THE ISSUE OF AUTONOMY WITHIN MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

When we speak of autonomy we think about how we navigate in a specific setting, since a relative level of autonomy is determined by that setting. When dealing with rural schools with multigrade classrooms, we refer to a setting comprising a complex diversity of people in terms of age, sex, grades, contexts, conceptual levels, interests, motivations... All of them sharing the same space and the same teacher, and organised within the same time span in which they share a set of activities, both spontaneous and/or planned by a teacher who must ensure learning achievement. This paper presents different types of autonomous learning in multigrade classrooms, as a result of an international competitive research carried out in several Latin American and European countries.

KEY WORDS

Autonomy; Learning; Multigrade classroom; Rural school.

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INTRODUCTION

Multigrade classrooms are settings where varied relationships between teacher and student, and between the students themselves, can be enabled. Different roles may be agreed based on tasks' distribution, thus fostering a real development of autonomy. However, the mere existence of a multigrade group—and its inherent features—is not enough to achieve autonomy, and so the teacher hast to take some decisions to allow establishing certain type of dynamics—both interactive and communicational.

For the interpretation of the category «autonomy», referenced throughout this work will be Boix' approaches (2011): «Beyond typical complexity of multigrade classroom regarding the specific pedagogic practice performed, an important component to look at is the students' learning autonomy. Such competence is especially significant when we deal with student bodies of different ages who share the same time and space, and are instructed by one teacher only, who needs to respond to multiple and varied curricular demands.» (p. 18) «Moreover, learning autonomy allows the teacher to 'set out a daily dynamics for open knowledge circulation' (Santos, 2006) in multigrade classrooms, where students make progress in content acquisition according to their interests and motivations—with different curricular depth levels in the and beyond the goals set for each grade.» (p. 19) The author also refers to interactions: «The social practices operating in multigrade classrooms take place also in society as a whole. A huge variety of interactions and inter-subjectivities

are presented in multigrade classrooms and these need to be addressed in order to understand the complex set of variables influencing multigrade education practice (…) thus, this space becomes the most significant: one where models are replicated, social relationships beyond the class relationship itself are established and, therefore, where conflicts emerge...» (p. 20)

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study is part of a competitive research developed within the framework of the programme for I+D+I Fundamental Research Projects funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. This international project spanned during three years (2009-2012) and was carried out in three European countries (Spain, France and Portugal) and two Latin American ones (Chile and Uruguay). The project is titled «Rural schools are characterised by efficiency and quality in competence acquisition; is this model transferable to other types of schools?», and has been coordinated by the University of Barcelona. Two main objectives arise from this project and these are summarised below:

· To study and compare teaching-learning methodologies in rural schools in Chile, Spain, France, Portugal and Uruguay.
· To design a proposal of teaching components that can be transferred to other types of school.

As for the methods used in the project, they are set within the framework of the interpretative paradigm. Quantitative methodology tools (questionnaires) and qualitative methodology tools (interviews and participant observation) were used. Each country chose a sample of rural schools with a tendency to active-participatory approaches and gathered information after applying the aforementioned tools. This paper presents those results of participant observation in the Uruguayan rural schools pertinent to learning autonomy in multigrade classrooms.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The research team based in Uruguay applied the participant observation method in four rural schools (two two-teacher schools and two one-teacher schools) located in socially, financially and geographically diverse contexts. Researchers worked in pairs until data saturation was reached after successive visits to the schools. With the aim of exchanging data records, carrying out a first level of analysis, and planning the following sessions, each pair worked also in instances subsequent to each observation session. Around seven or eight classroom-based observations per school were carried out. Data saturation corresponding to the selected guidelines of participant observation was reached. Data saturation occurs when, after successive observations based on data collection from a relevant body of evidence—large enough as to ensure the credibility of the observation—no new information emerge, however, the information previously observed is validated.

As a methodological element *sui generis*, four work groups[1] relative the four different cases were formed. In the meetings they held team partners who had not been involved in the observation sessions—therefore enjoying a certain «external» aspect—were also invited. These analytic work groups enabled expanding and enriching observers' view, as well as redirecting the observation and focusing in what seemed the more interesting aspects and details. They worked in four different geographical locations related to the schools that were subject of observation and to the researchers' places of origin. Each group produced a primary product derived from the analysis of the observations based on two fundamental inputs: the field notes contributed by the observers and the theoretical corpus previously defined—a collection of selected texts for interpretative work.

On the basis of that dynamics several plenary sessions were held and approximately thirty descriptive observation categories were created. In the search for new knowledge, those findings were named, appointed, described according to theoretical elements and then exemplified using the field notes. A first document—later known as «handcrafted report»—was created including categories grouped according to the schools where they had been generated; these were named as follows: South School, West School, Centre School and North School.

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1   These first work groups worked in Montevideo, Lavalleja, Flores and Paysandú.

A second document was produced, with categories organised into four groups. First group is called «Autonomy and control: teacher-student interactions in multigrade classrooms», including categories such as «individualised instruction *a priori*», «apparently autonomous controlling model», «the teacher works all the time with the entire multigrade group», «guideline and initial support», «dependency and control» and «autonomy and participation.». From that it can be inferred that some categories reveal some familiar phenomena formerly outlined in the theoretical framework. However, others refer to teaching situations either unexpected or denoting an unsuspected distance between multigrade theoretical elements and their effective materialisation.

During 2012 four more work groups worked, whose aim was producing a series of texts based on comparing the aforementioned categories against several theoretical sources.[2] This process of intellectual production resulted—being thus partially finished—in an interpretative text including the findings presented by the application of participant observation methods.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHOOLS SELECTED FOR PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In order to select the four rural schools where participant observation was going to be carried out, a mixed criterion was applied by taking into account aspects related both to the teachers' education and to the educational outcomes achieved by the school institutions according to certain objective indicators and to corresponding Department Inspections' point of view. Some other criteria were also taken into account: geographical distribution (four different departments of the country were selected); socio-economic context (farming; milk and livestock sectors), and type of school (one-teacher and two-teacher types). In that way, four different settings arose, detailed below.

The school hereafter called *South School* is a one-teacher school from a Department located in the southern part of the country, approximately 70 km from Montevideo. The teacher lives in the school area. She has been working there for 12 years and has greatly appreciation by the community. The socio-economic context is that of a predominantly agrarian rural area—small

2   These second work groups worked in Montevideo, Paysandú, Florida and Lavalleja.

producers and family economy. Population is very dispersed, although demographic density is highly above national average.

The *West School* is a multi-teacher school; there are two teachers working at it, one of them acting also as head teacher. The school is located in a Department of the western part of the country, approximately 150 km from Montevideo. From the point of view of educational outcomes and opinion by education supervisors, both the school and the teachers are regarded to be of an excellent level. As for the socio-economic context, it is a rural based area focused mainly in the milk sector; most people are settled in population centres and enjoy a good economic situation.

The *Centre School is a* multi-teacher school; there are two teachers, one of them is also the head teacher and teaches to higher grades. This school is located in a Department of the central area of the country, approximately 220 km from Montevideo, and is a highly ranked school, both for its outcomes and for the head teacher's experience, who has a long career in education. The context embraces the milk production sector and extensive livestock farming; however, the school is located in a small rural town—one of the few existing ones in the area.

The *North School* is a one-teacher school; it has a scarce number of students and is located in a Department of the northern part of the country, 525 km from Montevideo. It is a rural area characterised by intensive livestock farming, where milking yards, small farms and green houses are found. Population is much dispersed and close to the Department capital city; demographic density is low. Most business owners do not live in the area. The head teacher is ranked as excellent and has some experience in rural environments. Some of the students are the children of the aforementioned retail premises, and the rest come from nearby farms.

SOME OBSERVATIONS
AND THEIR CORRESPONDING INTERPRETATIONS

In the Uruguayan case, the observations related to autonomy in the multigrade classroom produced a set descriptive categories characterised by a tension between autonomy and control. Four of these observations are discussed below.

During the first sessions in the multigrade classroom of the South School, observers are left with the impression that children have a great deal of autonomy, since they do some tasks on their own—without asking any questions to the teacher. For instance, when it is time to go to the dining room each child, without asking anything at all, gets his/her wash bag and goes to the toilet—without receiving any instruction about it. Then they go into the dining room and handle their lunch—water and dessert are served by them. Other classroom-based observations were as follows: when writing a heading title, all the pupils use coloured pencils—they decorate it as they please. After finishing a task, children from Basic Level pick up a photocopied activity from their personal folders and start working—they do not wait for the teacher's suggestion to do it.

These and other situations lead to think of certain climate of freedom, a situation where children are the ones managing their learning resources. In the following observations, however, observers began to note that such atmosphere of freedom and autonomy occurs only in certain activities and in certain moments as the ones previously described; they observed these situations were actually representing habits and routines deeply rooted in the children after having been imposed by the teacher along the years. Neither proper autonomous work, nor management of the learning resources did exist: when the children were about to use a specific resource and it had not been instructed by the teacher, nor did it appear in the task description, they consulted it with her.

This underlying controlling model can be noted also in the attention paid by the teacher to each thing children are about to write down. The whole group is working on the topic of population census. A census officer is present in the classroom. The teacher proposes that the students make questions while one of them—a student girl—writes the answers on the blackboard. On several occasions, a child asks anything and the teacher rephrases the question, or even makes a new one, immediately thereafter. Also, each time the student girl is about to write on the blackboard, she is asked: «What are you going to write?» The comment made by the girl is or is not approved and then the teacher rephrases and dictates it.

So, how do teachers direct their students' autonomy? Is autonomy oriented only in terms of following the rules imposed by the school institution? These

questions are not easy to answer. Based on the observations, it can be noted how the teacher is permanently performing his/her role under a controlling model, and therefore she is, first of all, restricting their students' freedom of expression.

If we comprehend Boix' idea of autonomy—a concept already proposed in this paper—, then it follows that teachers need to take the most appropriate decisions so that their pupils develop self-reliance and are able to act and decide freely and responsibly. Therefore, we lead to the conclusion that, in terms of theoretical perspective, it would be necessary to agree to those models and paradigms that consider autonomy as a skill developed by learners in order to manage their own learning processes. In that way, autonomy would entail, at least, recognising and choosing some of the strategies, resources and paths to approach knowledge.

It seems that the fact that the classroom has an «atmosphere of freedom» is not enough to foster learning autonomy. Autonomy is rather intentional and therefore it needs to be taught. Autonomy should be an educational objective and should be considered as part of learning content.

This would entail, among other things:

· Diversifying teaching proposals so that diversity is addressed.
· Presenting open proposals to be solved in different ways, so that they lead to critical thinking, in such a way that pupils' work process is given value.
· Organising multigrade groups in different ways according to the activity or topic worked, thus allowing the children to interact in varied ways both with the teacher and among themselves.

Some teachers, although unconsciously—or at least without having and explicit intention to do it—do not boost autonomy through their proposals out of fear of losing control over their classes and subsequently loosing the security they are in need of. Teachers cannot be the only guilty part in here since this is the preponderant role imposed upon their profession since very long ago (Gabbiani, 2000).

The censor officer scene example reveals that the teacher does not give her students the chance of taking their own decisions and, for each act they perform, she is constantly interposing the need of approval. Resistance to give up to the core place the teacher considers her own—and defines her role—is reflected in this example.

As expressed by Beatriz Gabbiani (2000), language and discourse play a core role in classroom interaction. In fact, different discursive practices will offer the students different situations involving learning. Teaching and learning in the classroom are determined by discursive practices and discursive formations. Stubbs (1984) maintains that «learning is not a merely cognitive or psychological process since the social relationship between teacher and student can play a vital role» (p. 88). Teachers' discourse is fundamental for the vision developed by the students about the type of relationship established in the classroom. It is through language that the teacher's values for which he/she advocates his/her right to manage speech in the classroom are put at stake. This is intrinsically linked to certain basic socio-cultural values and certain status relationships (Gabbiani, 2000). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) talk about how the distribution of speech turns in the classroom is organised around three movements: initiation–response–feedback. Teachers assume movement 1 and movement 3, and leave to the students the second speech turn. The gap left to the students' interventions does not follow a path very different from the one expected by the teacher.

Perhaps it can be inferred that the teacher wants to help the students to build the answers that were going to be written on the blackboard as means of «scaffolding» (Bruner, 1987), however, the high frequency of her interventions may also be a way of exercising control and reveals an «asymmetry in the relationship» (Gabbiani, 2000). The teacher organises and manages the situation. We have already seen how she chooses the responses she prefers and how she ignores others—even «rephrasing» them. «To the asymmetry typical of institutional roles, it must be added the fact that teachers are adults» (Gabbiani, 2000). When she speaks about control, the author is referring to how decision-making works in relationships. This aspect seems to play a core function in small social structures such as family or the classroom. And the strategies used by teachers to control what their pupils learn and do are many.

SECOND OBSERVATION: DEPENDENCY AND CONTROL

In the *Centre School* no sequential autonomous work is observed—it is performed only sporadically, relies on the teacher and is always under his/her control. In order to make progress in their task, the children are in constant need of her endorsement. Individual work requiring the children find strategies to solve situations on their own is scarcely done.

The teacher states that she keeps them (in relation to the children) «constrained», because this is a group «without autonomy», so if they are left working on their own, they «cannot manage and get distracted with anything». In order to take control of the class, tasks are being suggested all along. There is no place for «idle time». The teacher is afraid of having a messy situation and losing control over the group, as last year she worked in a one-teacher environment.

Beatriz Gabbiani (2000) refers to control and power issues and to how decision-making works in relationships. To quote Wieman's words (1985), she understands control as a «constellation of constrictions mutually assigned by people by means of manipulating the structure and content of interactions, thus limiting the available options for each of the speakers and for the relational system as a whole». Language is used as a control element and the student is managed through it, «a specific discipline is imposed on him/her through language and even in situations where speech is dominated by someone else's speech, to the point that it could be said that it is not the person who is speaking (…).» As long as the teacher finds ways of keeping on speaking, students will pay attention; as long as he/she is able to orchestrate or to preset others' speech, he/she will maintain control. (Gabbiani, 2000)

First of all, it needs to be said that the issue should not be about groups with or without autonomy. It has been already stated, as maintained by Boix, that autonomy is a skill and therefore has to be taught. Absolute autonomy does not exist—it is developed. The fact of recognising that the children are dependent on her may be a teacher's strategy to keep under control what they learn and do; she institutionalises this dependency relationship and considers it is something characteristic—a feature.

For Gimeno (1988), in the school context there is clearly a leader—the teacher. His/her actions do not only determine the actions of each of the students, but also the class-evolution as a group. If the established relationship is based on dominance, students will have to retreat and inhibit themselves from spotlight. If the predominant interaction is that of a personal relationship, then a tutorial system will be set up.

Based on this information, the relationships of dependency linked to interactions in the classroom can also be seen. Within this environment, the teacher is the one who, as a matter of principle, determines tasks to be done and rules to be followed. This definition can be more or less clear and flexible, and can address to a greater or lesser extent the students' interests, and conse-

quently it can be negotiated. However, this does not change an essential fact: the enormous difference in power implied in performing the teacher role in relation to performing the student role.

For this reason, we think that these observations carried out within the research reveal dependency relationships, which result in some ideas, summarised below:

· Class organisation is always the same and interactions are performed always in the same way.
· There are not any diversified work proposals; it is either the same one for the whole group or the same one for the whole grade.
· Paths and resources to be followed are provided in work instructions, in which some elements from the behavioural approach are underlying.

third observation:
individualised instruction *a priori* (south school)

The teaching proposal made by the teacher is based in individualised instruction to their students. This is described as «a priori», since daily activities are planned as individual work. The teacher proposes shared activities to the children of the same grade, but these are designed to work on them individually. During the seven observation days, the teacher proposed only two activities to the group as a whole, and individualised instruction was equally applied when supervising children's autonomous work.

It is observed that, even though the teacher provides individual attention, neither does it respond to learning modalities, nor to the children's learning difficulties. Likewise, these aspects are not considered in work activities, which are the same for all same grade students. The most used resource is photocopied exercises: they are given to each of the children, who then glue the worksheets onto their notebooks.

This proposal contradicts what Multigrade Teaching theory (Santos, 2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b) maintains in relation to the achieved asset that interrelationships taking place within diverse groups in a time-sharing and space-sharing situation entail. A different instruction for each grade is observed here and this does not enable teacher-student interaction, let alone peer interaction; it only enables that the assignments are returned after being appropriately graded.

Even though learning is based on a process both interpersonal and shared, ultimately it is always a personal acquisition—which does not mean that the process has to be carried out individually. In order to accomplish learning, an issue or situation that makes our knowledge unstable has to arise. Children frequently work individually with materials previously created by teachers including clearly sequenced and progressive activities about different topics—which are called «worksheets».

Zabala (1995) speaks of the «personal work contracts by Freinet». The teacher proposes to the students learning activities appropriate to their aptitudes and interests. Beyond the difficulty of creating and developing—and correcting—these specific work files, autonomy is fostered, as is commitment and responsibility to ensure contract compliance. Group/class work, level group work, or grade group work, do not exclude individual work and effort; on the contrary, the aforementioned foster both purposeful personal work and responsibility as an active integrant of the process.

In view of the necessity of analysing the classroom situations observed in the research in accordance to the theory, we should ask ourselves, «What does 'teaching' mean?» According to Fenstermacher (1989) «…that relationship established between at least two people; one of them have some knowledge, skill or another content form that aims to transmit to another person who lacks it». The author considers that two people need to be present in the act of teaching, while in the case of learning this is not essential. Learning relies more on specific factors such as mindset, study time, motivation, etc., than it does on teaching. Teaching can occur without entailing learning achievement, and learning can also exist without a systematic teaching process having taken place.

The work of teaching entails an enormous responsibility and it is not only about passing on wisdoms and knowledge. The idea we have of teaching defines to a great extent the way practices have been structured—which in turn is inevitably linked to personal and disciplinary stories.

«Teaching practices presume an ideological identification which makes teachers structure that field in a specific way…» (Litwin, 2001, p. 94) Then, it is good trying to interpret those practices so as to foster reflection upon them. As in any human work, mistakes may be made in the micro world of practice. The important thing is to have elements in order to study, analyse and think about the subject permanently.

«If in the years to come we are not able to think more deeply than today about some of the complexities that dwell in the very heart of teaching; if we are

not able to appreciate more fully the role that teachers can play—and indeed play—in our lives, we are condemned to have those schools and those teachers whose educational potentialities will never be developed.» (Jackson, 1990)

Children seem to be autonomous—autonomy being perceived as something being taught. They listen to work instructions and work without expecting to be supervised by the teacher. They tend to ask each other and to the teacher if needed be. When they are on their own, the same working atmosphere is maintained—likewise when they carry out tasks outside the classroom. No distraction from the topic that calls them together is observed. They are able to stop, talk, or gesticulate, but they are always focused in the subject. They participate orally, in an active way, using good vocabulary—which is being constantly increased by the teacher: she requests synonyms, «another way of saying it», etc. The children are enthusiastic about the suggested tasks.

Below is the transcription of a classroom situation that we see as a resounding example:

> Children seem to be autonomous—autonomy being perceived as something being taught. They listen to work instructions and work without expecting to be supervised by the teacher. They tend to ask each other and to the teacher if needed be. When they are on their own, the same working atmosphere is maintained—likewise when they carry out tasks outside the classroom. No distraction from the topic that calls them together is observed. They are able to stop, talk, or gesticulate, but they are always focused in the subject. They participate orally, in an active way, using good vocabulary—which is being constantly increased by the teacher: she requests synonyms, «another way of saying it», etc. The children are enthusiastic about the suggested tasks. (Category 1.3. Field note from the West School)

In the light of theory we interpret that in this scene circumstances to develop the students autonomy have occurred. This can be inferred from the way they take responsibility for the learning process and do not rely constantly on the teacher's guidance: they make decisions so as to make progress. They keep up

the pace of work even when they are outside the classroom. The teacher puts the students in situations they have to solve, without having previously given an explanation, since she knows they manage certain level of conceptualisation. She motivates them to find solutions, firstly with their peers, and then they turn to her if necessary. This teacher provides opportunities to interact and stimulates mutual support. She organises space areas—perhaps according to the topic she intends to teach—and it can be seen that the children are used to go outside the classroom and work responsibly.

In relation to the progress of the knowledge acquired by the children, it is important to highlight the presence of the teacher. We could ask ourselves if autonomy is linked to children participation since the planning stage or if it is the teacher the one making decisions and organising activities. In some way, the education system gives the teacher the responsibility of decision-making: he/she has to select and give a hierarchy to the contents so that they are taught; teachers have to promote that all children enjoy the same opportunities to engage with knowledge. This task will depend upon the teacher's intellectual autonomy, which involves discipline knowledge, experience and commitment.

In that sense, autonomy is a competence, and as such should be taught; and, multigrade classrooms are ideal settings to develop it. Autonomy is the foundation of lifelong learning and it is strengthen as children began to realise that the responsibility for their own actions belongs to them.

CONCLUSIONS

Our aim was to look thoroughly into the teaching situations taking place in multigrade classrooms of rural schools. For that, participant observation method was applied, since we understand it enables a dual intellectual action: a look from the inside—by immersing ourselves in the setting where events are produced; and, at the same time, enjoying certain perspective and the distance provided by the fact of us being researches and by the theoretical corpus adopted in this work. From that position we went on to observe certain categories and indicators in which, based on the theoretical knowledge available, we were particularly interested: teaching strategies, time management, space organisation, the use of teaching materials, assessment mechanisms.

The outcomes were, to some extent, surprising. According to what has been aforementioned above, we expected to find settings that showed a certain set of features—where teaching situations based on the features of the selected schools corresponded, to a greater or lesser extent, to what theory suggests. However, we found a remarkable diversity of manifestations of teaching practices in multigrade groups: some of them were in the order of what was expected while others were far from and even contradictory to the theoretical framework of multigrade teaching and the active-participative methodological approaches. But these unexpected scenes throw much light on multigrade reality and contribute to the creation of teaching proposals for rural schools and their extrapolation to other types of schools. Therefore, these are included in the descriptive categories expressed and in their subsequent interpretation.

In that respect, the Uruguayan team worked on the basis of two successive processes. On the basis of the field notes generated through participant observation method applied in the four schools selected, various descriptive categories were created; each of them was given a *scene*, which was named, described and illustrated with examples. These categories that were at first linked to the schools where they had been generated, were later organised into four groups based on what we initially intended to reveal. The second process comprised the interpretation of the categories in the light of the theoretical corpus selected. This part of the work produced a text which is still under construction, although its core elements are included in the present report. Therefore, these conclusions are necessarily partial and leave the path open so as to continuing working on it. The inputs generated in the field work thus merit it, both for its potentiality and for the hermeneutic-interpretative possibilities they open.

Regarding teacher-students interactions in multigrade classrooms, observations suggest a clear tension between autonomy and control and dependency. Much has been said about autonomy of students in rural schools, and specifically in multigrade classrooms, and thus we expected to find indicators of it. Autonomy did appear, although complexly expressed due to the diverse manifestations that, according to what we noted, it acquires in reality. Only in the case of the West School did we find a type of autonomy linked to children participation, since a process of having taught such autonomy is noticed on the part of the teacher. This fact is necessarily seen in the observations—even though they correspond to a short period time—since the decisions

made by the children and the dynamics they acquire in the class development cannot happen by chance. On the contrary, the children participate autonomously in the day-to-day running of the classroom which, however paradoxical it may seem, highlights the teacher's role as educator and responsible for those events. Only under the teacher's attitude and her decisive influence is possible to achieve the level of autonomy observed. Under these advantageous conditions the multigrade group structure helps that autonomy be expressed in an effective manner. Observing that the children «are used to ask each other and to the teacher if necessary» reflects the potential of asymmetric relationships within the multigrade group and, therefore, the purpose that inquiries and interactions among learners take.

In the other cases observed autonomy reveals differently and reflects the complexity of this subject and the difficulties it presents for teaching processes and strategies which can be applied in order to foster it. As it was proved, autonomy has to do with the way the student manages in the classroom, but also it is closely related to the teacher's role and his/her attitude towards his/her ties with the children. Two facts seem to be clear. Firstly, judging from the teachers' discourse and the primary images produced by their gestures, autonomy is something of value and as such entails legitimacy so as to be performed. Autonomy is seen as a positive feature that has to be sought in the classroom, specifically and because of its characteristics and the theoretical weight lying behind it, in multigrade classrooms of rural schools. The alternation between directed work and autonomous work, and the fact that the teacher cannot always attend all the children directly, contribute to this previous idea of autonomy as something desirable and necessary in multigrade classrooms. Secondly—and in tension with the foregoing—, certain sense of *danger* exists in light of the students' autonomy. That is linked to an eventual loss of control on the part of the teacher, who feels the group «is getting out of control» unless she directly intervenes in each decision made or each event taking place. But that danger is also linked to losing her position in the classroom, that position of the one who teaches and permanently regulates interactions. The observations revealed indicators of both strands of that danger implicitly associated to autonomy.

As both facts—considering autonomy as something positive but at the same time experiencing it as dangerous—, while being contradictory in many cases cohabit, the descriptive categories that were generated are particularly remarkable. However, they are strong indicators of what occurs in reality

within the classroom, and of the danger the superficial gaze of those who want to render account of it entails. Participant observation method made possible to generate descriptions that were much further from what can be seen «at first sight». That is the case of the «apparently autonomous controlling model», in which the teacher does not give up control and her position as regulating officer of the classroom dynamics, but she does so by establishing a series of guidelines and detailed routines. When these are performed they project the idea of autonomy, but only apparently, as behind it there is a controlling model. Routines are applied in a mechanical way, and so the children are not able of solving any conflict or situation different from what it is expected, unless the teacher is present. Additionally, a necessity can be observed on the part of the teacher for having the last word and permanently building up a scene as a kind of problem-free picture. The first thing is revealed in the way she rephrases the children's discourses, including ultimate amendments about what has to remain written or said. There is a power relationship where it is clear that, whatever is said, it will be teacher the one who will legitimate a «truth». The second thing is revealed in the anticipation processes exercised by the teacher to the actions performed by the children. Everything that does not follow a routine and a protocol—being therefore under control—is submitted to a prior trial so as to not showing it incorrectly or insufficiently. The girl who is about to write something on the blackboard does not have the autonomy to write as she wish, and so, before writing she has to say it to the teacher and will only be able of doing it if she gets her approval. A power relationship is present here, too, and is materialised in a stronger manifestation than the latter—the teacher has not only the last word but also the control over the situation even before it happens.

In other situations, what happens is not a type of control disguised as autonomy, but a more explicit, recognised and accepted control, assumed by the person exercising it. This is the case of the observation carried out in the Centre School, where the scenes revealed little autonomy and an extreme dependency of the children on the teacher, and a tight control and a permanent supervision on the part of her. It is interesting pointing out that the teacher's discourse is clear: she admits that such control is necessary. She does not feel that she should hide or cover up reality by dressing it up with other clothes. This fact is expressed in the need she says she feels about «constraining» the children because she thinks is a group «without autonomy» and the fear of «mess» and of not being able to «manage the group». This lack of autonomy

the teacher appreciates within the group presupposes the idea of autonomy as something given and pre-existent, instead of something that, as it has been said within the theoretical framework using Roser Boix' words, can be fostered and enhanced by the teacher. For this teacher, these children are not autonomous, period. What remains to be done is «constraining» them; providing guidelines for each step and for each event they are going to be involved in. The vicious circle which is thus generated leads to prevent that absent autonomy will ever appear. The teacher provides guidelines and leads every action point by point because of that lack of autonomy, wherewith she is not favouring for it to emerge. In other words, children are not autonomous because the teacher does not allow them to be, in a process of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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