of available learning and instructional resources, discussed the negative effect this situation has in students’ academic achievement and the extent to which it is possible to accomplish the standards as proposed by the national curriculum.

**Theme 1.7: Multigrade classrooms are a characteristic of schools located in rural areas that challenge teachers' instructional practices.** During interviews, 13 teachers discussed about multigrade classrooms as a challenge in schools located in rural zones. Some teachers stated that they had to learn how to provide instructions for several grades together, while others expressed they believe multigrade schools should not exist. Moreover, some teachers indicated that multigrade classrooms themselves are not the challenge. Instead, they indicated that the challenge comes from the myriad of student characteristics in the multigrade classrooms they teach. For example, a teacher who has worked with up to five grades all mixed together in one single classroom expressed:

This is a matter of authorities; they should find a way to eliminate multigrade schools. We are talking about quality of education here, and to be honest multigrade classrooms can't be associated with quality of education. It is our duty to make it work and we put all of our effort to make it work, but! it is not possible to achieve quality in education in multigrade schools. (Jesús)

As the interviews developed, and questions around multigrade as a challenge arose, teachers went deeper and expressed some challenges within the multigrade classrooms. For example, teachers indicated that teaching multigrade curricula is time consuming because it is double work for them.

...for example, if I only had fourth grade or fifth grade, which are my current grades, what I plan for fourth grade I also have to plan it for fifth grade, it is not the same as having just one grade, but, in the meantime I have to plan to cover all the necessities of both grades. Sometimes I tell my students to take care of all of the learning resources I manually create for them because when they are asleep in their

beds I am awake at 11:00 p.m. at night working for them and that is my time to rest.

(Emi)

Another concern that arose as a challenge within the multigrade classroom experience is that teachers, sometimes, are assigned grades that are not compatible, therefore, making instructional practices more difficult.

Well, my biggest difficulty here is that I have first grade and kindergarten altogether and I can't handle it. As you know, kindergarten and first grade are somehow similar in some things, but, curricular contents are very different, plus, I have to eliminate many moments of the kindergarten routine because I just can't forget about first graders for so long, but I try to manage myself, I try to execute a little of each grade's routine. Plus, you have to adapt preschoolers to school because this is their first year of extended school, many of them by noon are already crying.

Everything is a process and demands special care. (Maye)

Also, other comments during interviews indicated that overpopulation within multigrade classrooms makes it harder for teachers to differentiate two or more grades within the same classroom.

In our case, we have in one classroom, for example, 23 students and those 23 students are from two different grades. Multigrade classrooms are designed to function with six or seven children, no more than that! That is a multigrade school, no more than 15 children. ...but here! Here we have reached 32 children in one classroom from several grades in just one section. There was a time I had 36 students from seventh and eighth grade altogether on my own. That was an amount that could have been divided into three or four sections. (Frank)

**Theme 1.8: Teachers in schools located in rural communities experience various challenges to meet national curriculum objectives.** Meeting national curriculum standards, as stated by 14 teachers, is also a big challenge for them. When connecting the themes that emerged in this category, challenges meeting the curriculum connected with the lack of resources in schools.

There are specific contents and competencies in the curriculum that are not linked to multigrade schools' realities. They are designed to be developed in a city school.

But, we have to try. But, in reality I cannot achieve what the curriculum says. ...for example, we don't have technological resources and the curriculum talks about working with technology. (Ana)

To add to this theme, Ava stated that "I understand that this curriculum is very detached from the reality of the schools located in rural communities. There are many things we cannot even work on, they are only written standards, but there is no way to achieve them."

Teachers stated their concern when discussing how they meet the curriculum standards, despite the challenges they face due to the lack of resources, inappropriate infrastructure, and shortage of teachers; all these, contributing to imbalances when compared to other schools outside the rural context. Figure 2 offers a summary of the themes and sub-themes described by teachers in category 1.



Table 3

*Challenges Identified by Teachers Present in Schools Located in Rural Zones*

Teacher Pseudonym	1.1 Students' academic performance	1.2 Transportation	1.3 Infrastructure	1.4 Lack of Specialized Teachers	1.5 Lack of Parental Involvement	1.6 Lack of Resources	1.7 Multigrade Classrooms	1.8 Unmet Curriculum Objectives
Ana	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bob	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
María	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pedro	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Maye	X			X	X		X	X
Luis	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Emi	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Frank	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Ava	X			X	X	X		X
José	X			X		X		X
Magda				X	X	X		X
Jesús	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
John	X	X			X	X	X	X
Karla	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Paco		X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Category 2: Teachers' professional practice in rural contexts**

This section presents the data collected from each of the 16 participant teachers as they describe their professional practice in rural contexts. The primary topic of this category, *teachers' professional practice in rural contexts*, is not presented in any particular order. Still, emergent themes in this category presented a strong connection among them.

Five themes summarized the impactful statements expressed by teachers:

- 2.1 Internal and external factors of the school motivate teachers to teach in schools located in rural communities.
- 2.2 Teachers' acclimation to the rural community can be positive or negative depending on the culture and characteristics of the rural zone.

- 2.3 Teacher preparation programs in the Dominican Republic do not prepare teachers for rural communities despite being a predominantly rural country.
- 2.4 Teachers receive professional development workshops from outside and inside the public education system to address school challenges in rural zones.
- 2.5 Many teachers have developed self strategies to address school challenges in rural zones.

**Theme 2.1: Internal and external factors of the school motivate teachers to teach in schools located in rural communities.** All of the sixteen teachers discussed about their motivation to teach in schools in rural contexts indicating that their main source of motivation, almost unanimously, is the great collaborating teams they have created within schools (see Table 4 for details).

Integration and collaboration, those two strategies have helped us as a team to stay together and move forward. We help each other, when one of us is having trouble, we provide help. (María)

As they further discussed their motivation to work in rural contexts, two different sources of motivation emerged; intrinsic and external. Intrinsic motivation, as discussed by teachers, included their vocation and love for children, while some other teachers expressed their need to see their students succeed.

What motivates me is my desire for children to learn, and give my all to see them learn. It is on us that children learn, to find the way to make them learn, that is our main goal! Also, for us to be better human beings, and give the best of us! When I am here what I want to do is give the best of me, no matter if they supervise me or not. (Magda)

On the other hand, most teachers discussed that their main source of motivation is the collaboration climate present in their schools. As discussed in previous themes, teachers in rural contexts must find their way to overcome the challenges present in the schools they serve. Therefore, teachers' natural defense is to unite in order to help each other overcome such challenges.

Table 4

*Teachers in Rural Communities*

Teacher Pseudonym	Motivation to Work in Schools Located in Rural Communities	Acclimation	Readiness to Teach in Schools Located in Rural Communities
Ana	Intrinsic	Positive	Yes
Bob	External	Positive	No
María	External	Positive	No
Pedro	Intrinsic	Positive	No
Maye	External	Positive	No
Luis	Intrinsic	Positive	Yes
Emi	Intrinsic	Neutral	Yes
Frank	External	Positive	No
Ava	External	Positive	No
José	Intrinsic	Negative	No
Magda	Intrinsic	Negative	No
Jesús	External	Positive	Yes
Vale	External	Neutral	No
John	Intrinsic	Positive	No
Karla	External	Positive	No
Paco	External	Neutral	No

Collaboration teams, as expressed by teachers, is not only between teachers, it extends to the school principal and coordinators. For example, Bob indicated that “it is of great help to collaborate and socialize. When you collaborate with one another you empower yourself, and what you see as a difficulty your colleague does not and vice versa, when you collaborate everything is easier.”

**Theme 2.2: Teacher’s acclimation to the rural community can be positive or negative depending on the culture and characteristics of the rural zone.** Among all of the 16 teachers, three different perspectives were revealed about their acclimation to rural contexts (see Table 4 for details). One perspective describes teachers’ insertion to the rural context as a positive one.

I live here but I am not from here. The culture here is beautiful, people are very united and collaborative, they work very well in teams. When we do an activity in the school what we want is the well-being of the community, so, we include the community and we also get involved in community problems. You know that people like to be taken into account and treated well and that is what we do. (Ana)

The second perspective drawn from the interviews indicated a neutral insertion to the rural community.

For me it has been neutral, as in all places, I have never had problems here, people were very happy when I arrived and they expressed it to me. For example, in the church they do activities and always give us a part of the Mass for us to lead, they have also made us special acknowledgements during community activities. (José)

A third perspective describes teachers’ acclimation to rural communities as negative. For example, one teacher indicated that she was afraid of disrupting the school community although she did not agree.

This community is very difficult. It is the reflection of homes where parents are not respected because parents are absent. Many times children are orphans of living parents, there is no degree of respect from children to teachers nor parents' concern for their own children because sometimes they have to live with a stepfather, with a brother, with a brother-in-law, as a result of that reality one has to be submissive and cope with it (José).

Teachers provided different perspectives about their acclimation to the rural context, being the majority of experiences described as, good ones.

**Theme 2.3: Teacher preparation programs in the Dominican Republic do not prepare teachers for rural communities despite being a predominantly rural country.**

Teachers discussed two different perspectives regarding their readiness to serve schools in rural communities. Four discussed feeling prepared, while 12 discussed not feeling prepared. Some teachers indicated feeling well prepared to assume the challenges presented in schools when allowed to participate in internships while pursuing their degrees. On the contrary, other teachers described not feeling prepared to manage the challenges they encountered in schools located in rural contexts. Within both perspectives, teachers unanimously indicated not being knowledgeable about strategies to provide quality instructional practices to multigrade classrooms because they were not trained for such characteristics during their teacher preparation program. Also, teachers indicated that teacher preparation programs have a significant impact on how they respond to the challenges they encounter when assigned to a school located in a rural context. These findings suggest the importance of pre-service experiences in schools, most importantly, the need to prepare teachers to attend schools that demonstrate characteristics of those located in rural contexts such as multigrade classrooms.

***Subtheme 2.3.1: Some teachers in rural zones indicate feeling prepared to face schools located in rural communities challenges, while others indicate not feeling fully prepared.*** Some teachers currently teaching in schools located in rural zones indicated feeling ready to teach in their current school (see Table 4). However, the majority of teachers indicated the contrary. For example, Bob indicated that she did not receive any training to attend a multigrade classroom.

In college, you do not get trained to work in a multigrade school in a rural zone; then, all of a sudden, you find yourself not knowing what to do. ...but, you adapt, you cope with the situation, and you overcome it. (Bob)

Another teacher further added that she had never heard of a multigrade classroom while preparing to become a teacher.

In none of the subjects I took, nor did my teachers ever tell me that I was going to have two grades altogether in one classroom. In fact, I did not even know that multigrade existed. (Vale)

Other teachers indicated that it is necessary to include in teacher preparation programs subjects to address the characteristics present in schools located in rural zones.

Universities should include subjects that are directly linked to multigrade schools, we, teachers, pursue a degree in education, but in the end, we do not know where they will assign us, and we must be prepared for any school, whether rural or not, multigrade or not. (Maye)

***Subtheme 2.3.2: Some teachers feel professionally ready to face school challenges when given the opportunity to participate in pre-service internships in schools.*** Thirteen teachers in rural communities, when describing their academic preparation, indicated that a

pre-service internship is necessary. For example, Jesús indicated feeling prepared to teach because of the opportunity given to participate in an internship before being assigned to work in schools.

I felt very prepared. But, because I had the opportunity to have an internship before graduating. ...they give you the theory and practice as well, and then, when you arrive at school, you already know a little.

Another teacher indicated perceiving differences between colleagues who were provided the opportunity to participate in internships.

The university where I studied is really good, but other universities are not as good. My colleagues graduated without having any professional practice and the difference is noticeable. ...many times you go to university, and when you arrive at a school, and you face your new reality, you realize that everything is very different from what you learned. (Magda)

Ava elaborated more into the topic of internships and indicated that having the opportunity to practice in real classrooms before graduating could have provided her the experience to learn how to work in a multigrade classroom.

I agree that theory should be taught in college, but I also agree that they should go a little further and focus more on practice. Not just a short professional practice. I mean, send pre-service teachers to classrooms to experience our current reality, and have them live it on their own. For example, they teach you how to plan a lesson, but, how can I plan multigrade? How can I work multigrade? (Ava).

**Theme 2.4: Teachers receive some professional development workshops from outside and inside the public education system to address school challenges in rural zones.** Teachers indicated that their professional development programs come from two

different sources; internally from within the public education system through the Ministry of Education, and externally from outside the public education system through non-governmental organizations (NGO).

Internal professional development programs consist of regular meetings where schools with similar characteristics meet to discuss their challenges and possible solutions. Teachers also indicated to prefer external professional development programs because, not only do these teach new strategies to work with students in schools located in rural communities, but they also include the community and provide parents with workshops. Also, many NGOs equip schools with learning and instructional resources to fulfill their needs. For example, María indicated that schools in the zone have monthly meetings to address the challenges they face as multigrade schools.

We have workshops for multigrade schools every month. These workshops are given by us, to us, and the school district arranges them, they are called EMI (Integrated Multigrade Schools), and there we learn strategies to work for multigrade schools. These workshops are only for multigrade schools; that is, they are designed for those who currently work in multigrade classrooms. (María)

On the other hand, there are programs from outside the system that help teachers overcome multigrade classroom challenges by providing resources, and also instructional strategies to work with students.

The biggest problem we have here is the lack of resources, but, several NGO have arrived and solved that problem. For example, they brought us a program called “Felix and Susana,” and it has helped us a lot by giving us materials and activities to work with children in multigrade classrooms. (Pedro)



Another teacher indicated that they do not only receive workshops, but interventions to address school challenges as well.

For example, we receive workshops and interventions from different institutions that have helped us a lot. For example, EDUCA (Business Action for Education), brought us pedagogical resources that help us a lot. We also had an OEI (Iberoamerican States Organization for Science, Education, and Culture) intervention. I am one of the teachers who say that OEI has helped me 99% to improve my instructional practice... OEI stayed three years here, and also in several other schools in this province, and they worked with the entire educational community. (Ana)

From all of the workshops teachers receive, the monthly meetings they attend, and the interventions they receive from NGOs, seven teachers highlighted preferring external programs because they are provided with resources they need to work with their students. Also, they are provided with practical solutions that include the whole learning community to address the challenges schools in rural communities face every day.

**Theme 2.5: Many teachers have developed self strategies to address schools located in rural communitites.** Teachers currently working in schools located in rural zones have described several challenges. The majority of these challenges are a collateral effect of characteristics present in rural communities. Other challenges are generated stemming from the inequity of resource distribution at the governmental level. Despite all these challenges, teachers expressed their willingness to address them, even taking from their own resources and spare time to fulfill the needs of their students, to achieve to the highest possible extent, the objectives of the national curriculum. The following challenges, as expressed by the teachers, are being addressed: (a) underachievement, (b) multigrade

challenges, (c) lack of resources, (d) difficulties to meet the national curriculum objectives, and (e) family-school integration. Table 5 summarizes this information for each participant.

***Theme 2.5.1: Many teachers in rural communities have developed strategies to cope with students' underachievement challenges.*** 15 teachers indicated to have developed several strategies to cope with student underachievement. For example, one teacher indicated that they make students rotate, so every teacher can participate in the process of working with students who are illiterate and overaged in order to have them caught up with their respective grade levels.

We have collaboration spaces. Our overaged students, that are also illiterate, we make them rotate in every one of our classrooms until they learn how to read. We know that a single teacher cannot do the job alone. (John)

Other teachers have expressed they use motivational reinforcements to help students achieve the objectives of the grade.

Motivation! We always look for strategies to motivate students. We make reading marathons and give them prizes. We also tell them why learning how to read is so important for daily life activities, you know! We have to keep them motivated so they can learn. We have to find our way to keep them motivated because if they don't we will achieve nothing. (Frank)

Other teachers have indicated that they use their spare time or other moments during the school day to provide one-on-one sessions to students who are falling behind.

During my lunch hours, spare time, or when my students are resting, I take advantage of those moments to sit with students who are falling behind to work individually with them.

These strategies indicate that teachers have developed a wide range of strategies. (Vale) However, they never expressed that these strategies are successful enough to deal with underachievement challenges.

Table 5

*Areas in which Teachers Have Developed Strategies to Overcome Challenges Present in Schools Located in Rural Contexts*

Teacher Pseudonym	Underachievement	Multigrade	Curriculum	Resources	Parental Integration
Ana	X	X	X	X	X
Bob	X	X	X	X	X
María	X	X		X	X
Pedro		X	X	X	X
Maye		X		X	X
Luis	X	X	X	X	X
Emi	X	X	X	X	
Frank	X	X	X	X	
Ava			X	X	X
José			X		X
Magda	X			X	X
Jesús	X	X	X		X
Vale		X	X	X	
John	X	X		X	X
Karla		X			X
Paco	X	X	X	X	

***Theme 2.5.2: Many teachers in rural communities have developed strategies to address multigrade classrooms with two or more grades mixed together.*** One of the biggest challenges expressed by 13 teachers was multigrade classrooms. Nevertheless, it is not the multigrade structure itself that has forced teachers to look for strategies, instead the challenging characteristics of the multigrade configurations they currently serve. For example, some teachers have indicated selecting common topics for everyone in the classroom, but planning activities differentiated for each grade level.

In first and second grade, there are many common themes, I differentiate activities by age and grade. So, what I do is that I look for ways in which students feel they are in the same grade. I plan differentiated activities that work together for both grades. Also, I put them to work in teams. (Ava)

Maye, who currently teaches incompatible grades divided the classroom into two sections to teach one grade first, then the other grade.

I have first grade and kindergarten together, but separated within the classroom, that is, on one side of the classroom I have one group, and on the other side, the other group. However, if I am going to read a story, I read it for everyone, and during the activities, I differentiate the difficulty level. For example, preschoolers are assigned to draw while first graders are asked to write, both groups based on the story I read. (Maye)

Other teachers have chosen to address activities that are easier to deliver as a strategy to cope with multigrade classrooms. For example, Paco stated that “I look for activities that help me, that are not very difficult, also, activities that the contents are related for both grades, so it is not difficult for me.”

***Theme 2.5.3: Many teacher in rural communities use their own resources and spare time to fulfill national curriculum objectives.*** 10 teachers indicated having problems to meet the objectives of the national curriculum because of the many challenges they encounter in schools located in rural contexts. For these situations, some teachers expressed having to develop strategies to help, to some extent, achieve the goals of the national curriculum. For example, Emi indicated having to adapt the curriculum to the reality of the school when stating that “...adapting to the context, I have to adapt to the context, one thing is what the curriculum says, and another is what we have here... our reality!”

Jesús, for example, has opted for situational learning strategies. This strategy aims to develop activities that are extracted from current situations in the community, while inserting the curriculum objectives using what they have available in their context. He expressed “as I stated very clearly, this is doable only by adapting to the reality of my group of students; we use the “learning situation” strategy to adapt the curriculum.”

However, many teachers indicated having to disregard some of the curriculum objectives such as technological competences because they do not have technological resources, nor alternatives to achieve the technology curricular goals.

***Theme 2.5.4: Many teachers in rural communities use their own resources or available natural resources in the environment to compensate for the lack of learning resources.*** Teachers have developed several strategies that can be condensed into three main categories. First, seven teachers expressed having to purchase learning materials with their personal income and share them with other teachers in the schools. For example, Maye stated:

One of the biggest challenges here is the lack of learning materials. Sometimes we do not have as much as we need to work, but, even though we manage to help one another, we distribute the load, and each of us buys materials, and we share those materials whenever it is necessary.

Second, nine teachers expressed going outside and look for natural resources to use inside the classrooms. For example, many teachers indicated that they construct learning materials from natural resources they find outdoors. Third, six teachers indicated they bring their technological resources to use with their students. However, this last strategy does not always work, given the lack of reliable internet connection and limited time with power during school hours. Specifically, María stated “I have a TV here, and I have my laptop, I

bring my resources because sometimes we have no power and the internet connection is poor.”

***Theme 2.5.5: Many teachers in rural communities have developed strategies to integrate families in school affairs.*** Teachers have developed numerous strategies to integrate families into school affairs because they impact the students’ academic achievement positively. For example, seven teachers indicated that they design activities to invite parents to school.

The first thing I do is to give them affection because sometimes parents are not present, they have to migrate to go to work in Santo Domingo, in search of the sustenance for their family and that is understandable, we have to look at both sides of the story. Also, we do activities for the family to integrate them. We also give parents gifts to motivate them to come to school. (Emi)

Other six teachers indicated having visited students’ homes to narrow the distance some parents have with the school.

I like the dialogue strategy; I try to empathize with them and to know their reality. ...families are provided with follow up strategies, I try as much as I can to have a connection with parents. In some occasions, I visit them at their homes or send them invitations to come to school. The school must be open to the community, and the community must be within the school, this will enable school management to be effective. (Karla)

Also, three teachers indicated taking advantage of occasions when they encounter parents walking by in the community.

I approach parents when I see them in the community; I choose the appropriate occasion; it is not like I am harassing them all the time. But, when I have the

opportunity, I bring to the table the topics that I want to discuss with them about their children. The ideal space would be in school, but if they don't come here, I take advantage when I see them in the community. (Ana)

Vale went further and designed a whole activity to integrate parents and the school by teaching illiterate parents how to read and write.

On one occasion, we did a participatory classroom project where we conducted a census in the community to identify parents who did not know how to read and write. We designed a structure to teach them along with two older students from the community. (Vale)

### **Chapter 5 Summary**

This chapter has presented the rich interview content collected from 16 teachers currently serving schools located in rural communities. Data presented in this chapter supported the two categories, and associated themes and subthemes to provide the reader with a full description of the challenges schools in rural zones present, and how teachers indicate their academic preparation has helped them address such challenges. Also, a description of the strategies teachers developed to manage challenges present in their schools was addressed.

Chapter 6 will connect these themes and supporting literature to the research questions of this study and discuss implications and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION**

This chapter addresses the research questions of this basic interpretative research by using themes that emerged from the interviews, and supported by past research offered in Chapter 2.

The implications of this research study suggest that interventions focused on the rural community should be designed taking into consideration the collateral impact of families' behaviors, and rural culture to positively impact the academic progress of students living in rural communities. Recommendations for further research are explained.

This research study captured the experiences of teachers in rural contexts as they served schools and students in rural communities. The origin of most challenges present in schools located in rural contexts that have a negative impact on students' academic achievement, suggests that intervention programs for educational purposes in rural contexts should not solely focus within the school perimeters. Rather, interventions must also, include the whole community in order to enhance the academic achievement of rural communities.

Universities are required to play an active role in developing future professionals with a sense of place during their teacher preparation programs by incorporating place-consciousness into the curriculum. Place-conscious pedagogy, the theoretical framework on which this study is based, aims to move educational approaches and systems away from standardized teaching practices toward a more place-based education to promote consciousness of place by drawing connections between the local context and what is being taught (Fraser, 2016). The findings from



this study reinforces the importance of universities providing teacher preparation students with a place-based education to improve students' ability to connect their education to the real world.

The research questions posed in this study aimed to explore rural teachers' experiences teaching in Dominican public schools located in rural contexts, and their perceived level of professional readiness to serve in those schools, through the analyzed and interpreted experiences they expressed during interviews. This study involved 16 teachers currently teaching in rural contexts. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. The participant interviews provided a detailed description of participants' experiences teaching in rural contexts. Data collected through these interviews identified two categories of themes: (a) school challenges in rural contexts through the lenses of teachers, and (b) teachers' professional practice in rural contexts (see Figure 2 in Chapter 5).

### **Key Findings and Connections with Previous Research**

This section explores each research question in the context of the collected data and supported through previously published literature. Research questions aimed to profile the challenges for teachers who teach within rural contexts through the exploration of their rural teaching experiences, and their perceived level of professional and academic preparation for serving in schools located in rural communities.

#### **Research question 1 findings**

*How does a criterion sample of Dominican public school teachers' experience school challenges when serving in rural communities, and how their academic and professional preparation help them meet those challenges to meet the requirements of the national curriculum?* Interviewed teachers described several challenges present every day in schools —

most of these challenges are collateral results of the characteristics and culture of the rural zone. Regarding their pre-service training, teachers indicated that they felt better prepared when they received internships; however, almost in unison, teachers indicated that they had no previous training to work in multigrade classrooms, thus, having to develop strategies along the way.

Summary findings include:

- Finding 1. Schools located in rural zones in the DR present major challenges that affect students' academic achievement (Theme 1.1).
- Finding 2. Challenges present in schools located in rural contexts are mostly a collateral impact of the rural culture, and its characteristics given their socio-economic status, community development, and access to resources (Themes 1.1 through 1.8).
- Finding 3. Some challenges present in schools located in rural contexts are caused because of governmental inequity in resource allocation (Themes 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, and 1.8).
- Finding 4. Multigrade classrooms are not perceived by teachers as a challenge, instead, overpopulated multigrade classrooms, incompatible grades within the same classroom, and more than two grades mixed together are the challenges teachers have expressed when working in multigrade schools (Theme 1.7).
- Finding 5. Families in rural communities demonstrate lack of motivation to integrate in school affairs, and take part in their children's academic achievement (Theme 1.5).
- Finding 6. Teacher preparation programs in the DR are not standardized and do not offer pre-service internships to all teachers (Sub-theme 2.3.2).

Finding 7. Teacher preparation programs do not consider the characteristics of schools located in rural communities to prepare teachers for all types of realities (Theme 2.3).

In 2016, the Dominican Institute for Evaluation and Research of Educational Quality (IDEICE), indicated that educational inequalities prevail due to the geographical location of schools in the DR. Accordingly, challenges presented by teachers who teach in schools located in rural contexts are the result of, such collateral effect, i.e., a product of the characteristics of the rural area. Similarly, Azano and Stuart (2015) indicated that school learning outcomes decrease when the context has characteristics that affects school dynamics.

The socioeconomic status of families, their beliefs, and attitudes towards formal education also have an impact on the academic achievement of children in rural communities. Accordingly, UNICEF (2017) stated that cultural and even climate challenges interfere with students from rural communities in their educational achievement.

Challenges that arose in schools located in rural zones seem to generate a vicious circle because one contributes to the other most of the time. For example, overaged children in classrooms are not solely the result of children who fail the grade; also, it is generated by the lack of motivation present in rural families to send their children to school, causing students to enter school late, miss many school days, and therefore, fail the grade, or opt for desertion. So, it is not a surprise that IDEICE, in a recent research conducted in 2016 revealed that parents in rural zones during their schooling years often deserted or did not attend school at all which increases the likelihood of their children to drop out. Additionally, children who enter late to school, and end up in grades with other children with different developmental stages and interest, also causes students to feel unmotivated, or desert. Likewise, IDEICE, in another study

conducted in 2016 on school dropout using the socioeconomic characteristics of households near schools as reference, indicated that the urban area has the highest percentage of students taking the National Test within the established time, which amounts to 54%. In contrast, the isolated rural area decreases considerably to 38%. It should be noted that in urban areas of the country, students are more likely to complete school on time, and that the zone where students live is a relevant factor for their academic performance and achievement.

On the other hand, when examining the data to understand the root of the demotivation of rural families, one encounters many challenges that families must endure. For example, illiteracy among parents who are not able to help their children during homework sessions. Also, the lack of transportation to access schools which makes it difficult for students to keep on with their academic endeavors. Similarly, IDEICE's (2016) report also revealed a strong correlation between students' dropout rates and their schools' distance from an urban area, indicating that the further the distance of their school to an urban area, the higher the dropout rate. Again, the vicious cycle within the challenges present in schools located in rural zones is evident.

Similarly, teachers in this study indicated that among their most significant challenges are the lack of educational resources, specialized teachers, and adequate school infrastructure. These challenges that affect the schools are also due to external factors that are beyond their control. As stated by the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) in 2013, schools that serve the rural areas of the country with the highest poverty, generally have more limited teaching and learning resources. That study also demonstrated a great disparity in investment in terms of infrastructure and technology when urban and rural schools are compared (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011).

One of most the predominant characteristics of rural areas are multigrade schools. In this matter, teachers did not express that multigrade classroom are the challenge in of themselves; rather, the type of multigrade classrooms that they must teach pose the unique challenges these teachers encounter. For example, teachers spoke about overcrowded multigrade classrooms, which means a greater challenge for them. In this scenario, teachers are forced to not only focus on two or more grades altogether, but also, a significant number of students in the multigrade classroom. Large numbers of students in classrooms serving two or more grade levels dramatically limits the possibility for teachers to attend students who are falling behind with personalized instruction.

Teachers also indicated the case of multigrade classrooms that congregate two incompatible grades, such as a preschool-grade and an elementary grade. Both grades have different natures and different routines, so teachers are forced to eliminate parts of the routines for one or more of those grades. Aligning with these findings, IDEICE (2016) indicated that these types of schools generate extra disadvantages for students who, due to their socioeconomic characteristics, already enter schools with greater disadvantages than students from more economically advantaged families.

Finally, findings indicate that teachers do not feel prepared to work in multigrade classrooms when they first arrive to a school located in a rural context. Teachers arrive at schools without basic knowledge on how to plan a lesson nor how to provide quality instruction for multigrade classrooms thus, having to develop their own strategies without a specialist's guidance to assure effective learning outcomes.

## Research question 2 findings

*How do the teachers describe the culture of the community they serve and how do they describe their acclimation to that culture?* Teachers mostly indicated that the rural community has been an excellent experience, and that they feel welcomed and included by locals. Only a few teachers indicated feeling neutral about the rural community, and only two reported adverse reactions to the community. Summary findings include:

- Finding 1. Teachers describe the rural culture as similar to their own, therefore not feeling as if they had to embrace and learn a new culture (Theme 2.2).
- Finding 2. Acclimation to rural culture is easy for teachers given the welcoming embrace teachers receive (Theme 2.2).

Most teachers, indicated that they felt welcomed upon their arrival at the school in rural zones, and indicated that the community made them feel like part of them immediately. Likewise, despite coming from other communities, rural and non-rural, teachers did not feel a cultural distance. The only difficulties presented by teachers regarding the rural area are focused exclusively on factors not associated with the rural culture. That is, the developmental socio-economic stage of rural communities given the lack of stores to access resources to teach, and the lack of transportation to arrive safely to schools.

## Research question 3 findings

*How do the teachers describe their level of preparation for teaching in public schools located in rural contexts?* Teachers who had the opportunity to do internships during their academic preparation indicated that they were better prepared than those who did not have the same opportunity. Teachers who did not have internship experience indicated that they entered the school with only theoretical knowledge. Teachers, in general, indicated not feeling fully

prepared to address the characteristics of multigrade classrooms, despite having attended internships or not. Summary findings include:

- Finding 1. Teachers feel to some extent prepared to work in schools, however, not prepared to attend multigrade schools (Theme 1.7 and 2.3).
- Finding 2. Teachers who completed pre-service internships expressed feeling more prepared to work in schools than those who did not participated in pre-service internships Sub-theme 2.3.2).
- Finding 3. Teachers do not receive academic preparation during their teacher preparation programs on instructional strategies to teach multigrade classrooms (Theme 2.3).

Regarding the academic-professional training that teachers who currently teach in schools located in rural areas received, teachers indicated two essential perspectives. First, teachers perceived that receiving training that included a pre-service internship before graduation was very helpful for them. Similarly, they expressed that there is a noticeable difference when colleagues do not receive pre-service practice before graduating. In congruence with this finding, the theoretical framework of this research study states that places are important to people's daily lives, consequently, resulting in important and inevitable learning environments (Fraser, 2016). Therefore, as other study findings indicate, pre-service teachers' rural experiences produce some significant attitudinal changes for teaching in rural contexts, vanishing misconceptions about living and teaching in rural communities (Hudson & Hudson, 2008).

Second, even teachers who received pre-service internship opportunities during their academic training indicated that they did not feel in full professional capacity to work in multigrade classrooms. They also expressed that during their teacher preparation programs, they never received training, neither theoretical or practical about the characteristics of the schools in

rural areas, nor the academic and practical approaches for multigrade classrooms. These findings align with Heeralal's (2014) findings, indicating that the content in the curriculum of Dominican teachers' undergraduate degree programs rarely includes aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools. Other research findings indicate that it is essential for universities to play an active role developing in future professionals a sense of place during their teacher preparation programs by incorporating place-consciousness into the curriculum (Fraser, 2016).

Kline and Walker-Gibbs (2015) found that graduate teachers' readiness for working in rural settings is determined by their development of pedagogical expertise, their capacity for professional engagement with parents and the community, and most importantly, a broad preparation and positive notions for teaching in rural contexts. However, this is a deficiency in teacher training programs in the DR, as these research findings suggest, potentially resulting in a negative impact on student academic performance.

#### **Research question 4 findings**

*How do the teachers describe the ways in which they adapt to and address the characteristics, challenges and needs of the schools they serve in rural contexts?* In general, teachers indicated that they had no options; therefore, the needs of the school have induced them to be creative and seek solutions for the school challenges they face. Similarly, they have adapted to use all the available resources made to them, inside and outside the school, to move along with their students' academic objectives and the national curriculum standards. Summary findings include:

Finding 1. Teachers have developed strategies to overcome school challenges in rural zones with available resources they find outdoors, and in the community by utilizing



their own resources, and spare time to compensate for the reality of the context they serve (Theme 2.5).

Finding 2. Teachers indicated that non-governmental organization interventions have helped them overcome various school challenges more than those offered by the public education system (Theme 2.4).

Finding 3. Teachers have developed collaboration teams within the school to overcome multigrade challenges, and to share and learn strategies that match the context they serve (Theme 2.1 and 2.5).

Teachers, due to the characteristics of the rural community, are presented with various challenges; however, teachers in this study are motivated by using their creativity to overcome school challenges to move forward and generate spaces for students to learn.

For example, teachers indicated that they use all the resources they find available outdoors, in the community, or those they purchase with their own salary. Also, they expressed bringing resources from their homes, elaborate upon artisan learning materials, or when they go to the city, they take advantage and buy whatever their students need—this way, they are able to remedy the lack of learning resources in school. Aligned with these findings, Del Rosario et al. (2014) indicated the necessity to design effective rural education development strategies to fulfill their current needs.

Additionally, due to overpopulation in schools, multigrade classrooms, and lack of teachers, teachers have resorted to using their free time to prepare class materials, provide personalized teaching sessions, and give individualized attention to students who are falling behind. Teachers also indicated that they feel grateful for the non-governmental organizations that intervene in schools to improve the quality of education. They further indicated that these

intervention programs are beneficial to schools because they include the entire educational community while also providing learning resources to students and teachers.

Similarly, as expressed by teachers, the Ministry of Education has supported teachers to meet periodically to discuss the challenges they face and the strategies they have developed to overcome them. These meetings are directed by teachers currently teaching multigrade classrooms to help other local teachers in similar situations.

The strategy that has favored teachers the most, and also motivates them to continue working in schools in rural zones, are collaboration teams between teachers and school administrators inside of the school. These teams, as indicated by teachers, have been their primary source of motivation and helping hand when they have difficulties in the classroom that they do not know how to face. Similarly, these collaboration teams also represent a source of wisdom for novice teachers. Aligned with these findings, Saigal (2012) stated that teachers must develop competencies that include the ability to implement congruent pedagogical practices and strategies to ensure students achieve the proposed learning outcomes for each grade level by matching instructional practices and objectives to the context in which they serve.

### **Research question 5 findings**

*How do the teachers describe their motivation and aspirations for teaching in schools located in rural contexts?* Teachers, in general, indicated feeling motivated to work in rural areas. Teachers' sources of motivation come from their vocation and the collaborative teams they have in schools. Summary findings include:

Finding 1. Teachers feel motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors to work in schools located in rural contexts (Theme 2.1).

- Finding 2. External motivation such as collaborative teams help teachers feel motivated to work in schools located in rural contexts (Theme 2.1).
- Finding 3. None of the teachers were aware of the location of the school until they were assigned by the Ministry of Education (Participants Profile, Chapter 4).

Findings indicate that teachers are not aware of the school where they will be assigned to work until the Dominican Ministry of Education assigns them. After meeting the school, some teachers feel overwhelmed because they do not feel fully prepared to work in multigrade schools. Over time, teachers adapt to work in schools located in rural zones and the unique conditions that are part of the reality of serving students in these schools.

Teachers describe two sources of motivation to work in rural areas. The first is the vocation for the profession they have. This intrinsic motivation pushes them to work every day for the learning objectives of their students. The second source of motivation is extrinsic. The latter being the one with the most significant resonance in the interviews. Teachers indicate that collaborative teams are a source of inspiration and, at the same time, great support for working in multigrade classrooms. They attribute much of their motivation to serve in these schools to the collaborative culture between teachers, principals, and even some additional parties, like directors.

### **Research question 6 findings**

*How do the teachers make sense of and act upon the requirements and expectations of the national curriculum and education policies of the Dominican Ministry of Education?* Teachers do everything in their power, including using their resources and free time to address the challenges of teaching the national curriculum in spite of conditions in the schools and communities that present challenges to doing so. However, there are times when they have to

ignore some of the curriculum objectives because they do not have the means to achieve them; for example, the technological objectives posed by the national curriculum. Summary findings include:

- Finding 1. Given the lack of technological resources and other basic resources such as electricity and Internet connection, technological competences are not covered by teachers (Theme 1.8, and Sub-themes 2.5.3, and 2.5.4).
- Finding 2. Teachers have to undertake subjects out of their range of expertise to cover for missing teachers in schools (Theme 1.4 and 2.5).
- Finding 3. Teachers use their own resources, make artisan learning materials, and take everything they find outdoors and in the community to make up for the lack of learning resources in schools (Theme 1.6 and Sub-theme 2.5.4).

To achieve the objectives of the national curriculum, teachers put all of their effort and creativity to make up for the lack of learning and instructional resources in schools. However, some objectives of the national curriculum are not covered by teachers because the subject matter is out of their area of expertise or requires resources they cannot acquire for their students. Rural communities, given their socio-economic development, do not have reliable access to electricity and Internet. The national curriculum reform advocates for the development of technological competences, and most schools located in rural zones, are not equipped with technological resources. Even if teachers can provide some of the technological resources, themselves, the lack electricity and Internet connection can make it impossible to provide their students with the learning experiences that are essential to develop technological competencies in students.

On another aspect, when analyzing the data, teachers demonstrate several difficulties when trying to achieve the objectives of each grade level when teaching multigrade classrooms, because the national curriculum is rigorous enough to place significant demands on teachers even when they are teaching only one grade level. This curriculum is not designed to ease teachers' work when teaching several grades simultaneously. In addition to the demands of the curriculum itself, Castillo (2005) indicated that the Dominican teacher is supposed to be trained with instructional competences and provided with appropriate incentives to develop an educational program that satisfies the needs of the students they serve. Moreover, teachers are expected to adapt their teaching practices to the context of their students. All this, despite of an characteristics of context in which teachers are assigned that might pose particular challenges and require teaching adaptations that teachers never learned in their preparation programs.

Lastly, one of the challenges faced by teachers is the lack of specialized teachers in schools. Aligned with this finding, the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) conducted in 2013 revealed that most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers who are prepared to teach the full breadth and depth of the national curriculum. Most of the time, these schools have no teachers prepared to teach in areas such as arts, physical education, foreign languages and technology. This under staffing in certain curricular areas means that those subjects will be taught in schools that serve rural communities by non-expert teachers, if taught at all. This can only contribute to the deficits in student achievement that characterize student performance on national tests in schools that serve rural communities. Combined with over-enrolled classrooms with multiple (and often incompatible) grades, this shortage of teachers qualified to teach subject and lack of teacher preparation for teaching multigrade configurations, certainly inhibits the chances for students in these schools to compete academically with students

from schools with more qualified teachers who are responsible for fewer students and only single grade levels in one class.

### Connections with Previous Research Summary Table

Table 6 offers a summary of my research's key findings and their connections to previous research.

Table 6

#### *Major Findings and Connections to Previous Research Summary*

Columna (2020) Major Key Findings	Literature In the DR	Literature Outside the DR
Schools located in rural zones in the DR present major challenges that affect students' academic achievement (Theme 1.1).	Affirms: Educational inequalities prevail due to the geographical location of schools in the DR (IDEICE, 2016).	Affirms: School learning outcomes decrease when the context has characteristics that affects school dynamics (Azano & Stewart, 2015).  Poverty and limited access to resources negatively affect the educational process leading to the expansion of educational inequality (Juárez & Rodríguez, 2016).
Challenges present in schools located in rural contexts are mostly a collateral impact of the rural culture, and its characteristics given their socio-economic status, community development, and access to resources (Themes 1.1 through 1.8).	Affirms: Socioeconomic, cultural, and climate challenges interfere with rural students' educational achievement (UNICEF, 2017).  Rural areas in the DR are characterized by their marginality of resources, services, and their dependence on urban centers for a significant portion of social and educational services (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011).	Affirms: Impact of the rural context characteristics on instructional practices seem to prevent teachers from delivering quality instruction in schools located in rural contexts schools (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011).
Some challenges present in schools located in rural contexts are caused because of governmental inequity in resource allocation (Themes 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, and 1.8).	Affirms: There is a disparity in investment in terms of infrastructure and technology between urban and rural schools (Del Rosario & Morrobel, 2011).	
Multigrade classrooms are not perceived by teachers as a challenge, instead, overpopulated multigrade classrooms, incompatible grades within the same classroom, and more than two grades mixed together are the challenges teachers have expressed when working in multigrade schools (Theme 1.7).		

Table 6-Continued

Columna (2020) Major Key Findings	Literature In the DR	Literature Outside the DR
Families in rural communities demonstrate lack of motivation to integrate in school affairs, and take part in their children's academic achievement (Theme 1.5).	Adds: Children and adolescents living in rural areas are more likely to dropout or not attend school altogether (UNICEF, 2017).	
Teacher preparation programs in the DR are not standardized and do not offer pre-service internships to all teachers (Sub-theme 2.3.2).	Dispute: DR is under a completely standardized educational system (EDUCA, 2015).	
Teacher preparation programs do not consider the characteristics of schools located in rural communities to prepare teachers for all types of realities (Theme 2.3).		Adds: Graduate teachers' preparedness for working in rural settings is determined by their capacity for professional engagement with parents and the community, and a broad preparation and positive notions for teaching in rural contexts (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015).
Teachers describe the rural culture as similar to their own, therefore not feeling as if they had to embrace and learn a new culture (Theme 2.2).		It is fundamental to prepare student teachers to develop knowledge and skills to adapt their pedagogy to the people, culture, and social practices in the rural zones (Ajayi, 2014).
Acclimation to rural culture is easy for teachers given the welcoming embrace teachers receive (Theme 2.2).		
Teachers feel to some extent prepared to work in schools, however, not prepared to attend multigrade schools (Theme 1.7 and 2.3).	Adds: The content in the curriculum of Dominican teachers' undergraduate degree programs rarely includes aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools, making it difficult for rural schools to attract, recruit, and retain teachers (Heeralal, 2014).	Adds: Universities provide students with a career-oriented education instead of a place-based education that seeks to improve students' ability to connect their education to the real world (Fraser, 2016).
		Current instructional practices and methods at all levels do not satisfactorily practice the concept of place (Greenwood, 2013).
Teachers who completed pre-service internships expressed feeling more prepared to work in schools than those who did not participated in pre-service internships Sub-theme 2.3.2).		Adds: Pre-service teaching experiences in rural settings contributed positively to urban pre-service teachers' perceptions toward working and living in rural communities (Masinire et al., 2014).

Table 6-Continued

Columna (2020) Major Key Findings	Literature In the DR	Literature Outside the DR
Teachers do not receive academic preparation during their teacher preparation programs on instructional strategies to teach multigrade classrooms (Theme 2.3).	Adds: Dominican teachers should be trained with instructional competences and provided with appropriate incentives to adapt their teaching practices to the context of their students (Castillo, 2005).	Adds: Place-conscious pedagogy aims to move educational approaches and systems away from standardized teaching practices toward a more place-based education (Fraser, 2016).  Teachers should not only be trained with a realistic vision of the rural context, but should also be trained with an impartial vision that allows them to address emergent situations, typical of a rural context. (Cornish & Jenkins, 2015).
Teachers have developed strategies to overcome school challenges in rural zones with available resources they find outdoors, and in the community by utilizing their own resources, and spare time to compensate for the reality of the context they serve (Theme 2.5).		Adds: Ability to implement matching pedagogical practices and strategies to ensure students achieve the proposed learning outcomes for each grade level by aligning instructional practices and objectives to the context in which they serve are essential competencies that teachers must develop (Saigal, 2012).
Teachers indicated that non-governmental organization interventions have helped them overcome various school challenges more than those offered by the public education system (Theme 2.4).		Dispute: Schools located in rural areas do not have participating agencies that work towards the improvement of their situation (Valera, 2004).
Teachers have developed collaboration teams within the school to overcome multigrade challenges, and to share and learn strategies that match the context they serve (Theme 2.1 and 2.5).		
Teachers feel motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors to work in schools located in rural contexts (Theme 2.1).		
External motivation such as collaborative teams help teachers feel motivated to work in schools located in rural contexts (Theme 2.1).		Affirms: Teacher collaboration has positive effects on teachers and their students Ronfeldt, et al. (2015).
None of the teachers were aware of the location of the school until they were assigned by the Ministry of Education (Participants Profile, Chapter 4).		



Table 6-Continued

Columna (2020) Major Key Findings	Literature In the DR	Literature Outside the DR
Given the lack of technological resources and other basic resources such as electricity and Internet connection, technological competences are not covered by teachers (Theme 1.8, and Sub-themes 2.5.3, and 2.5.4).	Affirms: The current curricular reform advocates for the development of technological competences; however, most rural schools lack electricity, and Internet. Essential to develop technological competencies IDEICE (2016).	
Teachers have to undertake subjects out of their range of expertise to cover for missing teachers in schools (Theme 1.4 and 2.5).	Affirms: MINERD, in the 2013 TERCE, revealed that most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers and in most cases none at all.  Most rural schools do not have enough specialized teachers and most of the time none in areas such as arts, physical education, foreign languages, and technology (TERCE, 2013).	Adds: It is very difficult to attract and recruit teachers given the limitations of rural communities (UNESCO, 2003).  Teachers whose bachelor's degree curriculum did not include aspects that relate to teaching in rural schools, i.e. dealing with multiage, multigrade classrooms and differences in family and community characteristics, makes it difficult for rural schools to retain teachers (Reeralal's, 2014).
Teachers use their own resources, make artisan learning materials, and take everything they find outdoors and in the community to make up for the lack of learning resources in schools (Theme 1.6 and Sub-theme 2.5.4).		

### Practical Implications for Schools and Policymakers

#### Implications for schools located in rural communities

Findings in this research study revealed essential insights about the challenges present in schools located in rural communities and the preparation teachers receive to meet those challenges, and thus, achieve all the standards of the national curriculum. The goal of this research is to provide schools and policymakers insights they can use to make informed decisions that positively impact educational actions in rural areas throughout the DR.

Two implications are presented that could be pursued by schools located in rural communities to mitigate the negative impact of rural contexts on students' academic achievement: (a) propose to the Ministry of Education a curriculum adaptation for multigrade schools, and (b) design a mentoring program for novice teachers to satisfy the professional training gap on multigrade teaching strategies.

Data from this research has revealed that teachers do not feel prepared when assigned to a school in a rural community, given the characteristics of the community and the school. Also, that they have to overcome multigrade challenges without any previous professional training that assures the strategies they are using will produce the desired learning outcomes. Therefore, it could be an essential step for the school to provide teachers with the necessary support from veteran teachers who already have the experience in multigrade classrooms. Moreover, proposing the idea of a curriculum adapted to multigrade classrooms could be a relief for teachers who have to teach more than two grades simultaneously, without the need to disregard any objective or standard of the curriculum. This might take the form of learning units that are coordinated between grade level standards and objectives. It might also include specially developed self-study learning modules that teachers of multi-age classrooms could use to augment their direct instruction.

### **Implications for policymakers**

Findings in this research study suggest the urgent necessity to reformulate teacher preparation programs to integrate contents that help teachers address the characteristics of rural communities that negatively impact school performance. This content could include such areas as, how to take advantage of the natural resources available in rural communities or how to access, design, and adapt school learning resources and instructional materials that are uniquely

developed to the characteristics of students from rural settings. In addition to curriculum resources, teacher preparation programs should include specific instructional strategies to teach children from all types of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and to teach multigrade classrooms. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated in 2003, that the multigrade classroom is the most common characteristic of Dominican rural schools; therefore, this particular classroom configuration should take a significant place in the content of teacher preparation programs.

This does not mean that there should be competing teacher preparation programs. Instead, studies suggest that teacher preparation programs should include complementary courses to address the challenges of both rural and urban teaching individually, and that teacher development programs should include both, residential and fieldwork for teacher interns. Hence, teachers acquire experience in both urban and rural settings (Masinire et al., 2014). The results of this study also suggest the need for a place-conscious pedagogy perspective to move educational approaches and systems away from standardized teaching practices toward a more place-based education to promote consciousness of place by drawing connections between the local context and what is being taught (Fraser, 2016).

Accordingly, Ajayi (2014) suggested that a fundamental aspect of teacher preparation programs in the rural communities, is to prepare pre-service teachers to develop knowledge and competences to match their pedagogy strategies to the people and culture of rural communities. To achieve this, teacher preparation programs should integrate into each teacher preparation program in the DR a mandatory pre-service internship. Ideally, these internships would give pre-service teachers experience in schools that serve both rural and urban communities. The need for mandatory internships came through the voices of the teachers who participated in this study and

confirms previous studies that indicate that internships can contribute positively to urban pre-service teachers' perceptions toward working and living in rural communities (Masinire et al., 2014).

Finally, findings in this research study demonstrate the necessity to develop social projects to develop rural communities aiming to reduce the negative impact of the lack of resources, integration, and motivation towards schools. Even with the school level supports for teachers and the changes in teacher preparation recommended here, teachers who serve schools in rural communities will continue to meet with challenges that are grounded in socio-economic inequity. In order to eliminate inequity in educational outcomes, these broader inequities must be addressed. In the meantime, the participants in this study show an amazing level of commitment, resilience, creativity, and persistence in serving their students well. Many voiced motivation to continue serving students in schools that serve rural communities despite the limitations of staffing, resources, facilities, technology, parent engagement, and support for education; yet, transportation challenges and lack of appropriate preparation continue to make it difficult for these teachers to remain in schools that demand so much of them.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The subsequent recommendations should be considered for extending this research study to better understand educational processes in rural communities:

1. Conduct a study to explore the specific limitations teachers, schools and students endure while working to achieve the national curriculum, and to what extent it is possible to achieve all of the objectives of the curriculum given the scenario present in schools located in rural communities.

2. Explore deeply the challenges present in multigrade classrooms in rural communities, their configurations, and the causes for each configuration, and how teachers respond to them. This will help better understand the nature of the multigrade classroom in Dominican rural contexts.
3. Investigate the potential benefits of intentionally designed multigrade schools in Dominican rural contexts. Obtained data could help inform policy makers to transition from multigrade schools generated out of necessity without specific criteria, to purposely designed multigrade classroom to fit rural communities' populations.
4. Extend this research by investigating if there is a negative correlation between the lack of specialized teachers and learning materials in rural communities, and the level of students' academic achievement in mathematics, technology, and literacy.
5. Extend this research study by exploring the causes that stimulate the lack of motivation in (a) students' parents, (b) students, and (c) the community in general, to participate in school affairs, and further pursue formal education.
6. Explore further the strategies teachers have developed on their own to teach in multigrade classrooms to reveal to what extent these strategies are efficient to achieve grade level curriculum objectives.
7. Further explore which are the positive and negative impacts of the different multigrade configurations present in schools located in rural communities to provide policy makers with reliable data to regulate multigrade schools.
8. Investigate if there is a relationship between teachers' instructional practices when they participate in pre-service internships in rural communities and when they participate in pre-service internships in urban contexts.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This dissertation resulted in a deeper understanding of the challenges present in schools located in rural communities, and the experiences and professional readiness of teachers currently serving schools in rural contexts. Knowledge gained from this research can be applied to developing effective and data-supported policies and programs to reduce the challenges that currently impact students' learning outcomes in rural communities. This study also provided insights into how teacher preparation programs might include specialized knowledge of aspects related to the rural community and training in effective strategies for teaching multigrade classrooms, that, according to UNESCO (2003) are the most common characteristics of schools in rural contexts.

Challenges present in schools located in rural contexts are the consequence of the unprivileged characteristics of the zone, the socioeconomic status of the families in the Dominican rural communities, the lack of transportation to safely access schools daily, and the unbalanced distribution of resources throughout the Country. Consequently, teachers must be professionally and academically prepared to address the characteristics of the school to consciously match their pedagogical approach to the community they serve.

As a result of this investigation, it could be interpreted as a wrongdoing to adjudicate teachers with the full responsibility to guide students to achieve everything that is mandated in the national curriculum. That is, teachers who have graduated in teacher preparation programs with generalized content knowledge and lack of specialized training to address a multigrade

classroom, in some cases, graduating without the opportunity to participate in an internship program to recognize the contexts in which they will serve.

To conclude, this research process has led me to transform the perspective and approach I had toward teachers and schools in rural contexts: the school never ceases to be a school because of its location, neither change its nature because of the challenges it must endure, nor stop being much more than a place for teachers to teach and students to learn. A simplistic and unsubstantiated way of labeling the school based on its location only aggravates the perspective we have towards it, and therefore, limits the approach that we must have to it. For that reason, schools in rural communities are not to be called *rural schools*, to separate the physical space where most challenges are generated, from the space where teachers work hard to surpass such challenges.

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**Appendix A**

**Recruitment Letter for School Regional Director**



Mrs. Lidia Malena  
Regional 06 Director

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Mrs. Malena,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at Regional 06. The research study, "Dominican Public-School Teachers Readiness to Teach in Rural Context" will serve as Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez dissertation for the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

If approval is granted, I will need to recruit 14 teachers who will be asked to volunteer in two 60-90 minutes' interviews in after school hours. Volunteers will be asked a set of questions to inform the research questions.

The interviews discussions will remain confidential to preserve teachers' anonymity. No costs will be incurred by either your Regional or the teachers who volunteer to participate.

Your approval to conduct this study will be much appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have at that time.

You may contact me at my email address: [nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu](mailto:nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu)

Sincerely,

Nidia Beatriz Columna, M.S.E.

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Letter for School Regional Director (Spanish version)**

Sra. Lidia Malena  
Director Regional 06

RE: Permiso para realizar un estudio de investigación

Estimada señora Malena,

Le escribo para solicitar permiso para realizar un estudio de investigación en la Regional 06. El estudio de investigación, "La Preparación de los Maestros de las Escuelas Públicas Dominicanas para Enseñar en el Contexto Rural" servirá para fines de la disertación de tesis para los requisitos del grado de Doctor en Filosofía de Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez, M.S.E.

Si se aprueba, tendré que reclutar 14 maestros a quienes se les pedirá que sean voluntarios en dos entrevistas de 60-90 minutos después del horario escolar. A los voluntarios se les hará una serie de preguntas para que conozcan las preguntas de la investigación.

Las discusiones de las entrevistas serán confidenciales para preservar el anonimato de los maestros. Los maestros que se ofrecen como voluntarios para participar no incurrirán en gastos.

Su aprobación para realizar este estudio será muy apreciada. Haré un seguimiento con una llamada telefónica la próxima semana y con gusto responderé cualquier pregunta que pueda tener en ese momento.

Puede contactarme a mi dirección de correo electrónico: [nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu](mailto:nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu)

Sinceramente,

Nidia Beatriz Columna, M.S.E.

## **Appendix C**

### **Recruitment Letter for Teachers**

Hello Teacher,

School District (x) has recruited to participate in a research study that seeks to profile teachers' experiences in schools that serve rural areas in the southern region of the Dominican public education system, and teacher's professional readiness to work within rural schools' settings. In this regard, teachers with at least five years of experience teaching in rural schools are required. Teachers who agree to participate will attend two 60-90 minutes' sessions during after school hours to respond a set of questions in a focus group.

*Participation in this research will be absolutely confidential and identities will not be disclosed.*

If you are interested in participating, please call or send an e-mail to:

**Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez**

**(809) 292-9303**

nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu

## **Appendix D**

### **Recruitment Letter for Teachers (Spanish Version)**

Hola Maestro,

El Distrito Escolar 06 le solicita su participación en un estudio de investigación que busca perfilar las experiencias de los maestros en las escuelas que sirven a las zonas rurales en la región sur del sistema de educación pública dominicana, y la preparación profesional de los maestros para trabajar dentro de los entornos de las escuelas rurales. En este sentido, se requieren docentes con al menos cinco años de experiencia enseñando en escuelas rurales. Los maestros que acepten participar asistirán a dos sesiones de 60-90 minutos durante el horario escolar para responder una serie de preguntas en un grupo focal.

La participación en esta investigación será absolutamente confidencial y no se revelarán las identidades.

**Si está interesado en participar, llame o envíe un correo electrónico a:**

**Nidia Beatriz Columna Pérez**

**(809) 292-9303**

**[nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu](mailto:nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu)**

**Appendix E**  
**Interview Protocol**



Date of interview:

Place of interview:

Interviewer:

Participant pseudonym:

Years teaching in a Rural School:

Years teaching in the public-school system:

University of graduation:

Year of graduation:

Community type:

School type:

Number of students:

Number of teachers:

School grades:

### **Teachers' questionnaire:**

Welcome teacher to this interview session where we will be discussing some of the issues regarding your experiences teaching in rural schools and how well do you think you were prepared to address the characteristics of rural schools.

First, we are going to introduce each other, then I am going to ask you a series of questions, which we will be discussing with a natural flow manner. You may decide not to answer any of the questions and you also may withdraw at any time from this focus group if you wish.

Let's start the conversation with briefly describing:

1. How you came to work in a rural school and how long you have been working there.
2. How would you describe your first year as a teacher in a rural school?
  - a. What are some of the challenges you encountered?
  - b. How did you respond to those challenges?
  - c. How prepared did you feel to address those challenges?
3. How would you describe the changes you experienced from your first year as a novice teacher up to now?
  - a. What do you think influenced those changes?
  - b. What have you learned that has helped you along the way?

4. What challenges do you still encounter and how do you respond to them now?
5. Since multi-age and multigrade classrooms are a common condition in rural schools, how do you all make that work?
  - a. What strategies have you learned and/or developed to manage multi-age and grade levels?
  - b. How did you learn or develop those strategies?
6. How would you describe the needs of your rural students as learners?
  - a. How have you adapted your teaching strategies to address your students' needs?
  - b. What are some of the student needs you find you cannot address? Why?
7. How would you describe how students in your schools are doing academically?
  - a. What factors support or interfere with their academic progress?
  - b. How do you try to overcome the factors that interfere with their academic progress?
8. What should the teacher preparation programs be doing to better prepare teachers for rural schools?
9. What can the schools do to better support teachers in rural schools?

Thank you for participating in this interview. You helped me better understand your experience as a teacher in Dominican rural schools and I appreciate your contributions to my research.

## **Appendix F**

### **Interview Protocol (Spanish version)**

Fecha de entrevista:

Lugar de entrevista:

Entrevistador:

Seudónimo del participante:

Años enseñando en una escuela rural:

Años enseñando en el sistema público escolar:

Universidad de graduación:

Año de Graduación:

Zona de la escuela:

Tipo de escuela:

Cantidad de estudiantes:

Cantidad de maestros:

Grados que posee la escuela:

### **Cuestionario de docentes:**

Bienvenido maestro a esta sesión de entrevista donde discutiremos algunos de los problemas relacionados con sus experiencias de enseñanza en escuelas rurales y qué tan bien cree que estaba preparado para abordar las características de las escuelas rurales.

Primero, nos presentaremos, luego le haré una serie de preguntas, que discutiremos de manera fluida. Puede decidir no responder ninguna de las preguntas y también puede retirarse en cualquier momento de este grupo de enfoque si lo desea.

Comencemos la conversación describiendo brevemente:

1. ¿Cómo llegaste a trabajar en una escuela rural y cuánto tiempo llevas trabajando allí?
2. ¿Cómo describirías tu primer año como maestro en una escuela rural?
  - a. ¿Cuáles son algunos de los retos que encontró?
  - b. ¿Cómo respondiste a esos retos?
  - c. ¿Qué tan preparado se sintió para abordar esos retos?
3. ¿Cómo describiría los cambios que experimentó desde su primer año como maestro novato hasta ahora?
  - a. ¿Qué crees que influyó en esos cambios?

- b. ¿Qué has aprendido que te haya ayudado en el camino?
  - 4. ¿Qué retos aún encuentra y cómo responde a esos problemas ahora?
  - 5. Dado que las aulas de edades y niveles múltiples son una condición común en las escuelas rurales, ¿cómo hacen que funcione?
    - a. ¿Qué estrategias has aprendido y / o desarrollado para manejar niveles de edades y grados múltiples?
    - b. ¿Cómo aprendiste o desarrollaste esas estrategias?
  - 6. ¿Cómo describirías las necesidades de tus estudiantes rurales como estudiantes?
    - a. ¿Cómo ha adaptado su enseñanza para abordar las necesidades de sus alumnos?
    - b. ¿Cuáles son algunas de las necesidades de los estudiantes que encuentra que no puede abordar? ¿Por qué?
  - 7. ¿Cómo describirías el desempeño académico de los estudiantes en tus escuelas?
    - a. ¿Qué factores apoyan o interfieren con su progreso académico?
    - b. ¿Cómo intentas superar los factores que interfieren con su progreso académico?
  - 8. ¿Qué deberían hacer los programas de preparación de maestros para prepararlos mejor para las escuelas rurales?
  - 9. ¿Qué pueden hacer las escuelas para apoyar mejor a los maestros en las escuelas rurales?
- Gracias por participar en esta entrevista. Me ayudaste a comprender mejor tu experiencia como profesor en las escuelas rurales dominicanas y agradezco tus contribuciones a mi investigación.

**Appendix G**  
**Informed Consent Form**

## **Western Michigan University**

### **Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology**

**Advisor:** Dr. Patricia Reeves, Ph.D.

**Principal Investigator:** Beatriz Columna

**Title of Study:** Dominican Public-School Teachers Perception of Their Readiness to Teach in Rural Contexts

**STUDY SUMMARY:** This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to: understand the experience of rural teachers and their perception of their readiness to teach in rural contexts in the Dominican Republic. This research will serve as Nidia Columna's dissertation for the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to share your experience as a rural teacher in the Dominican Republic in an interview, and to participate in a second follow-up meeting to collect additional information and to further explore your experiences. Your time in the study will take between 60-90 minutes. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be discomfort from answering sensitive questions, and your time to complete the interview. There are no direct benefits for you other than sharing the results with you.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled " Dominican Public-School Teachers Perception of Their Readiness to Teach in Rural Contexts " and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

#### **What are we trying to find out in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived level of preparation of rural public schools' teachers to address the characteristics and needs of rural schools. Moreover, how teachers perceive the rural community culture impacts their teaching practices in their efforts to meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

#### **Who can participate in this study?**

Either female or male teachers between the ages of 25 to 60 years old, with a minimum of five full years of professional practice teaching in rural schools who have completed a BA in education at a Dominican University.

#### **Where will this study take place?**

The interviews will be conducted at the site of convenience for you.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

If you decide to participate in the study, your time commitment will be one session of approximately 60 to 90-minute interview, and to participate in a second follow-up meeting.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview where you will answer questions by sharing and explaining your lived experiences teaching in rural schools in the Dominican Republic.

**What information is being measured during the study?**

Through the study, I want to learn about your lived experiences as a rural teacher in the Dominican Republic.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**

If you participate in this study, the interview questions might make you feel uncomfortable, because you will be sharing personal information. However, interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Participation in the study is voluntary and you may decide to withdraw at any moment, or to not answer questions that are posed.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

There are no direct benefits for participants. However, this research might have indirect benefits for study participants since it will characterize rural school need in terms of teacher preparation programs. Therefore, policies directed towards public school will be better informed to provide higher education institutions in the Dominican Republic to foster an environment of equality between urban and rural public schools.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

There is no compensation for participating in the study.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**

This research is for Nidia Columna's dissertation project, and researcher may use the results to present at a conference, journals or other academic and professional platforms. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times, including the institutions where you work or have worked. Dr. Patricia Reeves also have access to data for supervision during the time of the study.

**What will happen to my information collected for this research after the study is over?**

Should another research study be conducted, you will be contacted to obtain your consent for use of the data. The use of identifiable data collected as part of this study will not be used or distributed without your consent. If I am unable to contact you for your consent, your data will not be used for another study.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**



You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study even if it is after the interview has been conducted. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact me, Nidia Columna, at [nidibeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu](mailto:nidibeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

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I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

---

Please Print Your Name

---

Participant's signature

---

Date

## **Appendix H**

### **Informed Consent Form (Spanish version)**

**Universidad Western Michigan  
Departamento de Liderazgo Educativo, Investigación y Tecnología**

**Asesora:** Dr. Patricia Reeves, Ph.D

**Investigadora Principal:** Nidia Columna

**Título del Estudio:** Dominican Public-School Teachers Perception of Their Readiness to Teach in Rural Contexts

**RESUMEN DEL ESTUDIO:** Este formulario de consentimiento es parte de un proceso de consentimiento informado para un estudio de investigación y proporcionará información que lo ayudará a decidir si desea participar en este estudio. La participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. El propósito de la investigación es: comprender la experiencia de los docentes rurales y su percepción de su disposición a enseñar en contextos rurales en la República Dominicana. Esta investigación servirá como tesis de Nidia Columna para los requisitos del grado de Doctor en Filosofía. Si participa en la investigación, se le pedirá que comparta su experiencia como maestro rural en la República Dominicana en una entrevista y que participe en una segunda reunión de seguimiento para recopilar información adicional y explorar más sus experiencias. Su tiempo en el estudio tomará entre 60 y 90 minutos. Los posibles riesgos y costos para usted por participar en el estudio pueden ser la incomodidad de responder preguntas delicadas y su tiempo para completar la entrevista. No hay beneficios directos para usted aparte de compartir los resultados con usted.

Usted está invitado a participar en este proyecto de investigación titulado "Percepción de los maestros de las escuelas públicas dominicanas sobre su disposición a enseñar en contextos rurales" y la siguiente información en este formulario de consentimiento proporcionará más detalles sobre el estudio de investigación. Haga cualquier pregunta si necesita más aclaraciones y para ayudarlo a decidir si desea participar en el estudio de investigación. No renuncia a ninguno de sus derechos legales al aceptar participar en esta investigación o al firmar este formulario de consentimiento. Una vez que se hayan respondido todas sus preguntas y se haya revisado el documento de consentimiento, si decide participar en este estudio, se le pedirá que firme este formulario de consentimiento.

### **¿Qué estamos tratando de descubrir con este estudio?**

El propósito de este estudio es explorar el nivel percibido de preparación de los maestros de las escuelas públicas rurales para abordar las características y necesidades de las mismas. Además, la forma en que los maestros perciben la forma en que la cultura de la comunidad rural impacta sus prácticas de enseñanza en sus esfuerzos por cumplir con los requisitos del plan de estudios nacional.

### **¿Quién puede participar en este estudio?**

Profesores de ambos sexos, con edades comprendidas entre los 25 y los 60 años, con un mínimo de cinco años continuos de práctica profesional en escuelas rurales y que hayan completado una licenciatura en educación en una universidad dominicana.

### **¿Dónde se llevará a cabo este estudio?**

Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en el sitio que le resulte conveniente a usted.

### **¿Cuál es el tiempo de compromiso para participar en este estudio?**

Si decide participar en el estudio, su compromiso de tiempo será una sesión de aproximadamente 60 a 90 minutos de entrevista, y un segundo encuentro de seguimiento.

**¿Qué se te pedirá que hagas si eliges participar en este estudio?**

Se le pedirá que participe en una entrevista donde responderá preguntas sobre sus experiencias vividas en sus experiencias en escuelas rurales en República Dominicana.

**¿Qué información se mide durante el estudio?**

A través del estudio, quiero aprender sobre sus experiencias vividas como maestro rural en la República Dominicana.

**¿Cuáles son los riesgos de participar en este estudio y cómo se minimizarán estos riesgos?**

Si decides participar en este estudio, las preguntas de la entrevista pueden hacer que te sientas incómoda, ya que compartirás información personal. Sin embargo, las entrevistas se mantendrán estrictamente confidenciales, la participación en el estudio es voluntaria y puedes decidir retirarte en cualquier momento o no responder las preguntas realizadas.

**¿Cuáles son los beneficios de participar en este estudio?**

No hay beneficios directos para los participantes. Sin embargo, esta investigación podría tener beneficios indirectos para los participantes del estudio, ya que caracterizará la necesidad de la escuela rural en términos de programas de preparación docente. Por lo tanto, las políticas dirigidas a la escuela públicas rurales estarán mejor informadas para proporcionar a las instituciones de educación superior en la República Dominicana información para fomentar un ambiente de igualdad entre las escuelas públicas urbanas y rurales.

**¿Hay algún costo asociado con la participación en este estudio?**

No hay costos asociados con la participación en este estudio.

**¿Hay alguna compensación por participar en este estudio?**

No hay compensación por participar en el estudio.

**¿Quién tendrá acceso a la información recopilada durante este estudio?**

Esta investigación es para la disertación de Nidia Columna y pudiese usar los resultados para presentar en una conferencia, publicar en una revista u otra plataforma profesional o académica. Su identidad se mantendrá confidencial en todo momento, incluidas las instituciones donde trabaja o ha trabajado como líder. La Dra. Patricia Reeves también tendrá acceso a los datos para la supervisión durante el tiempo del estudio.

**¿Qué pasará con mi información recopilada para esta investigación después de que termine el estudio?**

En caso de que se realice otro estudio de investigación, se lo contactará para obtener su consentimiento para el uso de los datos. El uso de los datos identificables recopilados como parte de este estudio no se utilizará ni distribuirá sin su consentimiento. Si no puedo comunicarme con usted para su consentimiento, sus datos no serán utilizados para otro estudio.

**¿Qué pasa si quieres dejar de participar en este estudio?**

Puede decidir dejar de participar en el estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier motivo. No sufrirá ningún perjuicio o penalización por su decisión de detener su participación. No experimentará NINGUNA consecuencia si decide retirarse de este estudio, incluso si es posterior a la entrevista. La investigadora también puede decidir suspender su participación en el estudio sin su consentimiento.

Si tiene alguna pregunta antes o durante el estudio, puede contactarme, Nidia Columna, a [nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu](mailto:nidiabeatriz.columnaperez@wmich.edu). También puede comunicarse con la Presidencia, la Junta de Revisión Institucional de Sujetos Humanos al 269-387-8293 o el Vicepresidente de Investigación al 269-387-8298 si surgen preguntas durante el curso del estudio.

Este documento de consentimiento ha sido aprobado para su uso durante un año por la Junta de Revisión Institucional de Sujetos Humanos (HSIRB) según lo indicado por la fecha y firma del presidente de la junta en la esquina superior derecha. No participe en este estudio si la fecha del sello es anterior a un año.

-----

He leído este documento de consentimiento informado. Los riesgos y beneficios me han sido explicados. Acepto tomar parte en este estudio.

Por favor imprime tu nombre

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma del participante

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fecha

**Appendix I**  
**HSIRB Approval Letter**

## WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Institutional Review Board

FWA00007042

IRB00000254

Date: December 10, 2019

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator  
 Nidia Columna, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-12-12

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Dominican Public-School Teachers Perception of Their Readiness to Teach in Rural Contexts" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., ***add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.***). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

**A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) December 9, 2020 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.**

**When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at**  
<https://wmich.edu/research/forms>.

**Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.**

Office of the Vice President for Research  
 Western Michigan University  
 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456  
 PHONE: (269) 387-8293 FAX: (269) 387-8276  
 WEBSITE: [wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb](https://wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb)

CAMPUS SITE: Room 251 W. Walwood Hall