THE PEDAGOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RURAL SCHOOL. INCLUSION IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSROOMS

A case study

- Summary (English version) -

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Presentation

This doctoral dissertation, titled *The pedagogical contributions of the rural school. Inclusion in multi-grade classrooms. A case study*, corresponds to the development of a research project that began in the academic year 2007-2008. My primary motivation for enrolling in the doctoral program was my desire to expand my knowledge of rural schooling A pre-doctoral grant by the Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Humanities and Translation at the University of Vic enabled me to carry out this research.

My teaching experience in rural schools, the different existing discourses from teachers and professionals, and the lack of educational research on rural schools, were all factors that motivated me to start this research, as I explain in the first chapter, which is autobiographical. There, I also discuss how the research questions and aims have been transformed, to the point of arriving at the central question of the dissertation, in which I ask: What elements of rural schools and multigrade classrooms can promote inclusion?

Unlike rural schools, inclusive education is surely one of the most studied themes within educational research. However, research bringing these topics together is almost inexistent. Therefore, this dissertation, in addition to contributing to our knowledge of rural schools, also attempts to undertake an initial step towards uniting these issues. The background of each is addressed in the second chapter, the theoretical framework.

During my research, I found it necessary to establish a series of research objectives that allowed me to approach the topic. For example, before I started, I needed to conceptualize the term "rural school" in a way that avoided generalizations, exploring different elements that, according to the Secretariat of Rural Schools in Catalonia (hereinafter SERC), define the rural school. During the process I also needed to inquire into the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practice because, as I will explain below, my fieldwork required it.

The methodological decisions that I took over the course of the project, while designing the research, developing the case study, analysing the data, etc. are elaborated on in the third chapter that corresponds to the articulation of the problem and methodology of the empirical research.

Next, I present the body of the research, the case study. In Chapter 4, I introduce the municipality of Rellinars and its school. Then, in the following chapters I expand on the characteristics of the Rellinars school and I analyse it from the perspective of inclusion. Although my original intention was to focus on inclusive educational practices from the point of view of teaching methods, during the research I changed course when discovering how the culture of the centre was key to supporting (and understanding)

the inclusive practices I was observing in the classroom. For this reason, the case study takes a broader dimension, looking at both teaching and the educational community (the teachers and staff, families and the environment).

Chapter 5, therefore, centres on teaching practices in the school classroom, and the Chapter 6 focuses on the development of the teacher community. Chapter 7 expands on the synergies that emerge between the educational community and the local context, after presenting the School Educational Project (PEC). While still reflecting on the case study, I also return, in Chapter 8, to the discourses that emerge around rural schooling which I mentioned at the beginning.

The last chapter contains the conclusions to this research project, which in reality emerged throughout the entire process, especially during the development of the case study. In the final chapter I attempt to synthesise the answers to my main question and reflect on the extent to which I achieved the objectives I had defined at the start. Finally, the bibliography and the annexes complement the work.

This document contains a summary of the main contributions made in each chapter of this dissertation, but is not a full translation of the dissertation, which is written in Catalan. This a shortened version was developed for the purpose of allowing the main points of my dissertation to be read in English.

Vilafranca del Penedès, Catalonia, Spain

CHAPTER 1: LOOKING BACK AND WRITING THE PRESENT

> *Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.*
> – Soren Kierkegaard

The first chapter alludes to my past, to my personal and professional trajectory, 32 years in the making. This is the moment for self-reflection and for inquiring into key issues. In the first section, I will try to answer such vital questions as: *Why am I a teacher? Why did I begin researching? What have I gained from writing a doctoral dissertation? Why did I choose to study rural schools?*

In the second section, I review my first steps as a researcher and in the third, I address the different pedagogical questions and reflections that have emerged and which now serve as the foundation for this research project. The fourth section includes the specific research questions of this dissertation and the following section contains the main aims of this project. Finally, the sixth section details the way the following chapters are organized.

The underlying question: What do I wish to achieve with my research?

This dissertation attempts to analyse and contribute to our understanding of the process of learning and teaching in multi-grade classrooms in rural schools. Specifically, it aims to deepen our knowledge of the educational practices that accept the heterogeneity of the students—in other words, inclusive educational practices in the broadest sense of the term—and which can thus respond to every individual.

The main question and central preoccupation of this dissertation is the following:

> *Which elements of rural school and multi-grade*
> *classrooms can promote inclusion?*

This question allows me to begin the study, while at the same time it serves as the path that guided me as I search for understanding and possible answers throughout the process, especially at the end. The objectives that I set out in order to be able to respond to this main question, and which also have guided this project, are the following:

1.   To explore, describe and analyse, while avoiding generalizations, the concept of "rural school", by reviewing different definitions that have been used over time.

2.   To inquire into the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practices.

3.   To identify and elaborate on the elements of rural schooling that can promote inclusion.

4.   To describe and interpret the elements of multi-grade schooling that can promote inclusion.

Regarding the first and second objectives, they were developed during the research process when it became apparent that I needed to respond to these issues in order to carry out the investigation. However, the third and fourth objectives relate to the main question I am trying to respond to. In the following chapter I will introduce the theoretical framework that supports this research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. INCLUSION IN RURAL SCHOOLS AND MULTI-GRADE CLASSROOMS

In this chapter I develop the theoretical framework and expand on the key themes that make up the core of this dissertation. These themes are: inclusion, the definition of "rural school", and the didactic and pedagogical elements specific to multi-grade classrooms. Each one, as we will see below, configure the objectives of this research and are addressed in the main question:

> *Which elements of rural schools and multi-grade classrooms can promote inclusion?*

Of the three themes that derive from the research question, the most studied is, beyond a doubt, that of inclusion in schools. Although the research conducted on inclusion is very extensive, there are a lack of studies that relate to rural school or multigrade classrooms. For this reason, the preparation of this chapter has been a theoretical challenge and it contributes in a small way to expanding our understanding of inclusion in rural schools, opening up a niche which hopes to be filled by future research.

The division of this chapter into three sections responds to the three key themes mentioned above. In Section 2.1, I am obliged to begin by situating the inclusive perspective, as well as the inclusive educational practices, policies and cultures, from which I focus my own research. In Section 2.2, I look at the rural school in the Catalonian context and provide an initial analysis of the term that lies at the heart of this entire project. Finally, in relation to the elements connected to teaching methods, in Section 2.3, I develop a literature review pertaining to a specific qualities of rural schools, multi-grade classrooms.

CHAPTER 3: ARTICULATING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

> *The term methodology refers to the way we approach problems, and the way in which we seek answers to those problems. In the social sciences this is applied according to how an investigation is carried out. Our assumptions, interests, and purposes shape which methodology we choose.*
> – Taylor & Bogdan (1986:15. Author's translation)

In this chapter I discuss the process behind developing the empirical study, explaining the different decisions that I took during the five years needed to complete this investigation. In particular I will share the research problem, the process of designing the research and the methodological approach which, as Taylor and Bogdan (1986: 15. Author's translation) discuss, is conditioned by my own "assumptions, interests, and purposes."

Chapter 2, which was more autobiographical, invited the reader to share the starting point and initial design of the research project. Meanwhile, this current chapter will focus more on the actual development of the methodological approach, which I undertook once having made these initial decisions. Keeping in mind that the word "method" comes from the Greek word *methodos*, or "meta" ('towards' or 'during') and "odos" ('journey' or 'path'), the concept conjures an image of a trail that leads to a milestone. Van Manen (2003:45. Author's translation) describes how the direction of the trail is determined by the methodology that is chosen:

> The methodology marks a path that the method follows, defining a specific way of researching.

Throughout the process I have taken different methodological decisions, some arising from the nature of my dissertation questions or conditioned by readings, reflections, supervisions, etc.. and others determined by the fieldwork itself. Some changes have led to moments of uncertainty and have produced some discontinuities in the course of preparing the investigation. I needed to get to the end of the process in order to to write this chapter, because the passing of time allowed me to gain the perspective I needed in order to explain and justify the decisions I've made. This experience resonates with Barbery (2007:159. Author's translation), who comments:

> We feel readjustments within, the nature of which we are nearly incapable of describing but which, at the same time, are mental and spatial, like moving houses.

I have divided the process of thinking and rethinking the dissertation into different sections. First, I present the focus of the research problem and the research aims.

Then, I justify the epistemological and methodological approach. In the last section I describe the entire process, detailing each phase.

3.1 Articulating the problem and the research aims

This section discusses the process that led me to articulate the research problem and define the research objectives. This took place in the first year, parallel to the literature review I carried out. In my case, this process was something I struggled through.

Starting in 2007, when I began the first courses in the doctoral program, I knew I wanted my research to focus on rural schools, specifically in relation to the teaching methods used. In fact, I enrolled in the program because I had a desire to research this very topic. In spite of my early initial interest, it look a while for me to frame and articulate the main question that would guide my investigation. I could not truly start my research until, as my co-supervisors insisted, I had a few *good questions*, just as Ackoff (1953) affirms when claiming that a properly constructed question is already a partially resolved one; the more specific it is the more likely it is that it can be answered satisfactorily. Not having an adequately defined research question made it impossible to begin and this I was lead to read and configure a general theoretical framework.

By reviewing the background and history of rural schools I determined that this was one of the research areas that has been least studied (Coladarci, 2007). Research in this area would cite the need to go deeper into aspects related to teaching methods, specifically in multi-grade classrooms, with a focus on the role of the teacher. For this reason, my initial questions were related to the teaching practices of teachers that were able to address diversity in a rural school context. Later, the term "addressing diversity" was substituted for "recognizing heterogeneity", but even so the phrase was not enough for what needed as a central question of my doctoral dissertation.

As with what I presented for my MA dissertation (or DEA, in Spanish) (2009), the research problem that I eventually defined was solid enough to justify beginning the study, using criteria adapted from Ackoff (1953) and Miller (1977). The problem responded affirmatively to almost all the questions proposed by these authors related to: its appropriateness, its social relevance, practical implications, theoretical grounding and the methodological approach. However, the problem was still unfocused. I thought it would be useful to review the literature on methodology and, according to Kerlinger (1975), who proposes three criteria for defining an adequate research problem, I realized that I still did not have a *dissertation question* and that I needed to continue developing it:

1.   The problem should express a relationship between two or more variables. In my case I knew I wanted to study teaching practices that were capable of addressing or recognizing diversity/heterogeneity in multi-grade classrooms in rural schools. In this

case the variables were not stated in relation to each other and the concepts used were diffuse.

2.   The problem should be formulated in a clear and concise manner and stated as a question. For example: who does it affect? Under what conditions? What happens if...? How does X relate to Y? In my case I did not have a clear question that I was asking and I did not have concise definitions of the concepts I was trying to work with (what does diversity mean? What does it mean to recognize heterogeneity?). I knew what I was referring to but I didn't know how to translate this interest into a research question.

3.   The proposal should be such that it can be proven empirically, in other words, it should address something that can be observed. In my case my interest did meet the third criterion: teaching practices in multi-grade classrooms are observable. However, given that my question didn't meet the first two criteria, it would have to be revised and reformulated.

After a period of forced pause, accompanied by intense conversations aimed at better defining the research problem, an important moment occurred when I began to review literature on inclusive education and, as I explained in the first chapter, was able to study it more in-depth during a research visit with Mel Ainscow's research team at the University of Manchester, in the summer of 2010. This was a very productive stay and I was able to develop the research design (Annex 6). The doctoral sessions with Susie Miles, the weekly supervision meetings with Mel Ainscow and the readings he recommended (Kugelmass, 2004; Advari-Solner, 1996; Bartolomé, 1994) led me to make decisions and move forward, and ultimately accomplish what I had set out to do during the visit. One thing I achieved, in line with the criteria for a good dissertation question that Kerlinger (1975) proposed, was introduce the concept of inclusion and to refer to educational practices that could promote inclusion.

Thus, in relation to my interest in researching the role of the teacher in rural schools, I decided to analyse and study in-depth the pedagogical understandings teachers in rural schools had that related to their ability to recognize heterogeneity. Some of the questions I formulated were: How do teachers' conceptions influence their answers to different students? Which pedagogical conceptions promote or facilitate heterogeneity in rural schools? And, which elements of a rural school promote inclusion? As a result of these questions, the main questions I wanted to respond to was: to what extent do multi-grade classrooms contribute to (the construction of) inclusive thinking (on behalf of teachers).

In accordance with the complex and social nature of the problem I wished to study, I aimed to approach the research from a perspective closely aligned to constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008), carrying out a nested case study:

composed of a series of case studies, one for each teacher at the rural school I chose, all of which are part of the main case study. One of the techniques I found necessary, in addition to the observations and interviews, was to make note of the critical incidents[1]. I spent a considerable amount of time studying this technique (Angelides, 1999; Martínez, 2003; Woods, 1993; Entwistle, 1989).

However, in October 2010, when I decided to start the fieldwork, my contact with reality made me reformulate the research design. I realized that the questions related to the study of teachers' concepts and beliefs were better suited to Psychology, a discipline other than my own, whereas others did develop from a pedagogical perspective, those relate to teaching practices or the elements of multi-grade classrooms and rural schools that promote inclusion. I was led to reaffirm my questions related to multi-grade education, rural schools and inclusion, partly because the bibliography I was working with highlighted the need for more study on teaching methods in multi-grade classrooms and also because there was not a lot of prior research connecting these three concepts. After reflecting and discussing with my supervisors, I was able to formalize the questions and the main objectives of the research, which I will discuss in the following section.

Dissertation questions and aims

The different research questions for the dissertation recuperate the original idea of looking at teaching methods but, as I expressed earlier, were brought into focus by introducing the perspective of inclusion that I was able to develop during my research visit.

The question driving the dissertation is the following:

> *Which elements of rural schools and multi-grade classrooms can promote inclusion?*

In order to respond to this question, I needed to explore what "rural schools", "multi-grade education" and "inclusion" meant. The definition of these terms was necessary for carrying out the research and therefore became part of my research objectives (objectives 1 and 2). Objectives 3 and 4 aim to respond to the main question, which

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[1]Flanagan (1954:327), comments that "critical incidents are those occurrences in professional practice that make us perpelxed, create doubts, produce surprise or which bothered or unsettled us due to their lack of coherency, or for having appeared unexpectedly. They are those moments in everyday life (extracted form our own experiences) that impact or surprise us (positively or negatively) and which motivate or provoke reflection. They are not necessarily *critical* situations in their gravity or vital risk. Rather, they are critical in the sense that they are surprising, unexpected or upsetting for a professional analysing his/her own practice." [Author's translation.]

can be divided into two parts: the elements of rural schools and those of multi-grade classrooms which can promote inclusion. The objectives are the following:

1.   To explore, describe and analyse, while avoiding generalizations, the concept of rural school, by reviewing different definitions that have been used over time.

2.   To inquire into the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practices.

3.   To identify and elaborate on the elements of rural schooling that can promote inclusion.

4.   To describe and interpret the elements of multi-grade schooling that can promote inclusion.

Now having articulated the main questions and established the research objectives, which will allow me to focus the research, I will discuss the epistemological and methodological approach used for this study.

3.2 The epistemological and methodological approach

This dissertation attempts to describe, develop, understand, contrast and interpret the educational realities of a rural school, based on the meanings that the people there assign to it. For this reason, this topic required an epistemological and methodological approach that would allow me to capture the reality it its complexity, in order to "be able to understand the complex world and the lived experience from the perspective of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994:118. Author's translation).

The epistemological presuppositions on which the alternative to the positivist perspective is based stem from two theoretical constructs that emerge from Philosophy and Sociology: phenomenology and hermeneutics (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Phenomenology seeks to understand social phenomenons from the perspective of those who experience them, and recognizes that the researcher can project her/his own subjectivity onto the case. The hermeneutic tradition also takes the subject as its starting point, based on the assumption that the meaning of the social world is constructed and reconstructed continually by those who participate in it.

The research conducted within the framework of these two perspectives is considered *naturalistic*, given that it is carried out in a 'natural' context, and not experimentally manipulated by the researcher, and also *interpretative* because it focuses on understanding the actions of the participants themselves. This perspective believes in the need to know and understand human action, as opposed to human behaviour, and believes that the causes of these actions reside in the meaning assigned to them by the people who have done them, more so than can be found through the similarity of observed behaviours (Van Manen, 1983).

To become familiar with the educational reality, I used an interpretative perspective within educational research, because it focuses precisely on how people interpret their social reality and the relationship they maintain with it (Gadamer, 1994; 1996). In the same vein as the nature of the questions posed at the beginning, they also involve adopting a methodological approach that enables me to explore and underscore the complexity of the phenomena under study, such as inclusive educational elements and practices and which reflections, actions and interpretations different subjects have and share. Since I understand that social phenomena are constructed, the methodology chosen should include the people who are involved and should allow me to approach reality in a complex manner in order to capture different sides of the issue. For this reason, the proposed methodological framework that will provide answers to the objectives set out will be constructionism

The constructionist research perspective

The socially constructed nature of this research draws on the constructionist perspective (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). This position guides and highlights the dynamic contours of social reality and the processes by which meaning is assigned and configured. In other words, reflecting on the social construction of reality implies a de-stereotyped vision of the researcher that "involves paying empirical attention to those processes that are considered ordinary and taken for granted and *naturalized*, questioning 'common sense' and problematizing general assumptions and those aspects of experience that are often treated as something that should be discovered, annotated and analysed" (Sancho et al, 2011:17. Author's translation).

In conclusion, a constructionist epistemology guides the research to interpret social (and consequently educational) phenomena, and is interested in the study of the meanings and intentions behind human actions from the perspective of social actors. It considers the words, actions and oral and written documents to study social situations as they are constructed by participants (Mayka & Morehouse, 1994). Thus, I have collected a set of meanings and given meaning to them, by listening to the words spoken by the people involved, directly observing reality, and so on.

Given the sensitivity required to explore and understand what happens in a particular educational context, along with the need to find strategies and research techniques that respond to my epistemological and methodological approach, I chose the ethnographic case study as a research method. This strategy allows for the development of a holistic and detailed study of the phenomenon investigated within the actual context in which it occurs. A study that is at once comprehensive and concrete, as Stake (1998:11. Author's translation) affirms:

> The study of the particular and the complex in a singular case, in order to gain an understanding of their role in important circumstances.

According to Yin (1994), questions beginning with "how" and "why" in relation to a contemporary event, a process, etc. are appropriate for a case study. Although the main dissertation question begins with "which", it implicitly contains a "how", given that I wish to respond to the way in which the elements in question promote inclusion. Therefore I believe that a case study to studying the following question is an apt choice:

> *Which elements of rural schools and multi-grade classrooms can promote inclusion?*

In the following section I will describe, step by step, the phases of the research process starting from when I first arrived at the "main research question" until the development of the study and the and final writing of the dissertation.

3.3 The research phases

In this section I explain the different research phases, distinguishing between three moments: the literature review, the conceptual analysis of the term 'rural school', and the elaboration of the ethnographic case study. While detailing the various stages with some apparent chronological order, their final production was conducted in parallel, and for each section I will explain the process more specifically.

3.3.1 Review of prior work in the field

As I mentioned in the Chapter 1, my study of the history and background of rural schools started when I enrolled in my graduate program, during the 2007-08 academic year, because I was interested in the subject. At the time, the literature was very focused on the environment and the rural school, with research focusing on ICT and multi-grade education. Later, during the 2009-10 academic year, I delved into the background of multi-grade education, and from May to September, 2010, I was able to use my stay in Manchester to further my understanding of inclusive education and finalize the research design. Afterwards, during the 2010-11 academic year, I detected a need for developing a conceptual analysis of the term 'rural school' in order to continue the research. To carry this out I based my review on historical texts dating from the late nineteenth century to present day Catalonia and Spain. In the same school year I carried out the field work in the school and in the summer of 2011, transcribed the material, extracted the data and analysed the documents. The following year, 2011-12, I began the data analysis and interpretation and, between March and July, 2012, during my stay at Stanford University, I began writing the case study. At this time, I also did a literature review focused on the role of teachers and faculty groups, supervised by Professor Ann Lieberman. This final year, 2012-13, I spent writing the dissertation itself. I would also add that my participation in different types

of research projects over the years has enabled me to enrich the literature review, in terms of both content and methodology.

3.3.2 Analysing the concept based on the *history of the concept*

As I explained in the previous section, the need for further conceptualization of the term rural school emerged during the first year of the dissertation. In spite of numerous existing definitions, I wanted to do a conceptual analysis by bringing those definitions together, in an effort to better understand the term. The analysis was carried out during the year 2010-11, based on a selection of forty-two texts, by thirty-six different authors[2] who refer to the concept from a historical point of view.

The analysis focused on the history of the concept, as I explained in Chapter 2, Section 2. My work attempted to "trace the various meanings of a concept that are accumulated in stratigraphic layers that are reactivated in each effective use of language" (Vilanou, 2006:166. Author's translation). This perspective lead me to employ a methodology that involved developing a conceptual analysis of the term rural school using the readings and interpretations of texts and definitions. The aim was to explore and see how these different levels of meaning are articulated.

3.3.3 Weaving an ethnographic case study

The sensitivity provided to discover and understand firsthand what happens in a particular educational context, along with the need to find strategies that correspond to my epistemological and methodological approach, lead me to opt for doing a case study. As noted by Stake (1985:283. Author's translation), "if you need to know the complexity and context of individual cases, the case study is necessary." I chose the case study because it was quite clear that I wanted to based may fieldwork in a rural school and as Stake has observed (1994: 236-237. Author's translation):

> The case study is not a methodological option, it is a choice about the object of study. As a form research, the case study is defined by its interest in particular cases, not for the research methods used (…). The case study is both the process of inquiry about the case and the product of our inquiry.

A case study is ethnographic in that it allows us to, according to Woods (1995:45. Author's translation), "penetrate the layers of reality", which requires the researcher to reject first and second appearances and have an open and sceptic mind. Sancho et al (1998:79. Author's translation) connect the two methodological options:

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[2] The definitions are taken from my own books and from books from university libraries and historical documents found at the historical archive in the Pavelló de la República Library.

Case studies aim to show the complexity of events by contrasting different perspectives, similar to what an ethnographer does when s/he studies the meanings others assign to certain phenomena and writes a tale that captures the voices and experiences s/he has collected.

I qualify that the case study is ethnographic because ethnography involves immersing oneself in the culture of the centre: the institutional culture, the teaching culture, the relationships... My research involved carrying out fieldwork in order to get to know in depth the situations and processes, as well as the school's culture, and also to establish trusting relationships with people in the context so that they act naturally and openly express themselves (Woods, 1995). It is therefore important to know how to find your place within the context. Woods (1987: 50. Author's translation) explains about knowing how to situate yourself as a researcher:

(...) Combine deep personal involvement with a certain detachment. Without the latter, you run the risk of *going native*, i.e., identifying with members to the point where defending their values prevails over your actual study. What saves us from this danger is taking careful field notes and maintaining a reflective attitude that will serve to alert us about changes in our own opinion or views.

In the following section I will describe how I developed the case study, including the negotiation with and entry into the school, the work I carried out, the writing process and the final part, sharing it with the people who were involved.

Selection criteria

Choosing a school for the case study was not an easy decision nor was the selection process clear and linear. At first I intended to choose different centres in order to compare them, but as I was designing the research I realized that to answer the kind of questions I wanted to resolve, comparing schools wouldn't be necessary. I realized it would be more interesting if I chose a case that met the conditions I was interested in, i.e., an inclusive rural school, and then studied it in-depth.

For this reason, I decided to focus on just one rural school, out of all the available options. I further defined the conditions by pondering what my research project needed, thus reducing the options. Finally the conditions I defined were:

a) The centre must be a rural school, meaning it should be located in a small municipality with multi-grade classrooms.
b) The multi-grade classrooms should not be just a convenience for the school system but a result of choices made in accordance with the centre's pedagogical mission.
c) The school needs to see themselves as promoting inclusive educational practices.
d) It would be preferable if a member of the school is part of the Secretariat of Rural Schools in Catalonia (SERC)
e) All the faculty must be willing to participate in the research project.

I finally chose the school in Rellinars because it fulfilled all the aforementioned characteristics, and it was located in a region that was easy for me to get to, falling between my home in Vilafranca de Penedès and the University of Vic, allowing me to easily combine the fieldwork with my work at the university. However, of all the items listed, the one that ended up being the most convincing was that the school director, Xavi, is an active member of the SERC teacher's group and from the start he was enthusiastic about participating in the project. At this point I should explain in more detail how and why I contacted this school, and will dedicate the following section to these questions.

History of a history

It all started in 2006 as part of the XV Conference on Rural Schools for student teachers, held in Vilopriu (Baix Empordà, Catalonia), where, I participated as a member of the organization GIER. Each year there was a day dedicated to visiting rural schools in the area, and that year I had offered to bring a car. Three GIER companions, professors at Ramon Llull-Blanquerna University came with me as well as another person who I didn't know at the time, Xavi. While on the roads leading to the Empordà, I started talking to him. Xavi was working as a teacher in a large charter school in Terrassa but has been reassigned, together with a group of teachers, to a project for a new school, that was currently being presented to the Department of Education, in the Government of Catalonia. The proposed school had the characteristics of a rural school since it would be located in a small municipality, Rellinars, and would have multi-grade classrooms. The conversation did not stop there and we continued during the conference talking about the type of school they were trying to create along with with a group of teachers who had coincided previously in their training and who shared pedagogical affinities. I thought the proposal was very interesting and since that time

that school, while yet to be real, has been alive in my imagination. It made me wonder, will they pull this off? Will they manage to do the project just as they hope? How will they do it?

Every time Xavi and I would meet, again we would talk, and years later, when I had already started the PhD, we had a SERC meeting at the school in Rellinars. Although it was Saturday and the students weren't there, I observed the school and I saw that there were interesting elements that corresponded to the ideas of the director. Months later I returned, during school hours, and after spending the day discussing my initial dissertation questions with the director and with Carme, I realized that there was a mutual desire on all our parts to find answers to what I was interested in asking. The school had elements that helped me make my decision and, ultimately, to choose it as my single case, the place where I would carry out my fieldwork.

The motives behind my choosing to establish these minimum requirements following what Stake affirms (2005:15. Author's translation) when he states that "the first criteria should be to maximize what we can learn from the case." Next, I will reveal what took place when I entered the field.

Arriving on the scene

As I mentioned previously, one of the most important requirements for choosing the centre was that there should be willingness on the part of all faculty to participate in the research. Luckily this case made it easy since the school itself constantly analyses and questions the work it does, and recognizes itself as a "learning school." For this reason, from the day they learned that I wished to do my fieldwork there, the teachers were very receptive and willing to collaborate. When I made a general presentation of my research at the faculty meeting, in June 2010, the teachers emphasized that they wanted this experience to serve as a learning process and that they were very interested in sharing knowledge and experiences relating to their own practice.

I agree with what Erickson (1989) proposes in relation to the tact and diplomacy required when entering the field. The *how* one enters and *who* gives us permission to access and remain in the institution, are issues that should be analysed prior to beginning. For this reason, I was very careful with the process. Knowing the school beforehand and having a personal relationship with the director, as I explained earlier, played a role in facilitating the initial process and entry. Negotiation takes time, tact and a sensitivity to the rhythms and rules of the school and teachers (Latorre, del Rincon & Arnal, 1996), which is why I started in May, 2010, while planning to begin the fieldwork starting in September of the next school year. It was important that I got to know the people involved, as well as the context and the centre's rules and norms, and I made an effort to explore and become familiar with the setting (Latorre, del Rincon & Arnal, 1996). Also, I needed the teachers and the school administration team to

understand that, starting in September, I would be around frequently. And so I worked on that, and during my first days at school I tried to build relationships with different teachers and explain, generally, my research. I had informal conversations during break time, at the end of classes, or during lunch. The teachers showed an interest in my career as a teacher, educational psychologist and later researcher. I think having worked as a teacher, both in public and charter schools, was a significant help when entering the field, because it meant that I was already familiar with the dynamics.

Once I decided to do the fieldwork in Rellinars, in early July I moved forward with the formal research procedures by preparing a formal letter that detailed relevant information regarding my fieldwork and a negotiation document (attached in Appendix No. 7). As Coller has observed (2000:78. Author's translation), the researcher must be covered by her institution and such a letter should be clear, and must specify the following:

- State the position of the researcher in her/his department or the relationship with the person who will sign the letter. In my case, I was a Pre-doctoral Fellow in the Department of Education at the University of Vic.

- Research topic. In general terms, explain the theme and objectives of the dissertation. My intention was to explore inclusive educational practices in the school in Rellinars.

- Work framework. In my case: a grant-funded (pre-doctoral contract) dissertation developed at the University of Vic.

- Reason for which the host institution may be helpful for the research. In the case of the Rellinars school, it fulfilled all the requirements that were previously mentioned.

- What is expected—generally—from the host institution. Here I explained that I will carry out observations, interviews, review documents, and attend classes, meetings, and be present when teachers and families got together (with the exception of private parent-teacher meetings).

- Provide an approximate timeframe for the duration of the fieldwork. I specified that I would be researching during the 2011-12 school year, and that initially I would carry out long stays and later, shorter visits on specific days.

It was also important that letter clearly specified how the centre would be involved and indicate the time commitment, to avoid surprises or misunderstandings. Also, any ethical issues related to the confidentiality of the participants were noted. Using these indications I wrote the letter and began the negotiation process. Once I had the approval from the faculty to do the fieldwork, I brought the document and the letter of negotiation to the school. Having shared the process from the beginning, and having

talked about the logistics ahead of time, the actual signing of the documents was experienced as a mere formality.

The data collection, analysis and interpretation

The case study began on the first day I went to the school. My first impressions were that I was well received and immediately felt welcome. Although the first few days I simply listened, observed everything, and took notes of everything people told me, developing my field notes, it was clear that in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the centre, in relation to its inclusive educational practices, I would need to use different instruments to gather information. For this reason, from the start, I combined different methods of data collection using the typology provided by Goetz and Le Compte (1988), who recommend in addition to using a field diary, doing observation, document analysis and carrying out individual and group interviews.

The first school visits in June and July 2010 gave me a general idea of the school, allowed me to obtain relevant documents and also let me establish a positive relationship with the centre before beginning the fieldwork in September. That summer I analysed the school's website, their schedule, the teaching material, etc.

At the end of September, 2010, I began the observations, initially in a completely open way without any type of protocol. In other words, observing and making dense descriptions in my field diary. After two weeks observing the five classrooms in the school, I began to narrow the observations, looking more at the teaching methods in one classroom in particular, with the oldest students. Focusing on one classroom allowed me to better monitor the sessions and, thus, the inclusive educational practices taking place in the classroom. I was in the school one day a week from October 2010 to June 2011. During the first trimester I was there every Wednesday, because there was a faculty meeting at noon, but during the second and third trimesters I tried to vary the days of the week in order to get a more holistic view of the schedule, teachers and spaces for all groups at the school.

At the same time, I observed the other spaces at the school, such as the faculty meetings, administrative meetings, the *Conversations*, the meetings with alumni, the school board, sessions with specialists, specific presentations by the teaching aides, etc.

Concentrating on the classroom for older students and getting to know the dynamics and the work they were carrying out each day allowed me to deeply emerge myself in this group. As I will describe in the following chapter, the students, especially in the older classroom, had aggressive behaviour that often made it hard for me to focus on what I had set out to study: teaching methods. At one point I questioned whether I had chosen the right centre for the case study and if I could actually answer my research questions by continuing there. I later came to see that I was in the right place. Having a

student body with mainly a lower middle-class background, and with some behavioural problems, created a good opportunity for studying how teachers were able to use inclusive educational practices which could support learning and foster a positive classroom dynamic.

In the first trimester of the 2010-11 school year, I was at the centre regularly, which allowed me to develop relationships with the majority of the teachers and the administration, with whom I had many informal conversations during breaks, between classes, after school hours, etc. In the following table I will share the different techniques used to collect data, and the number of observations and interviews I carried out:

Document analysis:
School website
School schedule (class blocks)
Teaching material
Observations
Classes with the youngest children (5), Classes with the mid-aged children (10), Classes with the older children (30), Workshops (2), Faculty meetings (8), *Conversations* (3), School Open House (1), Meeting with alumni (1), School Board meeting (1)
Interviews (and informal conversations)
School management (1 interview, 4 informal conversations)
Teachers observed (9)
Teacher's aide (1)
Group interview with families (1)

Table 7: Data collection techniques used. Source: developed by the author during the fieldwork.

The methods or techniques mentioned in the above table complement each other, allowing the triangulation of data. Obtaining a range of information on the same situation from different perspectives or viewpoints, contributes to improving the quality of research. As Goetz and LeCompte (1988) have stated, triangulation prevents the researcher from too easily accepting the validity of her/his initial impressions, obliging her/him to extend the scope, consistency and clarity of the constructs developed during the research and helps to correct biases that can occur when the phenomenon is examined by a single observer.

Gomez (2011), in his doctoral dissertation, warns that often many interviews are needed in order to strike up a conversation. In my case it happened in totally the opposite manner. After a year of intense discussions with school teachers, accompanied by jotting their comments down in my field diary as a complement to my own observations, the time arrived to carry out the formal interviews.

I did the interviews in the spring of 2011. Because my goals for each interview depended on who I was speaking with (teachers, families, Xavi or Carme) I created different scripts with broad questions that would allow the narratives to develop like a conversation. I recorded the interviews with the permission of the participants and then transcribed them.

Once the interviews were completed I had all the material I needed to perform the analysis. I will now share the different steps through which I was able to carry it out, the process which Creus (2011:44. Author's translation) has referred to as "cooking the

dissertation". I wasn't sure what I would end up cooking, I was unaware of the cooking times, the kitchen was disorganized and filled with ingredients that I wasn't sure how to use. Luckily there were recipe books and people that could help me. At the time I felt overwhelmed, I didn't know how to proceed and I needed support from my co-supervisors in order to begin the analysis.

With their help I realized that the I had actually already started the analysis, without being completely aware of the process. In fact, the analysis is a continuous process that begins with data collection, as Taylor and Bogdan (1986:158. Author's translation) have argued:

> During participant observation, interviews and other qualitative studies, researchers follow the clues in the form of emerging themes, read their field notes and transcriptions, develop concepts and propositions that will help them make sense of the data.

It's true, in that moment I did have some *themes*, as I called them, which resonated with the research design and my stay in the school, and emerged as issues that I found relevant. These *themes* surprised me because while my research focused on inclusive teaching methods in multi-grade classrooms, many of the relevant aspects that were emerging from the fieldwork at the school, in relation to inclusion, referenced the culture of the centre, the relationships between the faculty, and the degree to which the school was open to its community (both the environment and the families).

These initial *themes*, which later took on more complex dimensions, were what I used as a starting point for analysing the documents, interviews and the observations I made. As you can see here, they were very general:

a)   Concept of inclusion in the centre

b)   Concept of the process of teaching and learning

c)   Multi-grade education in the classroom

d)   The faculty meetings

e)   Role of the families regarding the School Educational Project (PEC)

The assistance of my co-supervisors and the steps and stages proposed by Taylor and Bogdan (1986:152-176. Author's translation) served as a guide during the analysis, and I drew on the organized and systemic process the authors propose. Here is a description of the steps I followed:

1.   Read the data repeatedly. The first thing I did was reread my notes, the interview transcripts and the document analysis I had done.

2.   Follow the clues planted by emerging issues, insights, interpretations and ideas. From my re-readings and by following the themes I discussed earlier, I identified those paragraphs that were related, making annotations, etc..

3.   Search for emerging issues. Within these themes were some specific issues emerged and began to gather strength.

4.   Develop typologies and classification systems. As general themes and specific issues emerged, I tried to situate and classify them.

5.   Elaborate concepts and propose theories. In relation to different themes and areas of study, as well as in relation to references or existing relevant studies.

6.   Read bibliographic material, examples from case studies. When developing the case study, it was useful for me to read others that related to the same topic, as well as re-read those in which I had participated as a researcher.

7.   Code the information: define codes for the case study, encode all data, separate data relevant to each category, review the data that has not been categorized and refine the analysis. Finally, transform the initial themes into categories, redefining them. In my first attempt at the case study, I noticed that inclusion was in fact a transversal category, present in all the others, so I ended up with four: multi-grade education, teachers, families, and the environment.

After the various coding stages, when I began preparing the final report of the research, I used these categories to start writing. However, as you can see, they did not end up each representing a chapter in the case study. Rather, as I wrote and shared my work with my co-supervisors, these categories were restructured, changed and modified. In the end, the case study chapters are an introduction to the municipality and the school, a chapter on the teaching-learning process in the classroom, then it delves into the community of teachers, the educational community and the environment, and finally the last chapter of the case study tries to challenge the stereotypes associated with rural schools.

I have highlighted the importance of research visits which have allowed me to elaborate on the process of knowledge construction in a more reflexive way. Undoubtedly, having an extended block of time helps a lot to advance in the writing. However, in my case, having to explain to others and share my research (and to do so in a second language (English) which requires another step of making my ideas explicit) was very useful. In both cases, both Professor Ainscow and Professor Lieberman and members of their research groups, have been very receptive to my research and helped me to progress considerably.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the research I have tried to be consistent with my epistemological position, while attempting to answer the main question and respond to my research objectives. The most difficult part for me was doing the research design and focusing the main question and objectives. Probably the most enjoyable parts were the fieldwork and although, it was quite daunting, the development of the written case study. From my first contact with the school, I strongly questioned the ethical issues, because I felt lost and worried that my presence would be an intrusion for many teachers. At the same time I did not want to only observe, without offering anything in return. Woods's (1987:44. Author's translation) discussion of the ethics of research helped me find a balance between the self-interest involved in developing a dissertation and the desire that the experience also be useful and meaningful the other people involved:

> (...) The best way to build trust is to have an honest project, that is, a project designed to enhance knowledge, capable in turn of improving one's own teaching and/or that of others, or the other's conditions, and not a project, say, led by a vain search for one's self or by something devoid of value or a completely self-centred goal. So, one must prove themselves to be a discreet person who appreciates the views of others and who knows how to differentiate between permissible and impermissible data.

Fortunately, the teachers and the administration greatly facilitated the process, and I could establish open, sincere relationships that favoured collaborative and shared learning. Thus, I could share and talk openly about any doubts regarding ethical issues. In terms of confidentiality, I have used the original names of the two people in the administration, Carme and Xavi, because I received their permission after they read the case study. In the case of the rest of the teachers, I preferred to maintain their anonymity for different reasons (including: the time it took some to send their feedback to the case study, the fact that many teachers no longer work in the school and the study is relatively *distant* from them, the problem I had connecting with some of them, etc.), all of which lead me to believe that it would be more convenient to use fictitious names.

Next, now having finished the section on the methodological approach, I will present the chapters that make up the case study, specifically those that correspond to Chapter 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

CASE STUDY

The case study is divided into four chapters. Next I will provide a summary of four of these (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7) and following that, Chapter 8 appears in its entirety.

CHAPTER 4: RELLINARS, ARRIVING IN THE TOWN AND ENTERING THE SCHOOL

In this chapter and the following four, I aim to present and analyse aspects of the school in Rellinars, the centre chosen for this dissertation's case study. As you can read below, in its pedagogical discourses and the lines of thought that underpin the School Educational Project, as well as in the direct observations and the interviews with stakeholders I did, it is apparent that this is a school where they carry out inclusive educational practices. This chapter will serve as an introduction to the case study and is written with the hope of allowing the reader to imagine the school in Rellinars without ever having seen it; it also serves to give an in-depth description of the unique School Educational Project (PEC) which supports inclusion.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first presents the more general aspects of the school in Rellinars and the second looks at the centre's pedagogical and organizational aspects, specifically focusing on the spaces, resources and the School Educational Project (PEC).

CHAPTER 5: FROM INSIDE THE CLASSROOM: DISCOVERING THE WORLD, WEAVING AND REWEAVING NETWORKS WITH OTHERS

> "My daughter always reads the news, because at school they do it and follow current events. One say she told me 'today we talked about earthquakes' or 'now we're studying nuclear energy because such and such broke, for this reason...'. She's not in her own world, she's in the world!" – Mother of a student in the middle class

After situating the school and the municipality of Rellinars, this chapter attempts to illustrate *the life* that envelopes the classrooms. Considering that the pedagogical vision, the inclusive perspective, and the educational project are shared in the school, the *sensations* I had in each of the four classrooms were similar. For this reason, in this first section, instead of describing them, I thought it would be more convenient to detail different places and educational situations that are repeated in different classrooms (5.1). From this general description, in the second section I have extracted some of the pedagogical elements of the school (5.2) and some inclusive elements from the classrooms (5.3).

CHAPTER 6: BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF TEACHERS

> "The school as a school: how do we learn? We have faculty meetings to respond to this question, we believe that we need to mature before we can explain and share what it is we do in the classroom." – Teacher and school director

This chapter examines the process of building a community among the teachers in Rellinars, particularly regarding time management and shared learning spaces. One of the crucial issues this chapter addresses and aims to answer is: "how does an inclusive school include its teachers?". First, I introduce the faculty group meetings differentiating four types according to the pedagogical objectives and, secondly, the administrative meetings and those meant to support new teachers, who are often novices (teachers with less than five years of classroom experience). Finally, there is also a section that explores the meaning the school administration gives to these groups and spaces.

CHAPTER 7: CREATING SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT BY SHARING THE SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

> "I come from away and I have been at other schools and I see that a lot of the implication is thanks to the way you're treated and to *Conversations*. As a mother I like to be very active in my child's education and I've been to schools that have put up walls blocking what I know about how my child is doing, I've been told that there is only one meeting a month, or per trimester, and there's no familiarity or follow-up. Here this school is more open, you can go in, you can talk, any day you have a problem you can call and set up a meeting."
> – Mother of a student in the older class

This chapter focuses on the educational community and the environment around the school in Rellinars. I expand on the different actors who intervene in the school, either directly or indirectly, and discuss their impact on the School Educational Project (PEC). Considering that the school has opened recently, from the start, the centre has emphasized being open to the outside: on one hand towards the educational community and, on the other, towards the school environment.

CHAPTER 8. CONTRASTS, DIFFERENT VISIONS OF RURAL SCHOOLING AND MULTI-GRADE TEACHING. ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

> "If you enter a classroom and you ask 'What are you doing'? And they say 'maths', that's bad. If they say 'we're trying to solve a problem about this or that', for example, that could tell you they're working on something more complex." – Carme

This chapter, tied to the issues I discussed in the autobiographical chapter which inspired me to enrol in the doctoral program, opens up a debate on the relationship between the stereotypes that are associated with rural schools and multi-grade teaching. The context of the school in Rellinars and my experience with the topic has allowed me to contrast the different existing perspectives between the school teachers, the discourses from SERC and other rural schools in Spain.

Introduction

There are a large number of novels and books based on real experiences showing that when a teacher, who is novice or inexperienced in rural school, enters a multi-grade classroom, he or she is not indifferent to the experience (Aldecoa, 1991; Baquedano, 1979). Given the diversity of ages, the teacher asks: *"What should I do? How can I teach all the students at the same time ?"*

To find answers teachers must assume the role of tutor. This position depends on the dimensions analysed in the previous chapters, but also on teachers' own visions of multi-grade education and any possible biases they may have. They will be conditioned by their previous experiences, education, type of school where they are, etc., which will allow them to take more or less advantage of the opportunities offered by multi-grade education to carry out inclusive educational practice. That is, regarding pedagogical elements implied in the conceptualization of the term, discussed in Chapter 2, the educational potential that a rural school can can provide emerges with more or less strength depending on different factors.

In the next section I look at two aspects: the visions of multi-grade education and the opportunities that this type of classroom organization has to offer.

The concept of a multi-grade classroom is directly associated with the idea of rural schools. The definition of the word, as I discussed in the theoretical framework, has changed over time. In the years I was working on this dissertation, I have been able to share ideas and perspectives on multi-grade teaching with different colleagues from SERC, GIER, other teachers working in rural schools, teachers from other types of schools, undergraduate and graduate students in the class "Educational and Rural Development", fellow students and professors from the doctoral program, etc. This information contrasts with my fieldwork, which allowed me to configure a series of *ideas* and *perspectives* on rural schools and multi-grade classrooms, which can be organized into six parts. These categories begin with quotations from teachers at Rellinars which allow us to illustrate how they contrast with other rural schools[3]. The first refers to the way the school connects with the municipality, the second includes both the school and the classroom, and finally, the four following sections are specific to multi-grade classrooms.

8.1 "Before coming to Rellinars I thought it would be the *typical Catalonian town* with *local* families."

The profile of students in rural schools in Catalonia is quite diverse, the presence of families who are from the town is low, thanks to recent migratory movements.

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[3] I am referring to rural schools with which I am in contact, because of other research projects I've done or because of the network I've become part of while supervising my students' student teaching. For ethical reasons I have maintained the anonymity of these schools.

Since 1981, and in particular after 1999, a demographic and social recovery has been taking place in rural areas, breaking with a long trend of depopulation. This is due to improved infrastructures and the conversion of regional capitals into urban nuclei that are capable of offering, within an acceptable proximity, the same services as the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Aldomà, 2009). The author of this study states that income levels in rural Catalonia are now "equal or more than in cities," and that the population in rural Catalonia is no longer only agricultural and is contributing to different economic sectors.

Although the Catalan countryside is ageing, rural areas in recent years have experienced significant population growth. This is due in large part to the influx of foreign immigrants in search of work, serving as a source of rejuvenation in more dynamic areas. From the end of the 20th century, the type of immigration has changed, and people who came to Catalonia were from countries outside the European Union.[4] This fact, coupled with the low rates of natural population growth, has had a significant impact on demographic change and the social structure of Catalonia, especially in rural areas. Currently, in the serious economic crisis we are experiencing, migration processes have changed direction and now many young people are leaving Catalonia. In relation to the increase or decrease of the population in rural areas as a result of the economic crisis, it is still too early to know what the long-term impact will be.

Recuperating the theoretical conceptualization of 'rural school' made in Chapter 2, regarding the external context "the rural areas and their inhabitants are constantly changing, it is a system that is adapted and redefined, leading to a loss of traditional identity of rural life," as a result of these constant movements and improved infrastructure. This is precisely the case of the school Rellinars which, as I outlined in the introduction to this chapter, is located in a small town of Vallès Occidental, a predominantly urban region (OECD, 2007) where the number of immigrants is low. This town has the characteristics of a suburb, there are few people who were born in the same town or outside Catalonia, it is dominated by families who come from larger cities like Barcelona or Terrassa. The parents are children of migrants from other parts of Spain, first generation Catalonians who have inherited a plot of land or a family home (colloquially called "*torre*") which they or their parents built. The cultural and socio-economic profile of the municipality is low and different types of conflicts among the inhabitants are common.

Therefore the fact that this is a small town, where everyone knows everyone, is not itself a positive characteristic, it can be just the opposite depending on the dynamics that exist between its inhabitants. In the same vein, according to the teachers, in the

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[4] In the sixties, approximately 1.5 million people from other areas of Spain moved to Catalonia, mostly staying in the metropolitan area of Barcelona.

classroom conflicts have softened over the years but they still are present, hindering teaching:

> "Now it's changed, but before we had to separate the kids everyday, because they argued and bickered. The students would say 'I won't stop hitting him until he or she stops hitting me." – Xavi

During the fieldwork I was able to perceive this tension and a certain violence in the classrooms on behalf of the students, mostly in the class of older children where the profiles of families, described earlier, is accentuated. This situation often made me feel uncomfortable and inhibited me from concentrating on the pedagogical aspects that I had proposed to research, because the attitudes and behaviours eclipsed everything. In order to contextualize what was happening and continue with my research, I turned to the words of Domènech and Viñas (1997:60. Author's translation), who demonstrate the complexity of getting along in the classroom:

> Only in a classroom are such a large number of individuals grouped, in close proximity to each other, for so many hours in the day, working efficiently on difficult learning tasks and, what's more, doing it harmoniously.

A large part of the initial observations I made were done in the classroom where there are more conflicts. They were so constant that sometimes I thought I should find another rural school. After taking a few days away from the school, and discussing the situation with colleagues and reflecting on it, I realized that I was wrong to want to change schools. Considering the school's characteristics, their educational project gains even more importance, value and social utility, as is clear from the some of the teacher's comments:

> There are schools where kids learn in spite of the teachers, because they come from with a certain level already... Here they learn thanks to the school because at home..." – Xavi

> We tell the students that even though it's harder for them to respect the other students, they have to do it anyway. We tell them, *make an effort, I'll help you, I'll give you resources, I'll give you strategies, etc. And if you get wound-up, wait for it to pass."* – Carme

The reality of the classrooms in the centre, as in many classrooms in rural schools, is plural, in that in addition to the students from the region, there are many from other regions, autonomous communities or countries. In addition to immigration into Spain in recent years, in rural areas there is a lot of interior mobility related to the job market and improved living conditions. Currently there is a high mobility for labor reasons, whether it be moving into a rural area to find opportunities—like in the case of the Catalan Pryrenee region developing a service sector—or leaving the area to look for

work in a city. We also find municipalities that advertise that they welcome families with children—as seen with the Tírvia School, in the Rural School Zone (ZER) of Alt Pallars Sobirà—in order to avoid school closure. In other cases, families may opt for a radical lifestyle change, or due to recent rises in living costs, choose a rural environment. There are also other motives, like in the northern region Berguedà, where a large number of families live in rural areas, because it was recommended to them by the social services within the metropolitan area of Barcelona. They are families will different types of problems and which social services identified as potentially benefitting from a change of context.

All of this means that in rural schools there are families that can feel "out of place", others that feel "out of step" in school and, in short, a profile of students that do not correspond to the imaginary we have of rural school children living an isolated village life.

8.2 "Having few students in the classroom doesn't lead to positive learning results. We have about twenty per class, like a regular school. Regarding the centre, we do value that is it small."

When we refer to the advantages provided by rural schools, one of the more general topics is the idea that small classroom sizes are better because they allow the teacher to pay more individualized attention to each of the students, according to their age and needs. This belief lies in *paidocentrisme*, understood as "a pedagogical doctrine that claims that the foundation and the core of all educational work is the student and which considers childhood as a stage with characteristics that should be promoted, rather than see it merely as a time of transition to adulthood" (IEC, 2011)[5]. Teachers who share this perspective, when the number of students in the rural school increases, find it hard to attend to all of them. They make use of individual resources (such as individual work plans) and are grateful to have a support teacher in order to divide group into two subgroups, allowing each to work with more homogeneous age groups.

Contrary to this widespread belief in low student-teacher ratios, the teachers at the Rellinars school do not see small classroom sizes as a positive element. Although they recognize it would mean they could devote less hours to certain tasks (i.e., less reporting, less student monitoring, less interviews with families, etc.), a small number of students would be problematic and less stimulating from a pedagogical point of view:

> When you have a class with eight students, this isn't a space where ideas can multiply or be reproduced. And sometimes if there are eight students and two

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[5] Definition from the Dictionary of the Catalan Language IEC, online version.

are siblings, the younger one never stops occupying the role of the young sibling, never. These small rural schools must ask themselves, What do I do so that having ten students in class can be a rich experience? When you have students of different ages you have to plan differently, just like with schools that have a lot of immigration. – Xavi

An example is provided by one of the school's teachers who last year had a classroom with ten students from the same grade, 3rd Primary. This apparently ideal situation surprised even her because if we understand the classroom as a community of students who learn, having a small number of students can mean that the group will have a number of needs that the members can't meet:

> "It's odd and I myself was surprised. We have these assumptions or stereotypes that make us think that I'll treat the students better if there are less of them. I found out that's not true, that the quality is rooted in how you teach, and how engaged you are, it's not the number of students." – Tutor for the middle class

> "I had the sensation that the group from 3rd was stuck, it got to a point in the middle of the year, around Easter, when everyone knew each other, they knew everything... they expected everything and it was like they were stuck. Yes I have an influence, I think that for better or worse when I, for example, was in 3rd and there were ten students, you see the virtues more, but also the defects are also exaggerated. Everything is exaggerated, the good is too good and the bad is worse... We spend a large amount of time we together in the classroom and we get to know each other really well. For example, is Roger acts out or Roger is nervous, the others take it for granted and indirectly they allow it, and Roger can take advantage of that." – Tutor for the older class

Having a small number of students means everything is more apparent, both the good and the bad, as the teacher who was interviewed affirms. According to Altimir (Domingo, 2009), in this more intimate classroom setting "the individual has a stronger role" or according to Ferrière (1982:40. Author's translation):

> New rural schools avoid repressing the natural tendencies of the child; on the contrary, they allow them to act freely. This sometimes even push children to act. They have the opportunity to express themselves spontaneously...

In the school in Rellinars, the classrooms have about twenty students, in order to avoid a collapse within the group, and they try to make the groups heterogenous regarding the students' ages because they think it makes for a richer pedagogical experience. Thus, unlike many rural schools, the student-teacher ratio is within the average for Catalan schools, between 20-25.

Freinet, considering that at the time of writing the average was usually fifty students, defends the 20-25 margin. Ibernón (2010:100) updates Freinet, reminding us that the author argued that the overload in classes is always a pedagogical error because a large class works if the purpose is not to instruct but to educate. Freinet highlights some aspects that need a smaller non-anonymous group: the development of a moral, social, intelligent, curious, creative, mathematic, musical, artistic, etc. individual. He stresses the need for teamwork, which does not allow anonymity within an *anonymous mass*. The number of students together with the organizational criteria of space and time, determine the classroom practices, just as I noted in my field diary (26/01/2011):

> They tend to sit in a square, so that they can all see each other, including the teachers, but also they often arrange themselves in groups of four or five in order to work collaboratively. They move freely throughout the classroom, gathering and using the materials they need, like a computer, reference books, documents, etc. The teachers try to resolve any doubts and guide the process.

Regarding the academic results of students in multi-grade classrooms, the history shows that they don't depend on the individualized attention that occurs with low student-teacher ratios in rural schools, but rather they are more closely related to methodologies that are carried out in the type of group work that takes place (Barbara & Pavan, 1992; Gutiérrez & Slavin, 1992).

Another reoccurring argument surrounds the size of the school. Many authors defend that it is easier to manage a smaller centre with few students. The school in Rellinars has approximately seventy students and an average of 20 students per class. Even though it's big for a rural school, compared with the majority of schools in Catalonia it is a small centre, a fact that helps, as Denninson has argued in "The life of children" (1969:25. Author's translation):

> For some people it may seem strange to talk about the richness of experience when we only have twenty-three students and few teachers. But this is exactly the case. A school that is too large cannot provide a range of experiences, it creates anonymity and anxiety, and an impersonal manner of looking and showing. For kids it's like passing through a box store, looking at thousands of objects, without touching anything. Among twenty-three students, who are in a free and respectful environment, there is a true abundance of experience. Experiences are in-depth and allow for decisive changes.

For all these reasons, the widespread assertion that defends the quality of the teaching and learning in rural schools because they have less students and therefore provide more individualized attention, is full of nuances. The argument is related to conceptions of learning that I have pointed out in this section and is rooted to the

following key ideas: more individual contact with each child and a easier organization of the school.

8.3 "We understand the classroom and the school as a community of people that learn together and we need each other in order to achieve this."

When referring to multi-grade classrooms, one belief that often comes up is the notion that one of the most obvious benefits of rural school is that older students help out the smaller ones, and that this is very rewarding for the younger kids. From my point of view this statement is incomplete because it is written from the perspective of traditional education, where only specific interactions count, those of an older person towards a younger one. This vision reproduces the idea of knowledge transmission rather than collaborative work. In Rellinars everyone is involved. Regardless of age, during the course of the day as students work together they all can take the role of teacher or learner. From the youngest students, teachers, members of the community, invited experts or family members, but above all, this occurs in the classroom between the students of different ages.

From this multi-directional view of teaching and learning Denninson (1969:81. Author's translation) argues that

> leaving kids with their own resources has a mutual healing effect. This is the kind of romantic consideration considered by many professionals but many teachers and parents recognize in such a claim one of the most beautiful and significant facts of life. Would growth be possible—would it exist in the world—if what children receive were restricted to things that adults deliberately offer?

The possibility of having natural interaction is what multi-grade education and the inclusive pedagogic project in the school in Rellinars offer, which serve as the focus and also the objectives for this research.

The theory of learning in multi-grade classrooms, based on Boix's (1995) notion of concentric circles, is shared by the teachers of SERC, but many rural schools do not implement this notion. As the school director in Rellinars explains, from a critical perspective, one of the most common activities of rural schools (inluding Rellinars) is joint reading, where the older children help the younger ones read. He believes that when this inter-age activity is the only one taking place, rural schools are not taking advantage of the opportunities offered by multi-grade education, and that this is linked to schools' traditional conception of the meaning of education:

> "The ultimate experience of rural schools is telling stories together, that's what life in the classroom is about, but if in the rural school the only thing we do together is explain stories, then that's not enough, it's not taking advantage of the situation. This idea that the older children have to teach the younger ones,

or vice versa, or that when teaching multiplication sums you bring 3rd and 1st together but some have already heard it, that's not a good strategy. But it isn't because it's a rural school, it has to do with our understanding of how we learn." – Xavi

In line with the importance of exploring the pedagogical conceptions that teachers have and looking at the relationship between them and the teaching methods being carried out, I am in complete agreement Ferguson and Jeanchild (in Stainback and Stainback , 2004 187. Author's translation), regarding multi-grade education, they warn that:

> merely bringing together students with very different characteristics does not strengthen each one's learning or establish positive relationships between them. Actually, if the teachers do not act carefully, the opposite can happen. Physical proximity is necessary but not sufficient. The two main factors that determine the success or failure of education in heterogeneous groups is how the groups of students are organized and how their learning experiences are planned.

The teacher plays a critical role in this type of organization. As I have been discussing throughout the previous chapters, the school in Rellinars promotes complex learning which is supported by the principles of inclusive education, where educational content is the core to learning and the reality that we live in, the environment in which we are situated, and all the various stakeholders have an important role .

The different actors involved and the environment are also part of this community of people that make up the classroom and the school, with them not only do we learn together but they are needed in order to be successful. From this point of view, the rural school has historically been closely linked to the external context. As you can read in the theoretical conceptualization of the term, provided in Chapter 2, one of the converging beliefs is in the social function of rural schools and their role in the village, because in many cases the school was the only cultural centre in the municipality. The Rellinars school is an example of this and, I would also add, demonstrates an ongoing willingness to promote cultural intervention within the town, seeking the participation of all possible actors.

8.4 "Having students of different ages in the classroom isn't inconvenient for us."

Closely related to the discussion in the earlier section, we see that at the school in Rellinars the multi-grade issue is lived naturally, unlike in most other schools where teachers recognize having students of different ages as an obstacle, at first. It is quite common among teachers to recall when they were starting out, and their first impressions at a rural school. It's also quite common to hear the same from teachers or future teachers who imagine what it would be like to work in rural schools. From a

more *traditional* view of education, having to respond to students of various ages at the same time would entail designing and carrying out different activities for each student individually, which would create what is seen as a large and difficult workload. It is common to hear teachers who, based on Piaget's developmental stages, point out the disadvantages of the multi-grade classroom and argue that they would be required to "multiply by the number of courses they have, because everyone has to do according to what his/her age implies, and therefore the teacher cannot possibly get to everyone" or they suggest that schools organize groups so that they are as homogenous as possible.

With teachers who go against this rather traditional view of education and who develop more inclusive educational practices, initially having a classroom full of students of different ages still seems like a complex task, but without as many negative connotations. This is probably related to the idea of school grades that we have so deeply internalized, thanks to the experiences teachers have as students and the education they receive at the university, where multi-grade education and rural schools have not been given much mention in the standard curriculum.

In the case of the school in Rellinars, as I described in the case study, the teachers beginning their careers point out that it was complicated working with multi-grade classrooms given that, because of their inexperience, they weren't sure what corresponded to which level. Even though they expressed that they would have like to have started in a school with grades and a clear curriculum, they believe that they learned a lot, acquiring tools and reflexivity.

The teachers who have been at the school for a while claim that this centre has allowed them to dissolve any stereotypes they may have had initially, coming to the conclusion that it is equally difficult to manage a multi-grade classroom as one with just one grade, because the real issue is about putting effort into changing the traditional approach that still permeates many schools. This idea highlights what Imbernón (2010:68. Author's translation) argues, when speaking about Freinet. He notes that "traditional pedagogy has always used denial and hierarchy at the individual level and homogeneity and grades as group strategies," adding that "when Freinet began working with various childhood skills in the classroom, respecting the context and the diversity that are present, and when he introduced into the educational discourse the context of the students, teachers and school, as well as respect for the diversity of individuals, a new way of seeing the educational process emerged." This perspective, which comes out of the New School movement from the late nineteenth century and is later recovered during the last decades of the twentieth century within the movements for educational reform when a number of factors came together (Soler, 2009), is shared by the teachers in Rellinars and it is what allows the faculty to foster inclusive educational practices:

First I thought that it would be more complicated for a tutor, or for myself, to have different ages but after I saw that there isn't a lot of difference compared to a group of students who are the same age. Within a group of children the same age there are always levels that are clearly differentiated. I did the same, according to what we were working on. If we were doing musical language, up to whatever point the child arrived at, that's where s/he had accomplished. If I saw that s/he could do more I would push her/him to work harder. At first I thought it would be a problem, but then I saw that it wasn't. In fact it was positive because I lost my assumptions about it because I learned it was like any other classroom, to take advantage of the class you have to provide different options." – Music teacher

It is important that students can count on this range of options, according to their own pace and rhythm, regardless of biological age, but there are situations when it is the students themselves who remind us. In those cases teachers should take advantage of the incident as best they can, while considering the student. For example, as can be read in the following field notes (01/11/2011):

In the class for older students (4th, 5th and 6th) the teacher dictates two questions and the students ask her to repeat them, because they didn't have time to copy them down. The teacher says *you're old enough now to write faster*. A boy in 4th answers: *those of us in 4th aren't so old*. The teacher quickly focuses on another girl from 4th, who has it all written down. She shows that to the boy and responds: *this isn't about age but about taking our work seriously.*

In this case when the teacher says "this isn't about age but about taking our work seriously", she is echoing the desire within Rellinars to break the stubborn stereotype about age that permeates schools. It is a very internalized stereotype, which even the students who are used to being in multi-grade classrooms evoke as an excuse to work less, or work more slowly, than their older classmates. The teacher who made this comment shows that she has high expectations, which are independent of age, and promotes responsibility and student learning.

According to the theoretical conceptualization made in Chapter 2, the school in Rellinars contains the converging aspects related to the pedagogical elements I discussed earlier. Throughout history, classrooms in rural schools are characterized by having heterogeneous multi-grade groups and multilevel interaction. In addition, as in the case in Rellinars, this leads to a diversity of organizational models according to the specific moments and needs. This last point is directly associated with teaching methods and the need for comprehensive, engaged teachers who are well-trained, preferably with specific training in rural schools.

8.5. "It's important that the boys and girls learn to choose and be responsible in an autonomous (non robotic) manner."

This statement, taken from the School Educational Program (PEC) (2008:2), is widely accepted and used by teachers in rural schools in Catalonia. But the term "autonomous" is complex and the first thing we question upon hearing it is the very definition of the term. It is usually used to refer to students in rural schools who are able to work alone, individually, following an individualized work plan developed with the teacher either weekly or biweekly. This case is quite common in rural schools in Catalonia. The work plan consists of tables that map out what to do at all times, without direct teacher supervision, and are used especially when the class work has finished and students are waiting to being a new class project. There are different types of work plans, a more *traditional approach* involves assigning page numbers and exercises for different subject matter, but there are other examples that can include conducting group activities or carrying out parts of classroom or school projects that are underway.

Some teachers use the term "autonomy" when referring to students who can use resources in the classroom, like books, ICTs or different types of material (in the case of the youngest students) all by themselves. But is this the idea we have of autonomy?

The strict definition of autonomy is "the capacity for self-governance according to one's own laws" (IEC, 2012. Author's translation). Also, and regarding the role of others, it is understood as "the condition of an individual on whom no one depends" (DRAE, 2012. Author's translation). However autonomy in pedagogical terms means something more complex. Reyero (2008:10. Author's translation) suggests that fostering student autonomy can be considered as "as series of procedures that aim to ensure that each student acquires the cognitive and technical skills needed to perform the greatest number of tasks without relying on others."

In order to acquire cognitive and technical skills that encourage children's initiative, schools must attempt to involve them in the tasks they undertake. The school in Rellinars allows students to test the binary of freedom-responsibility, leaving wide margins for action and decision making. Freedom understood as it is defined by Ferrière (1982:55. Author's translation), an author associated with and a promoter of the New School during the first third of the twentieth century:

> Freeing oneself from contingencies, being inaccessible to the worries that rush in from the twilight and daily life, doing what is necessary for others and for ourselves (...): this is freedom, that which I want for children and what they must learn to conquer.

The teacher passes from having a more profound role in the conversations as the voice of experience and takes on the role of sustaining the emotional balance within the

group. It is a complex task that requires a high degree of professionalism on behalf of the teachers, as they themselves recognize:

> "If we want responsible citizens then we must behave so ourselves, we must become an example. Because we have a degree of freedom we must be very aware of the limits and be consistent with everything because, if you don't, you can create more conflicts" – Tutor for the older class

> "It isn't the school of happiness where students can say what they want to do and not do, because for the teacher everything needs to have a goal and needs to make sense for the group." – Tutor for the older class

The difference between the work plans I mentioned above and the weekly planning with students in Rellinars is that it is done as a group and not individually, so that everyone reflects on what they need, and how and who will do it. The same goes for autonomous learning, it can promote individual decisions (choosing between different options, the use of time when a student finishes before the others, etc.), or it can relate to the ability to make complex decisions with peers. These differences reflect different ways teachers have of understanding learning.

This implies, as I mentioned earlier, that teachers must be versatile because the tasks they perform are numerous, complex and diverse. This characterization is in line with the conceptualization made about the term rural school earlier in the dissertation.

8.6 "There are many moments when we forget about it all, we forget we have different ages in the classroom."

This phrase was shared by all teachers and students in the school in Rellinars. This was evident when I would ask them what year they were in and they had to think about it, or they just told me how old they were.

In the years I was undertaking this research, there were many times when I heard "multi-grade education lowers the level of a class, it is is harmful especially for the oder children because when they're teaching the young ones, they learn less," an opinion held especially by people who do not know what rural schools are really like or who have had an experience with one or have some reference about a specific rural school that does not work perfectly. The families of the Rellinars school, as discussed in Chapter 6, have showed resistance to this subject since the centre opened. Especially those families with children in EI where the school so clearly opted to take two classes with the maximum amount of heterogeneous ages (P3-P4-P5) instead of organizing students according to age.

> "At first we explained to the families the vision we had for the school, and we didn't bring up the issue about the ages because we didn't think it was

necessary, and it caused a crisis. The parents were asking what happens when my child is in 3rd and s/he goes to class with someone in 1st?" – Xavi

These families, a large number of which didn't have a history of academic success, questioned the notion of mixed ages, employing a deficit discourse. They emphasized how older kids would be hindered, not the other way around.

On one hand, it is true that the older students influence the younger ones, and in the majority of cases this is positive for the students who are young and it helps them improve.

> "When you have twenty-four students, you are constantly working on the group cohesion because each person is different, and they are all changing. The children that I had this year, in particular the two from 6th, between September and June have made a big mental shift. They are focused on secondary school and that generates, it influences the group. It is like a healthy competitiveness, 'if he gets better I want to get better at it, if she has better penmanship I...' And there is more *life*, I find." – Tutor for the older class

If I return to the background of multi-grade education, recuperating the theoretical framework used in this dissertation, I would highlight that there is no common agreement about whether multi-grade education in the classrooms is the cause of better or worse academic results. Veenman (1995; 1997) does not find any difference between multi-grade and single grade, whereas Mason and Burns (1996) believe that single grade classrooms are more efficiently organized. A large number of studies show that the success of multi-grade education is tied to the teacher, because this type of organization requires more planning, professional development, and collaboration among teachers than single grade classrooms (Cushman, 1993; Miller, 1996).

As discussed in Chapter 6, the school in Rellinars fosters collaborative work, reflective practice, and continuous professional development among teachers, and therefore they believe in the potential of multi-grade education preferring it over single grade classrooms. Due to an organizational issue, one year there was a single grade classroom composed of ten students, all in 3rd. The teacher, who was tutor that year and who then, the following year, was a tutor to the same students who were then in a multi-grade classroom, explains the difference when they were 4th year and became part of the class of the "big kids" (4th, 5th and 6th years):

> Yes, that year there was a class of ten children, all in 3rd Primary. So I have two experiences I can compare. I worked the same way, had the same strategies, the same pedagogical perspective, but I've enjoyed it more this year and I feel I have gotten more out it now that I have three different years, versus last year when I only had one." – Tutor for the older class

Regarding the claim made in this chapter, as I have argued the affirmation is incorrect. If we were to work towards a general vision, in relation to curricular learning, we could infer that it isn't necessary to do anything specific for any age group. However, in relation to the degree of responsibility, the level of demand, etc. we can detect differentiation, not so much due to the age of the student but usually due to how quickly he/she matures and changes, his/her availability, the attitude he/she has towards involvement in academic tasks in the classroom, the relationships developed with others, and so on.

Some specific actions that aid in strengthening and compensating older students, if there is an imbalance, are:

- Homework, where the tasks are either compulsory or optional according to the year of the student. Each child knows what is required of her/him but has the option of doing more or get assistance if s/he wants.

- Work involving memorizing, like the multiplication tables, which is such a concern among families, is compulsory for 3rd years and optional for 1st and 2nd year students.

- In work involving reading in pairs, the paragraph that students prepare at home to read in class with their reading partner can have different lengths, level of difficulty, etc., according to the student and is often closely related to his/her age.

- Students start developing a "class notebook" in the 5th year, 3rd and 4th year students don't have one, which is a conscious decision:

    "For example, with the class notebook, 3rd and 4th years do not have one and we make them wait until they are in 5th. They think it's interesting but we make them wait. We show them that being in 5th has an advantage. If not, what good is there to getting older if it just means more responsibilities?" – Xavi

- With the 6th year students they must prepare for the basic competency test in an individualized manner.

- The dictations are designed for 6th year, the others can do only a part, or do the whole thing if they wish to. With the assessment, there is more or less flexibility with the number of mistakes and spelling errors according to year.

- Making groups with students of different ages in an intentional way, ensuring that the 6th year students take on more responsibility, for example by taking notes. This is also left open so other students can do it if they wish to.

These are some of the concrete actions employed in the Rellinars school which take into consideration the biological age of the students. However, the management of a multi-grade classroom will depend on the teacher and the specific school. Because it is closely related to the different elements that make up the understanding of the term "rural school", and to all the historical moments that have been analysed, the discussion throughout this chapter reveals the pedagogical potential this type of school could *possibly achieve*. It is a condition that we need to explore further.

Towards a new understanding of the rural school

One of the items in SERC's definition of a rural school, which I shared in Chapter 1, is that "the basic skills and abilities are practised and developed in the very way a rural school is run, in it's intrinsic and constant methodology." Once the case study was finished and after exploring the different aspects of multi-grade education, within this chapter there emerges a crucial aspect of any school: the importance of pedagogical concepts that support the School Educational Project (PEC) and condition the methods or even the practices that are carried out. Therefore, referring to the "the way a school runs" or the "intrinsic methodology" is not adequate for capturing the diverse reality of these schools.

The school in Rellinars, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, has a solid School Educational Project that is supported by the school community. It supports the development of content in a globalised and interdisciplinary way, while respecting and responding to heterogeneity. Thanks to this vision, in this chapter we have been able to consider the potential of multi-grade classrooms; from a perspective of diversity (more students and more heterogeneity) they are seen as a source of enrichment and learning, as the director affirms:

> "You automatically have diversity here. In grade schools where each child has their own level sometimes teachers only see those who are far from average, because they have a problem and stick out, or they have an opinion, or what have you. But they don't see diversity as a group of people who are different. Here the teachers consider diversity, because of the age differences. Not everyone is in 6th, some are in 5th and 4th." – Xavi

This chapter provides evidence for reflecting on the stereotypes that are associated with rural schools and multi-grade classrooms and also shows practices that can promote inclusion. First, I reviewed items related to the different rural areas in Catalonia and discussed the diversity of students that can be found in rural schools. I also explored issues related to the size of the schools, the small number of students in the classroom, the concept of a community of learners who learn together, responsibility, autonomy and multi-grade education. This builds on aspects related to

the ways of understanding and managing knowledge acquisition that I addressed in chapter five.

Next, having finalized the case study, I will present the chapter that closes this study. In last chapter I aim to respond to the original question I asked at the outset, and which guided this research process, as well as reflect on the extent to which I achieved the objectives I defined at the start.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Writing the conclusions for a study is not a simple task, even less so when the methodology used was an ethnographic case study. A case study is a process and a result at the same time, in that the conclusions emerge throughout the work. While acknowledging the complexity of this task this chapter corresponds to the synthesis of the entire process, and will discuss what knowledge has been gained in relation to the central question and the objectives that led me to undertake this study.

In the first section I'll review how I have approached the central question and I will consider to what degree the objectives I set have been accomplished. Then, I will reflect on some elements that have not been studied, as well as some of the themes and directions future work may take in order to follow up on this study.

9.1 Review of the objectives and answers to the central question

To write the conclusions I will review the objectives that I articulated, in response to my desire to explore the central question of the study:

> "Which elements of rural schools and multi-grade classrooms can promote inclusion?"

These objectives are:

1.   To explore, describe and analyse, while avoiding generalizations, the concept of "rural school", by reviewing different definitions that have been used over time.

2.   To inquire into the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practices.

3.   To identify and elaborate on the elements of rural schooling that can promote inclusion.

4.   To describe and interpret the elements of multi-grade schooling that can promote inclusion.

9.1.1 Conceptualizations of the rural school

In relation to the first objective, when beginning this doctoral dissertation on rural schools my main reference point was from documents from SERC, which defines a rural

school as a "different school model". However, given the complexity of the term, which I have elaborated on in the chapter dedicated to the theoretical framework, I found it was necessary to reconceptualize it. Thus, I decided to explore, describe and analyse the concept "rural school". I have done so using four parameters: the external context, the institutional context, the role of the teacher, and the process of teaching and learning. As we can observe in the table, the elements that emerge come together over time, and therefore can be considered a definition of the concept.

Keeping in mind these four parameters, I have developed an initial approach to rural schooling based on an analysis of how this concept has been defined over the years. In this manner, I have observed elements that have emerged historically, and which have come to define rural schooling in the following manner:

> "A rural school is a public educational centre offering Early Childhood and Primary education that is situated in a small municipality of less than 3,000 inhabitants. One of its main characteristics is the presence of multi-grade classrooms, where students are organized into class-groups with one teacher working with boys and girls of different ages. This type of small school, which appears in a rural context that is in constant transformation and rejects a traditional identity of rurality, has historically been ignored by researchers and pedagogues and negatively affected by adverse administrative policies. In contrast, these centres have always been closely linked to their municipality, where they assume an active social function and are often the singular cultural focal point in the community. The rural school has always needed comprehensive and versatile teachers capable of carrying out the many, diverse tasks required of them. Meanwhile, the organizational tasks and pedagogical principles that support the management of heterogeneous age groups and multilevel interaction require a specific formation that is scarce in today's teacher training. In addition, the close-knit atmosphere in a rural school allows for more personalized attention paid to each student where an individual's personal learning pace is likely to be respected. Finally, rural schools appear to consistently work in order to articulate and validate a coherent structure, and throughout history, pedagogical potential emerges demonstrating what this type of school has to offer."

Next I will elaborate on the aspects related to the external context, which are of an historical and sociological nature. Because the other parameters directly relate to the central question of the dissertation, and to objectives three and four, I will address them later in my review of the elements of rural schooling and multi-grade classrooms that can promote inclusion.

First, based on a conceptual analysis of this issue, an idea emerges that portrays a rural territory and its inhabitants as a context in constant transformation. We have a portrait of a system that adapts and redefines itself, leading to a loss of a traditional rural identity. The case chosen for this study, the municipality of Rellinars, is representative of these characteristics, which are discussed in Chapter 4. In addition, in Section 8.4 of Chapter 8, I refer to the changes that the rural world has experienced in today's post-modern society.

The second characteristic derived from the conceptualization is that the rural school has a social function and has often been the only cultural focal point in a community, albeit in different ways and with distinct objectives throughout history. There has been a persistent desire within the school to organize cultural activity in the municipality, although this depends on whether the teachers assume this responsibility and is evidently influenced by local political tendencies. The school in Rellinars illustrates this point. In spite of being a newly created school, from the outset it has paid attention to the social and cultural role it occupies in the small community and the school administration supports this position. As I have described in Chapter 7, the centre develops a range of activities that extend beyond the school walls.

Next, corroborating the claim that rural schools have been constantly abandoned throughout history, the rural world and its schools have and do suffer under adverse administrative policies and from a permanent negligence on behalf of researchers and pedagogues. This characteristic has had clear negative consequences, which unfortunately are still an issue. As I have discussed in the autobiographical chapter and in the theoretical framework, discovering the scarcity of previous studies on rural schooling when I became interested in this topic was an important factor that motivated and inspired me to develop this doctoral dissertation on rural schools.

The school in Rellinars, like the majority of rural schools in Spain, has had to constantly confront adverse policies, which is a noteworthy grievance, especially when contrasted with the experience of other schools. For example, the amount of bureaucracy required compared to their lack of human resources, or the need to constantly explain the specific casuistry of the rural school to the Department of Education in order to carry out procedures, etc. In addition, the fact that these schools are invisible to researchers and pedagogues means that they practically don't exist in the Teacher Education curriculum (meaning that students are ignorant of the reality of rural schools and don't request to do their student teaching in this setting), nor are such schools a regular object of study in educational research. However, despite the difficult situation, luckily in Catalonia there are SERC and GIER which are able to raise awareness about rural schools in different educational institutions and are constantly, and vocally, speaking out against these negative policies.

This dissertation is a small contribution that could be useful as a starting point for different theoretical studies that address specific schools, as I have done with the school in Rellinars. It could also be useful for understanding the complexity, tensions and historical development of rural schools, for those people who are interested in the issue, whether they be from the educational sector, like pre-service or employed teachers, or other fields.

9.1.2 Dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practices

In its mission statement, the school in Rellinars does not define itself explicitly as an inclusive school. However I selected it as the case for my research because I knew of the inclusive nature of their classroom practices and had had different conversations about this topic with the administration, which convinced me it was a good fit. The original motives of this choice were closely related to the teaching practices I observed in the classroom, and that fact that these were multi-grade, because I was already familiar with some interesting experiences and projects emerging from this centre that seemed, to me, to be inclusive educational practices.

Despite initially considering what was taking place in the classroom, during the research other inclusive elements of a more global character became visible. I didn't consider them at the outset even though multi-grade grouping or the use of certain organizational or didactic strategies do not determine or ensure that a school is inclusive. As Schein (1985) affirms, practices are manifestations of an organizational culture and therefore the inclusive educational practices in the classroom that I observed are a result of the organizational culture in the centre, while also following Ainscow's (2004) index of the political dimension of an educational institution. Ultimately these dimensions were key for carrying out an analysis of this study.

I feel that the case chosen, in its complexity and global character, has expanded on what I hoped to learn and accomplish. During the field work, I found myself re-articulating and reformulating my research question on more than one occasion. I gathered evidence showing that in order to promote inclusion in a centre, it is necessary to have a very committed pedagogical, political and organizational model, rather than just the presence of multi-grade classrooms or the use of cooperative or collaborative teaching strategies. This case also allowed me to demonstrate that although the school does not identify as an inclusive school, its strong mission statement and the way it understands school knowledge means that inclusion inevitably emerges as a consequence of the design. Therefore, I can affirm that the case has turned my expectations upside down, in the sense that whereas I initially found concrete examples of rural schooling and multi-grade education that could

promote inclusion, I have discovered that the dimensions that characterize inclusive educational practices go beyond a mere mapping of a classroom and the teachers. Instead, the entire school community as well as the immediate and more general context must become active players in the educational environment.

Therefore, looking in-depth at the culture of a rural school that promotes inclusion can provide clues for other schools (rural or not) that wish to incorporate inclusive practices. In other words, the contributions here may enrich pedagogical debates among the group of teachers that make up SERC. I believe that the dimensions mentioned here complement their discourse, which members have been questioning since 2012. These teachers recognize that they have been defending rural schools as a "model for a different school" based on elements and arguments that have not been verified by scientific research and which respond more to an ideal than to reality. From this point of view, the analysis I offer in Chapter 8, on the claims, issues and different visions of rural schooling and multi-grade teaching can serve as a starting point for the SERC teachers who wish to reflect on and elaborate their discourse.

Within this line of work, and in order to formalize those elements of rural schools and multi-grade classrooms that can promote inclusion, next I will discuss the degree to which objectives three and four have been accomplished.

9.1.3 Elements of rural schools that can promote inclusion

As I have discussed earlier, throughout the research process many inclusive elements within the school of Rellinars emerged. The following is a synthesis of those which relate to rural schools, distinguishing between three perspectives: cultural, political and practical.

Regarding the elements that promote **inclusive culture** in rural schools, we must recognize that a strong point in its favour is the reduced dimension of this type of centre, which allows for a more agile organization and helps it run smoother. As I have been able to demonstrate in Rellinars, these centres can be welcoming and familiar, and the relationships among different members of the community can be more humanized and close-knit. Along the same lines, having fewer teachers can favour collaboration among the faculty and can aide in consensus and decision making. For example, in Rellinars the actions related to the elimination of obstacles to learning and participation affect curricular and organizational aspects, thanks to the flexibility that a centre like this can have, where questions about management can be resolved quickly and where decisions are based primarily on pedagogical motives.

Rural schools are spaces capable of reducing discrimination or intolerance of all types. In the case of Rellinars, stereotypes related to age, maturity level, or learning styles and

rhythms, etc. were less visible because the heterogeneity in the classroom fostered tolerance and supported the development of more inclusive thought, for both students and teachers.

In the same way that the characteristics of a small school can promote close relations between teachers and families, they also respond more easily to the day-to-day rhythms of life in a community and can find spaces, formally and informally, for sharing the values of inclusion. As I have observed in Rellinars, in relation to the school board's and local institutions' involvement with the centre, the school is a very important cultural focal point in the town.

Delving into the **political aspects**, the most defined premise of the inclusive rural school is that it welcomes all students in the town, working from the idea that it is a "school for all". In this sense, the Rellinars school tries to adjust in order to accommodate all its students, by ensuring that its facilities are accessible, helping new students and their families become a part of the town, assisting people with finding necessary support structures, etc.

As I found during the field work, having effective, flexible management as well as a solid mission statement makes a centre more efficient, allowing it to: help new and novice teachers to engage at school and encourage them to take part in training activities for improving diversity; promote policies that support the specific educational needs that favour inclusion; offer psycho-pedagogic support by reducing the barriers to learning and participation; and so on. This institutional structure can also help link the curriculum and support measures to educational orientation programs or to behavioural problems, and thus potentially reduce the use of intimidation, expulsions for bad behaviour, or even truancy.

Regarding **inclusive practices**, one characteristic of rural schooling is the ease with which it supports collaborative teaching, where teachers facilitate learning and participation among the student body and avoid splitting groups, working instead to ensure that there are always, whenever possible, two teachers in a classroom. The way the Rellinars school is organized, it is interesting to observe how teachers take advantage of their collective experience and develop resources both within the faculty and in the community, in order to support learning and participation. I will look at the more specific elements of classroom practices in the following section.

One of the clear limitations I've observed in Rellinars, which is quite common for small towns, is the lack of extracurricular activities on offer (C.1.1). As a result, families who are interested in them must travel, and therefore are required to have a private mode of transportation and some amount of free time. This can mean that the differences between those students who have these resources and those who do not become

more pronounced as children age and it may become difficult for the centre to compensate for these inequalities.

9.1.4 Elements of multi-grade classrooms that can promote inclusion

The school in Rellinars promotes **inclusive cultures** within the multi-grade classroom, thanks in part to the teacher's proximity to and deep knowledge of the students. By avoiding the homogenization of the class group, teachers come to value every student equally and thus maintain high expectations for each individual, seeing each student as a special case with specific potential. In parallel, the helping attitude students have with each other contributes to a more cooperative or collaborative learning environment; by being less competitive there is a reduction in anxiety and learning is made easier. The elements observed in the fieldwork represent multi-grade contexts as an added value, which enhances student accountability and autonomy and builds a class as a group where everyone can learn from others (as discussed in Chapter 8). They contribute to the development of an inclusive culture in the classroom.

Closely related to the **inclusive policies** of a multi-grade classroom, the groups organized within the classrooms are very diverse. In Rellinars I observed that as a starting point, the group-class was already heterogeneous with respect to age. Smaller groupings—work groups, partners, etc.—could be arranged both through students' choice, where the children chose their partners, or by the teachers (using a criteria of heterogeneity), and neither way was problematic or new to the students.

It is essential that we continue to expand on **inclusive practices** and we can recognize that multi-grade classrooms are a platform for developing them. When multi-gradation is not only a casual consequence of a rural context but is introduced as an opportunity, as in the case of the school in Rellinars, this provides a pedagogical opportunity, which I have discussed in the theoretical framework and have illustrated in this case study. From this perspective, multi-grades can promote inclusion if the programs are designed for all students, fostering participation, collaboration and a high tolerance of difference, while allowing the student body to explore multiple points of view and engage in respectful debate. One of the inclusive elements in multi-grade classrooms is that differences are used as a teaching resource and students can actively engage and regulate their own learning process. Finally, if we also introduce diversification within assessment, by proposing different ways to evaluate and create formative assessment, we can ensure that instead of closing doors and creating disappointments, we can promote the success and progress of all our students.

9.2　　Once finished, looking back and looking ahead

During the last revisions of the case study, and while writing this section, as I looked back and took stock of the path I have been following, I realize that in spite of my attempt to analyse the case in all its complexity, there are some aspects that I have left out. This material comprises the "off stage" or the "making of" of my research, and includes material that was not as closely related to the focus of this dissertation—i.e., the dimensions of inclusive education—or in some cases corresponds to tensions that were difficult to resolve.

One example of this would be the school's history and its relationship to the municipality. Even though it is considered a new school, the centre in Rellinars had been open before, and various initiatives have been taken by the school to acknowledge its history; this centre has thought and rethought forms of collaboration and involvement with the municipality but this process is not fully captured in my dissertation. Another aspect that I have not explored in depth is the nature of the relationships and the emotional ties that develop between members of the educational community and the diverse views that are represented. In addition, closely linked to some behaviours that I have very briefly described are some conflicts that take place, the most of which emerge outside the school but then have consequences inside. This is unlike the conflicts that can arise within the school, which the centre is committed to resolving internally in order to prevent them from escalating outside.

Finally, there are future investigations that I would be interested in carrying out within this line of work, which attempts to combine two rather large fields of study: rural schooling and inclusive education. For example, as is clear from this research, it is important to delve into teachers' roles in fostering the dimensions of inclusive education, particularly looking at their practices in multi-grade classrooms. Also, there is a need to learn more about the training teachers in rural schools require and assess the level of specificity that should be offered in degree programs, compared with what is currently available. Another potential area for further research is to look look at the participation, or participations, of families in an environment as close-knit and as favourable as a small town with a rural school. Elaborating on the opportunities and issues related to this reality is essential.

I hope that this thesis is only a first step towards linking the path of rural schools and inclusion, and that with time and persistence, this route will become a trail that many travellers follow, finding themselves increasingly in the company of others. Among them, I imagine researchers in the field, future PhD students who choose this subject as I did, the teachers, and especially the children, present and future, who live in a rural context and need a school capable of receiving them.

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