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# Teaching and learning in small, rural schools in four European countries: Introduction and synthesis of mixed-/multi-age approaches

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### ABSTRACT

As part of teaching and learning in small, rural schools, we investigate teaching and learning approaches in multi-grade classes. This introduction to four papers of a special edition, each of which documents practices in a different area of Europe, presents the background of the discourse on teaching mixed- or multi-age classes and provides information concerning the context of teaching in rural schools. As a synthesis, we outline a didactical framework of the mixed-age teaching approaches derived from the four papers and discuss the possible implementation of these approaches in the classroom. Finally, we propose to lead the rural education discourse away from the rural–urban antagonism to a more integrated view of dealing with heterogeneity in the classroom in general. The teaching approaches presented in this introduction can add to the theory of adaptive teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

It has been five years since a special edition on rural schools in British and northern countries appeared in this journal (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009). The focus of the issue was on the role of the school within the community. Less, however, was reported on the processes inside the school, that is, how teaching and learning occurs in small schools with low pupil numbers and multi-grade classes. Although teaching in multi-grade classes occurs around the world, the topic, to date, has not been investigated in depth. This shortage of studies represents a research deficiency, as a great proportion of the world's children live in rural communities and attend rural school, both in developing countries and in the Western world.

The articles of this special edition aim to elucidate the processes and outcomes of teaching, learning and schooling in small rural schools. The aim is to describe teaching approaches observed in multi-grade classes with a special focus on cross-age learning in different cultural contexts in four European countries. Such insight enables us to increase our understanding of teaching approaches aimed to include children of varied ages and to discover similar patterns among such approaches across the four countries. The origin of this special edition was presented at a symposium on teaching practices in multi-grade classes at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2013 in Istanbul. All authors of this special edition

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presented at this symposium. From a regional perspective, the articles discuss the state of education in various places of Europe from Spain to central Europe to Scandinavia. We note that in general, for the classes in the countries we present, the schools are well-equipped, and the number of students in the classes are, for the most part, lower than those in developing countries (Little, 2007a). In addition, teacher preparation is of good quality and is adequately funded compared to, for example, Myanmar, where classes in rural schools may have more than 60 pupils and where the often multi-grade rural teachers lack adequate teacher training (Hardman, Stoff, Aung, & Elliott, 2014).

Before presenting the backgrounds and contexts of our articles, we must explain where our research fits within the general discourse regarding rural schools. There are two primary strands of discussion connected to teaching and learning in rural schools. One discourse follows the line that rural schools are inferior as they cannot offer the same opportunities for students to attain high educational success (Bouck, 2004; DeYoung, 1987; Harrison & Busher, 1995). With respect to educational equality, it bears asking whether children from rural areas are disadvantaged in terms of their school careers due to social or cultural factors. In response, there seems to be no such disadvantage when the national test results of primary students in their final year in urban schools in France are compared with the results of their counterparts from rural schools in France (Alpe, 2012). More specifically, both groups exhibit approximately the same average results in French and in mathematics. However, while this finding is also observed for, for instance, England (Hargreaves, Comber, & Galton, 1996) or Catalonia (Alpe, 2012), in less favourable economic European countries, such as Romania, rural schools have higher proportions of unqualified teachers, and the related students' performances are lower (Bîrzea et al., 2006). Another way to assess educational equality is to compare students' ambitions for further education. Here, Alpe (2012) found that graduates from rural colleges compared to graduates from urban colleges chose shorter programmes at universities, and more started apprenticeships. Another issue observable in all countries is the isolation of the teacher, especially in extremely small one-teacher schools with multi-grade classes. In addition to the absence of colleagues, contacts with other school-related actors, such as inspectors, teacher trainers, and school counsellors, are also rarer in remote areas. It is common in small rural schools for few teachers to cover all subjects and after-school programmes, which means that these teachers may have fewer opportunities to exchange teaching ideas and to deepen their experience in specific subjects or themes. From the student's perspective, the small number of teachers leads to reduced opportunities to meet and be influenced by different types of teachers and different educational pedagogies.

Conversely, there is a discourse that describes rural schools as a place for experimentation and pedagogical innovation, where solutions for difficulties encountered by urban schools in disfavoured areas can be found. There is a movement for small schools in urban areas (Strike, 2008) that has its origins in studies on rural schools (Barker & Gump, 1964). Rural schools are a matter of interest to researchers, teachers and policy-makers not only because rural school environments provide a more open and safe school climate where teachers and students know each other well but also because of the pedagogical aspects of learning in and organising multi-grade classes. For example, in the United States, child-centred strategies for teaching multi-age classes are of increased interest in public school systems (Hoffman, 2003). Generalising the pedagogical benefits of small, rural schools would be naïve. As Supovitz (2002) posits, to make learning in smaller schools beneficial for students, continuing team collaboration that focuses on instructional practices is necessary. As multi-grading is not yet an instructional strategy, there is no guarantee that teaching is adapted to the individual needs of the students (Hattie, 2002). To expand this discussion, we explain, in Section 3, how mixed-age approaches match with general models of instructional design. Section 4 attempts to overcome the antagonism towards rural and urban schools by linking mixed-age approaches to adaptive teaching. While this theory is more comprehensive, it also focuses on how to adapt instruction to the needs of a class with heterogeneous learners.

## 2. Teaching and learning in rural schools

Many urban schools actively pursue a smaller is better model. A number of the urban schools in the U.S. are awarded large grants, while on the other hand, many small schools in rural areas are forced to close or merge to save money (Jimerson, 2006). From the perspective of a rural or urban context, we regard schools as place dependent (Hargreaves et al., 2009). However, when does a school have a rural context? The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (1996, 2009) uses a typology based on two criteria. The first one identifies rural communities as those with a population density less than 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. The second criterion, which distinguishes regions according to the percentage of inhabitants living in rural communities, is classified as follows. Predominantly rural areas, over 50% of the population lives in rural communities. Predominantly urban areas, less than 15% of the population lives in rural communities. Significantly rural areas, intermediate regions where the percentage of the population that lives in rural communities is between 15 and 50%. For educational research, however, a careful description of the local context rather than fixed numbers is more informative (Coladarci, 2007). For example, the rural context is often observed as a place where ties between community and schools are strong and local parents might fight to prevent school closures due to dwindling school numbers. In a study of school closures in rural Finnish communities, Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2014) found that schools are regarded as the "heart of the villages". According to their study, the school is not only a place to educate children but also the centre of the village's social life. In addition to human and cultural capital, schools build and maintain social capital, playing a pivotal role in constructing a local identity.

While the relation between the school and the surrounding area is significant, neither place-based education nor social meaning of the school is the focus of our special edition. Nonetheless, the teachers in the schools presented in our four

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