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Multi-grade teaching practices in Austrian and Finnish primary schools

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the teaching strategies used in multi-grade classes in five small rural primary schools in Austria and Finland on the basis of the content analysis of transcribed teacher interviews. Two main types of strategies were identified: practices that (1) aim to reduce or (2) capitalize on students' heterogeneity. The results illustrate how differently multi-grade teaching can be realized and how it can effectively support individual student learning. The findings are discussed with regard to teacher education with the intention of increasing the awareness of the professional skills required in high-quality teaching practices in multi-grade teaching.

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1. Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to the discussion of rural education and teaching in multi-grade classes by reporting an investigation into the teaching strategies used by teachers of such classes in rural primary schools. The main focus is on small schools in Austria and Finland, defined in our study as schools with fewer than fifty students.¹ In general, small schools are rural primary schools. They usually employ two or three teachers who teach different grades in the same classroom; this is called multi-grade or multi-age teaching. Concern over the closure of small schools and the related reduction in multi-grade teaching has motivated research on the subject. The contributions in the edited volume on multi-grade teaching based on the "Second International Multi-grade Teaching Conference" showed that multi-grade teaching is common throughout the world, in both developed and developing countries (Cornish, 2006a). The conference was held in Bangkok in September 2004. Accordingly, the *International Journal of Educational Research* highlighted the importance of rural school studies by publishing a special issue on the topic in 2009 that included reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in Norway, Sweden, Finland, England, and Scotland. The review articles were, however, based on studies conducted ten years ago or more, and thus the need for new and diverse research is clear (Kvalsund & Hargreaves, 2009).

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¹ How a school is defined as small or big is a contested issue. Statistics Finland defines a small school as belonging to one of three categories based on the number of pupils attending: fewer than 20 pupils, fewer than 50 pupils, or fewer than 100 pupils (Tilastokeskus, 1991). In Austria, a small school usually refers to a school with multi-grade classes located in a peripheral rural area (Müller et al., 2011).

In the discussions about maintaining or closing small rural schools, pedagogical arguments have often been neglected, which have motivated our research interest in how teachers actually teach their multi-grade classes. It has been argued that multi-grade teaching has certain benefits, including student-centered learning and teaching processes, flexible teaching, a family-like and secure atmosphere, the ease of implementing innovative change, support for individual learning tempos, and flexible school-entry (e.g., Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). However, multi-grade teaching can also be seen as especially challenging because of the widely varying needs of children of different ages. Despite its importance in primary education, there has been a lack of research on the practices used in multi-grade teaching. This article seeks to address this gap. Our research question “What kinds of teaching practices are used in multi-grade classes?” focuses on the *micro-level* of school pedagogy (Fend, 2006) with the aim of identifying the learning and teaching possibilities and resources that are supported or available in multi-grade classrooms. The study is based on empirical data consisting of narrative interviews of Austrian and Finnish primary school teachers. Austria and Finland are compatible case-studies for this internationally relevant topic because of the prevalence and the long tradition of multi-grade teaching in both countries. Their cultural differences with regard to basic education and teacher education support the cross-cultural analysis (Lahelma and Gordon, 2010), allowing us to uncover differences as well as similar patterns of multi-grade teaching practices across the two countries.

To understand education in multi-grade teaching, the definitions of multi-grade teaching proposed by Cornish (2006b) and Kalaoja (2006) are used as a theoretical framework. Based on the research results, we will additionally discuss how multi-grade teaching challenges teacher education, as both countries seem to have deficits with respect to professional training for multi-grade classes. We will also investigate whether the teaching practices used in multi-grade classes can be considered generalizable methods of dealing with heterogeneity and diversity.

2. Previous research and theoretical background

From a European perspective, there has been little research on teaching and learning in small rural schools over the last two decades (Kvalsund & Hargreaves, 2009), and information on the incidence of multi-grade teaching is difficult to find (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Little (2001) points out that most research on multi-grade teaching has focused on its impact on students' learning. The discussion of multi-grade teaching has often addressed the question of whether students' learning results are better in single-grade classes or in multi-grade classes, but studies have generally not found significant differences between these two forms (e.g., Veenman, 1995; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Lindström & Lindahl, 2011).

According to Hoffman (2003), around the year 2000, the increased awareness of multi-age education as a child-centered strategy began to arouse interest in the practice throughout the United States as well as in many other countries. For example, in the Central-European German-speaking research area, multi-grade teaching has been investigated in recent years, especially from the point of view of school reform. The practice has been seen as a possibility to optimize the phase of school beginning, as multi-grade teaching enables flexible school entry and does not “dramatize” developmental differences between children (Heinzel, 2007, p. 38). Multi-grade classes may also reduce the problems associated with grade repetition for students who have not met achievement objectives. Because students do not have to change classes according to age group, their class communities remain in part the same, ensuring the continuity of social relations (Kucharz & Wagener, 2009). In 2009, a collaborative research project on small village schools entitled *Schule im alpinen Raum* (“Schools in Alpine regions”) was launched in Austria and Switzerland. The aim of the project is to clarify how Alpine schools (with multi-grade classes) can offer equitable educational opportunities. The empirical data are collected primarily through questionnaires and interviews with school leaders, teachers, students, and villagers (Müller, Keller, Kerle, Raggl, & Steiner, 2011). The results indicate that only a few of the small schools under investigation utilize the possibilities of heterogeneous multi-grade classes; instead, teaching is organized such that each grade works mainly on its own assignments (Raggl, 2011).

In Finland, most of the empirical research on pedagogy in small schools was conducted more than ten years ago by Kalaoja, who has studied both teaching in rural schools and the relationships between schools and local communities (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). In the 2000s, a few dissertations on the topic were completed: Karlberg-Granlund's (2009) research focuses on the pedagogy, culture, and structure of village schools, while Kilpeläinen (2010) examines learning and growth environments in rural schools as described by teachers.

There have only been a few studies on the historical development of multi-grade teaching. Kalaoja (2006) investigates the different phases of multi-grade teaching in Finland since the end of the nineteenth century. He calls the first phase the “parallel curriculum”, in which a common theme was presented for all the grades but each grade was taught in turn. During the following phase, starting in the early 1950s, one important concept focused on decreasing the number of teaching groups in the classroom, which allowed the “alternating curriculum” system to be introduced: The curriculum was rotated, meaning that the entire class studied the syllabus of one grade for a year. In the next school year, they followed the syllabus for the other grade. This alternating curriculum has not been used in mathematics, Finnish or other languages. The most extensive change process in multi-grade teaching in Finland began in the 1970s, a phase that was characterized by the “spiral curriculum”—a concept strongly supported by the ideas of Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 2006). The theoretical precept was that the basic concepts of every subject should be taught in the lower grades, if possible, and then the subject matter should be deepened and expanded on in the upper grades. The aim was to take each student's level of development into account more carefully, similar to current theories of multi-age teaching. In our study, we are interested in whether and how the various curriculum forms studied by Kalaoja (2006) are still in use in multi-grade teaching.

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