

Multigrade classrooms in rural schools of Andalusia. Teaching Perspectives

INTRO. (max. 600 words).

Largely rural areas are characterized by being spaces with low population density, however, a new phenomenon of return to rural areas **is beginning** to emerge from returnees -immigrants or neo-rural people- drawn by business opportunities of the area- (Bustos, 2009). This phenomenon is reactivating the social, demographic and economic development of some of these areas and that are reconfiguring the rural environment. This increase in the population resident in rural contexts has a positive influence on the conservation of rural schools.

In the case of Andalusia (Spain), schools located in rural settings are subject to the same regulations as schools located in urban settings, however, they have a series of peculiarities inherent to the contexts in which they are immersed (Ortega, 1995; Olivares, 2007), such as the dispersed population in the areas and the low concentration of schoolchildren. This fact makes it necessary to implement a school organization such as the multigrade classroom, becoming one of the hallmarks of rural schools. Its characteristics and pedagogical and organizational singularities make it a particular and heterogeneous educational and school space.

The school organization in multi-grade, multi-level, inter-level, mixed classrooms, shared levels, multi-age or multi-class (Bustos, 2010, 2013), has become a peculiarity, a symbol and an organizational response to that rurality (Boix and Bustos, 2014; Bustos, 2010; Boix, 2011; Corchón, 2000). However, and although multigrade is associated as “the most unique feature of the rural school” (Boix and Bustos, 2014, p. 32), this way of organizing the classroom is not exclusive to the so-called rural schools, as we also find other schools located in urban contexts that are organized in multigrade classrooms (Ruiz and Ruiz, 2017), as a way of organizing, operating and maintaining schools (Sepúlveda and Gallardo, 2011) that have low levels of enrollment (Bustos, 2010).

As Jiménez (1983) points out, these classrooms are characterized mainly because “in the same class there are boys and girls of different ages and levels of schooling” (p.13), it means, we find: the combination of levels and grades in the same classroom (Quílez & Vázquez, 2012; Cantón, 2004; Hinojo, Raso & Hinojo, 2010; Bustos, 2010, 2013); students with different levels of knowledge are served; teachers work with a student / teacher low ratio (Canton, 2004; Sauras, 2000); and, it approaches the most natural way of meeting and working among schoolchildren (Abós & Boix, 2017) as an educative opportunity.

As it is pointed out by Quílez and Vázquez (2012), we find mainly two types of multigrade classrooms on behalf of the organizational level and depending on the number of students: the “unit classrooms”, in which students of different educational degrees are with a single teacher in the classroom and then in the school (Ortega,

1995; Boix & Bustos, 2014), and the "incomplete graduate classrooms", in which there are several educational levels where we find a teacher per classroom.

Through open interviews and discussion groups we recover the voices of primary and secondary school teachers who develop their practice in schools located in rural settings with the main objective of knowing the potential and weaknesses of multigrade classrooms from various teaching experiences in Andalusia. This concrete proposal is designed according to the literature and the state of the question, it is necessary to understand and disseminate this type of school experience for the commitment to rural development. Also, it is necessary to open a way to compare and discuss with other rural schools in other European countries, of which we highlight the following research experiences: EU (2011), Champollion (2011), Amiguiño (2011).

METHODOLOGY (MAX. 400 words)

This work is part of the thematic line of qualitative research conducted by Boix & Bustos (2014) - semi-structured interviews - and Bustos (2007) - case studies-. We have resorted to a collective case study (Stake, 1998) with the main objective of researching the teaching experience in order to know the strengths and weaknesses of the groupings of the multigrade classrooms in rural schools. The following objectives have been achieved:

1. Investigate the teaching experience in multigrade classrooms in the rural environment in Andalusia.
2. Identify the educational needs and possibilities of the schools that are organized in this type of classroom.
3. Rescue improvement proposals for the mentioned classrooms.
4. Compare with other rural schools in other European countries, in order to discuss these experiences.

The study involved 16 teachers from 6 public schools located in rural contexts in the province of Malaga (4) and Granada (2), of which 4 of them are called CEIP (Infant and Primary Schools) and the other two CPR (Public Rural School). Although both types of centers are organized in multigrade classrooms, we find five centers that are organized as incomplete graduated classrooms and one that is organized as a "unitary classroom" (Quílez & Vázquez, 2012).

By specialties we count with 3 infant education teachers (one of them the principal of a school), 4 Infant and Primary Education teachers (in unit classroom), 9 Primary and specialty teachers among which we find 2 teachers of physical education (one of them the principal of a school), 1 music teacher in a primary school (also principal of the school), 5 foreign language teachers (4 English and 1 French) and one Therapeutic Pedagogy teacher (itinerant).

Procedure and analysis

There have been sixteen open interviews with an average duration of 50 minutes in which teachers have reported their experiences, perceptions and educational experiences in a multigrade classroom.

Subsequently, the oral and individual return was carried out in a second meeting with an approximate duration of 70 minutes. Finally, a reflection and discussion group was held with seven of the participating teachers in a 90-minute session. In this meeting, issues related to the potentialities, weaknesses and proposals for improvement of schools located in rural settings have been mainly shared.

The analysis of the information has moved from a singular logic –considering the individual, intra-case categories- to a transversal logic –interpretation- in which common categories emerge (Cornejo, Rojas and Mendoza, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS (max. 300 words).

A series of common issues to many of the interviews and discussion group have emerged, of which we highlight for this paper:

- Practices of teachers in rural schools: strengths and limitations
- Provision of material resources and improvement of infrastructure as a matter pending by the administration.
- Initial and continuous training, a shared and forgotten task.
- Organizational, methodological and educational logic of the multi-level classroom.

The results reveal the contextual and pedagogical potentials inherent in the multigrade classroom, showing an inclusive, cooperative rural school open to new technologies and didactic methodologies, but also bring us closer to knowing the weaknesses of the rural school, mainly related to the provision of human and material resources and the initial and continuous training of teachers, revealing itself as a school little known to new teachers, students of education and academics.

On the latter, we also point out some questions of interest in the form of concrete proposals:

(1) It is necessary to manage and provide rural schools with human and material resources according to their educational needs (and not just student ratio) and thus avoid a comparative grievance in relation to the resources available to them schools located in urban settings.

(2) Ignorance of the rural school and the lack of training to manage and teach in a multigrade classroom have become key aspects that have hindered the teaching of participants for some time, so it is imperative to strengthen the Initial and continuous teacher training.

(3) The possibilities and teaching potential of the multigrade classroom reside in its ratio, which allows individual students to be cared for and favor collaborative learning and, by extension, elements that can be extrapolated to the urban classroom.

Finally, as pointed out in other studies at the European level, a commitment to sustainable rural development is necessary, with schools and education being the engine of change to welcome new generations and bet on rural culture (UNESCO, 2010; Champollion, 2011; Amiguiño, 2011).

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