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What can be learned from Spanish rural schools? Conclusions from an international project



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ABSTRACT

This article presents some of the processes and results of the Spanish part of an international research project focused on the analysis of teaching and learning components in rural schools. The work was conducted within the frame of an interpretative model combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results from three case studies show the components of multi-grade classrooms that use participative and active didactic strategies to acquire competences. In this research, we focused on methodologies, organization of time and space, materials and methods of evaluation. The conclusions might be transferred to other types of schools and could improve the quality of education in general.

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1. Introduction

This article presents the Spanish results of the international research project “Effectiveness and quality of competence acquisition characterize the rural school: Can this model be transferred to other types of schools?” The research was performed from 2009 to 2014 with the participation of Chile, Uruguay, France, Portugal and Spain.

As we progressed in the research, we realized that the title of our project is full of aspects that first needed to be resolved. The statement, “effectiveness and quality of competence acquisition characterize the rural school” is related to the results of basic skills evidence in all participating countries. As Weinert says (1999), competences are related to an individually or inter-individually available collection of prerequisites for successful action in meaningful task domains. This is related to the students’ learning and is evaluated by official exams. In Spain, for example, this government exam is at the end of each cycle in primary and is about skills in maths and language.

In the main question of the project, if this *model* can be transferred to other types of schools, it is important to explain what we intend by the term *model*. By model, we mean a rural school with multi-grade classes with practices of teaching and learning based on the idea that diversity leads to educational benefits, as Cornish (2006) describes the multi-age classroom. To explore this model, as discussed below, we focus on different components: teaching methods, organization of the lesson time and space, materials and methods of evaluation. These categories are detailed in a brief glossary in the methodology section.

It is essential to understand the research context. First, we present the general education system in Spain and second, the context of rural Spain.

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1.1. General education system in Spain

The Spanish education system is organized in three stages: childhood education, primary education and then compulsory secondary education. Each comprising different cycles (composed by two years).

The first stage is childhood education (between four months and six years of age) composed of two cycles. The second stage has three cycles of primary education (between six and twelve years of age), and the third final stage has two cycles more of compulsory secondary education (twelve to sixteen years of age). Primary and secondary stages constitute the basic education, including ten years of schooling. At the end of each cycle, there is an official exam that evaluates skills. In each stage, there is a different type of teacher and specific university degree. Childhood education is taught by a childhood education teacher; to teach a primary class, it is necessary to be a primary school teacher, whereas in secondary education, there is a different teacher for each subject (e.g. maths and chemistry) and you need the degree for your subject and then a master for didactics. Our study has focused on childhood and primary education because the Spanish rural schools admit only children of these ages (between three and twelve years of age). All of the teachers acquired the degree of “Primary or Childhood education teacher” but they did not receive specific training for multigrade teaching.

1.2. Rural Spain: Andalusia, Aragon and Catalonia

The reality of rural education in Spain is diverse; it changes depending on the territory. The Spanish territorial organization divides the country into seventeen autonomous communities (CA), each with their own jurisdiction in educational matters. Each CA has its own educational policies, particularly in reference to education in the rural territories of its jurisdiction and reaches (Abós et al., 2015). The groupings of rural schools in each territory also take on distinct identities and conceptualizations such as Group Rural Centres¹ (CRA), Rural School Zones² (ZER) and Rural Public Schools³ (CPR), among others. However, the idea of the rural school and the multi-grade classroom is similar throughout the territory. We can find in each territory one-room schools and schools with numerous multi-grade classes (by cycles or not by cycles). The present study focuses on three CAs with significant rural areas: Andalusia, Aragon and Catalonia.

With reference to the number of rural education centres, Andalusia is the second most rural CA in Spain, after Castile and Leon (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2012). In the southernmost CA of Spain, Andalusia, 126CPRs include 460 schools and another 47 schools that are not included in the groupings. The rural school network covers more than 16,000 students. We found that most of the centres are located in mountainous regions or beyond a certain distance from areas of medium to large populations. In Aragon, during school in 2011, there were 75CRAs with 822 school units in 433 municipalities, with 9816 students and 1196 teachers. Finally, Catalonia also has a significant presence of rural schools, which are notable not as much for their number of students as for the geographical territory that they cover. For the 946 Catalan municipalities, there are 278 rural schools. Of these, 218 are members of a ZER, and the rest are functional groupings (rural schools that are not a part of a ZER), according to Abós et al. (2015).

2. Educational research about rural education and multi-grade classrooms—the main question and objectives of the project

Keeping in mind that our research is centred on an analysis of the components of the multi-grade classroom in actual practice, conceptually addressing the different terminologies of the multi-grade classroom is vital. The components that we analysed are the participative and active didactic methods, the organization of time, the classroom space, teaching materials and the methods of evaluation. Our aim was to reach conclusions that could be transferred to other types of schools and improve the quality of education.

First, we will discuss the background of rural education and second, the process of teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms. We understand the multi-grade classroom as a place where competences are acquired based on participative and active didactic methodologies.

2.1. About rural education and multi-grade classrooms research

It is important to note that the latest review of international relevance on rural education research shows that it is one of the less researched areas (Coladarci, 2007; Little, 1995, 2001). Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) add that good research about rural education is missing. In Europe, Kvalsund, Hargreaves, and Galton (2009) in a review of research

¹ The CRA is a grouped public educational institution consisting of nursery and primary rural schools established with the purpose of providing a quality higher education service in areas with low school demographics in Spain. All schools have a common educational project, and they share specialist teachers such as music, physical education and English.

² A ZER is an institution similar to a CRA but in Catalonia. The difference is that each rural school has its own project and the different schools share a common educational project and specialist teachers.

³ A CPR consists of sections or sets of classrooms located in different towns (which would correspond to rural schools that existed before clustering) whose purpose is to share resources and faculty and develop joint activities and meetings that favour the socialization process of students. The different schools operate as though they were a single centre.

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