

Chapter 14

Multi-grade Teaching in a Small Rural School in Northern Norway



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Photographer: Anne-Mette Bjøru

Abstract This chapter investigates multi-grade teaching in a small rural school in Northern Norway. The aims of the chapter are to show what characterizes the teaching practices in a multi-grade school in a small rural community, and how these practices enable inclusion and adapted education. The chapter gives a brief insight into parts of the Norwegian framework for education; the Education Act and the Core- and Subject

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Curricula, and theory about didactical tools that are useful in multi-grade school settings. The data were collected during a visit to a small rural school. The field work lasted two full days and included observations of classroom sessions, participation at recess and informal talks with the teachers. Findings show that the three didactical tools student group formation/subject organizing, peer-learning and pupils' personal working plans are useful when conducting multi-grade teaching in a small school with few pupils. Alongside the subject orientation, the chapter also discusses the Norwegian Core curriculum's focus on social learning and how this is an important fourth element when working towards a practice that is inclusive and adapted to the individual pupil.

Keywords Rural community · General education · Didactics · Inclusion · Adapted education

14.1 Introduction

Norway is a narrow and stretched piece of land situated furthest west on the Scandinavian Peninsula, and in the middle of the five Nordic countries. It is approximately as big as Japan or Germany in area, but the distance from Norway's North Cape to its southernmost point Lindesnes is 1700 km by air route. It is shaped a bit like an open parenthesis, with a long coastline to the west and borders to Russia, Finland and Sweden in the east. The country has five and a half million people. The biggest city Oslo, the capital, has just over one million inhabitants. There is a big gap between the population of Oslo and the rest of the bigger cities in Norway, with only 53,000 inhabitants in the tenth biggest city, Tønsberg (Statistics Norway, 2021). Thus, Norway is a sparsely populated country, with a large number of small towns, villages, and communities. Norway and, to borrow from Corbett (2016), "most of the world remains predominantly rural" (p. 272).

The Northern part of Norway, north of the 65th parallel north latitude, consists of the counties Nordland, Troms and Finnmark. These counties together are one third of Norway's area, but have only 9 percent of the country's total population (Thorsnæs, 2021). All counties experienced a decrease in population in recent years (Hykkerud et al., 2020), a trend that seems to continue its foothold despite political willingness to support the north via incentives, such as lower payroll tax, lower private tax, and higher child support (Rolland, 2019). The challenges that the already small communities face when the population continues to decrease are many. One easy-to-imagine scenario could be: lower income via taxes, less investment, fewer jobs, not so many families, hardly any kids, empty houses, no pre-school facilities, tiny schools, and uncertain futures (Fredriksen, 2020).

This chapter explores one small rural community in Northern Norway. More precisely, the object of this study is to explore the organisation of one tiny school in a small community. The school is situated on an island, which is not connected to the mainland by bridge. The only way to arrive to- or leave from the island is by ferry or private boat. Due to the low number of pupils in the school, less than ten, the school has no choice but to organize the school days in multi-grade teaching sessions.

The chapter presents examples of how the teaching and learning activities are organized in the different subjects in a multi-grade setting. In addition, it shows how the practice in this school meets the Norwegian national framework for education, in particular concerning how inclusion and adapted education are met by way of its multi-grade practice. The chapter seeks to answer the following question: *What characterizes the teaching practices in a multi-grade school setting in a small rural community school, and how do the practices enable inclusion and adapted education?*

14.2 Theoretical Backdrop

To contextualize this study further, the chapter includes an introduction to the Norwegian school system; regarding both division between rural-urban school settings in Norway, as well as excerpts from the framework for education that target all schools, and in particular small community schools.

14.2.1 *Small Schools in Small Municipalities*

According to statistics, Norway had a total of 2830 grade 1–10 schools in the school year 2018/19 (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018). While the number of schools with more than 300 pupils is increasing, schools with fewer than 100 pupils is decreasing. This has both positive and negative effects. In brief, a better economy, enhanced learning environments and easier access to qualified teachers are arguments for closing small schools (Ertesvåg, 2019). On the other hand, among negative consequences is that pupils who change schools get a long commute to and from the new school (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). Most of the schools that have been closed down in Norway over the past 10 years are small schools, in small municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants, reducing the number from 700 to 550 over the last 10 years (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). This is of great concern to those who lose their local schools as it makes their village or place of home in rural areas less attractive (Solstad et al., 2016).

One central aspect in the discussion about rural schools and rural education is questioning the future for the pupils who attend rural schools (Corbett, 2016; Berg-Olsen, 2012). It seems to embrace both a worry that the school system works to educate the young away from rural areas (Berg-Olsen, 2012), as well as the notion that rural youth should be allowed to have the same aspirations and be given the same opportunities as the young in urban areas (Corbett, 2016). The latter meaning that the worry of the first claim, in fact, often becomes a reality.

Corbett (2016) claims that following one's aspirations to pursue a higher education make youth leave rural areas – naturally, because the higher education institutions do not exist in their local community. However, the “neoliberal agendas”

(Corbett, 2016, p. 274) that shape education policies often do not fit the agenda of the rural communities. The agenda of some people in the rural communities is what Corbett (2016) calls the “learning and earning” correlation and the “jobs mind-set” (p. 277). Indeed these are aspirations, just different aspirations than those held by the young who pursue a higher education. Secure employment in businesses that do not require higher education may be considered twofold; on the one hand, it is good for both the rural community that is able to offer jobs to its own youth, and for the youth who seek steady income and a future where they grew up. On the other hand, there are fewer opportunities in the work-sphere without a higher education, and all have the same right to education so why not “dream big” (Corbett, 2016, p. 279). The central issue here is who owns the big dream, and in what ways may upbringing and compulsory education create an agenda that allows that the big dreams are realized also in small rural communities. This brings us over to the school’s mandate, and the framework that sets its agenda.

14.2.2 The Education Act and the Right to Attend School

The Norwegian *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training’s* (1998) (hereafter named: *The Education Act*) chapter eight refers to the ‘Organisation of the training’ and states that:

Primary and lower secondary school pupils have the right to attend the school that is closest to where they live or the school designated for the catchment area where they live. The municipality may issue regulations concerning which schools are designated for specific catchment areas in the municipality. (The Education Act (1998), Section 8-1)

Looking at this section in more detail, the pupils’ right to attend the school ‘closest to where the pupils live’ and ‘catchment areas’ are interpreted to be decided by geography, topography and safe access (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014). Thus, the municipality cannot decide to move pupils from the school closest to their home in order to, for instance, increase the number of pupils at certain schools, gather all minority- or special education resources in one school, etc. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014). This is known as the ‘nærskoleprinsipp’ (nearest-school-principle), which stresses the municipalities’ responsibility to educate pupils at their ‘nærskole’ and that “local schools are thus required to educate children as far as is practically possible and professionally reasonable” (Maxwell & Bakke, 2019, p. 94).

This is relevant when investigating teaching practices in small schools in rural communities. This chapter shows an example of practice in a small community school, which aspires to combine the two. First, the multi-grade organization makes it practically possible to cater to the pupils’ different age- and grade-levels with few teachers employed. Second, the variation between two smaller groups and teaching all-pupils-together creates professionally reasonable solutions to the teaching and learning activities. More about this and the practical “doings” in the school below,

but first it is useful to look at other aspects of the Norwegian framework for education.

14.2.3 Adapted Education and Inclusion

To begin with, this chapter aims to study *how the teaching practices in a multi-grade school enable inclusion and adapted education*. This will be further explored in the results and discussion below, but a brief insight into the frames for education and how it treats inclusion and adapted education provides a useful backdrop.

A central principle in the Norwegian framework for education is section 1-3 in The Education Act (1998) on adapted education. It states: “Education must be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual pupil, apprentice, candidate for certificate of practice and training candidate” (The Education Act, 1998, section 1-3). As this is stated by law, all schools must practice adapted education and organize their everyday school days so that each individual pupil is taking part in learning activities that are adapted to the pupils’ level.

No sections in the Norwegian education act uses the term “inclusion” directly, but Chap. 9 A ‘The pupils’ school environment’ states: “All pupils are entitled to a good physical and psychosocial environment conducive to health, well-being and learning” (The Education Act, 1998, section 9 A-2). In order to meet the requirements in this section, it is essential to establish an inclusive practice and school culture. The importance of creating an inclusive environment in the school is also stressed in *The Norwegian Core curriculum* (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.). It is an overarching curriculum that concerns the organization and values of the education, and should be considered part of the teaching and curricula of all the different school subjects. Chapter 3, ‘Principles for the school’s practice’ has five sub-chapters, where the first two are about adapted education and inclusion. It stresses the school’s responsibility for creating “an inclusive environment” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d., ch. 3.1) because this helps the pupils to develop both academically and socially. Further, the second sub-chapter is entitled ‘Teaching and differentiated instruction’ (ch. 3.2) which points to the importance of giving all pupils equal opportunities to learn and develop even though they all have different abilities and come from diverse backgrounds. A prerequisite to create equal opportunities is adapted education, also referred to as differentiated instruction (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d., ch. 3.2).

In summary, two important principles in the Norwegian system of education are inclusion and adapted education. This is connected to the part of the Norwegian framework for education which underlines that the learning of subjects and social learning should receive equal focus in school. This is also expressed in the *Core curriculum* (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.), and a way to ensure that social learning do happen on equal terms to the learning of subjects, is through a focus exactly on inclusive practices and adapted education. To further

explore the link between inclusion and adapted education and social learning, let us have a closer look at social learning in the Norwegian framework for education.

14.2.4 ‘Social Learning’ in the Norwegian Core Curriculum

The Norwegian Core curriculum (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.) outlines the values and principles for primary and secondary education. It says:

A pupil’s identity and self-image, opinions and attitudes grow in interaction with others. Social learning takes place in both the teaching, training and in all the other activities at school. Learning subject matter cannot be isolated from social learning. Bearing this in mind, in the day-to-day work, the pupils’ academic and social learning and development are interconnected. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d., ch. 2.1)

The above excerpt shows that academic and social learning is valued equally in Norwegian schools, but the argument seems to lose attention as a focus on academic performance has gained a stronger standing due to national tests and result-orientation in all levels of school (Mausethagen, 2013). However, teachers may find support in the frames provided by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in their work to develop the pupils’ personal growth socially, alongside academically. In my understanding, this means that the activities in school should include a dimension that focuses on social learning.

14.2.5 The Norwegian Subject Curriculum

One central change in the Norwegian Educational Reform, *The Knowledge Promotion Reform* in primary and secondary education from 2006, was that the competence aims of the different Subject curricula changed from yearly aims to being organised as competence aims to be reached after second, fourth, seventh and tenth grade.¹ This structure of the subjects’ competence aims is continued in the new reform from August 2020.

This is relevant in a study about multi-grade teaching, because the way the competence aims are structured in Norway, gives the teachers an opportunity to work with the different competence aims over longer periods than one single school year. Thus, when teaching a multi-grade group of pupils the competence aims will encompass pupils of different age and grade-levels. To specify, eighth, ninth and tenth graders in Norway are taught by targeting the same competence aims, because these grades are collected in one group of aims; namely those after tenth grade. This

¹See The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training web page for info about curricula and competence aims: <https://www.udir.no/in-english/curricula-in-english/>

again, means that multi-grade teaching should be somewhat practically easier because of the division of competence aims in the curricula.

14.2.6 Useful Didactical Tools in Multi-grade Teaching Practice

In this study, I define multi-grade teaching as a classroom context where one or more teachers teach/es a heterogeneous group of pupils according to their age, subject- and curriculum-level (Berg-Olsen, 2012). Furthermore, I see multi-grade organization of teaching as different for large schools, which may choose multi-grade-groupings because it gives greater opportunities for adapted education (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015b) and shared use of teaching resources (Berg-Olsen, 2012). Whereas in small schools, the number of pupils could be so low that there is no other choice but to teach all pupils in one composite group. The different settings in schools will influence the motivation behind implementing multi-grade teaching, as well as pedagogical ideologies behind making that choice (Berg-Olsen, 2012). This chapter shows an example from the latter type of school, where the schooldays are organized in multi-aged groups out of necessity because the number of pupils is fewer than ten.

In the following I address the second aim of the chapter: *what characterizes the teaching practices in a multi-grade school setting in a small rural community school* which means a focus on didactics. Didactics are part of pedagogics, but rather than theories about how one learns, didactics describe the theory and practice of teaching and learning (Uljens, 1997). In other words, the actual “doings” that take place during a school day.

Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) introduce three tools that they found to be central to help teachers cope with the multi-grade setting and the diverse needs of the pupils in schools with a multi-grade organization: student group formation/subject organizing, personal working plans and peer-learning (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 97). Inspired by Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) set-up of useful didactical tools in this type of learning environment, I have structured my findings around the same three elements with the addition of a fourth element: social learning. First, student group formation/subject organizing helps the teachers to consider different ways of working with the subject curriculum; for instance for the individual pupils’ level simultaneously in same session or whole-class teaching where all pupils use the same curriculum and material (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 97). Second, the personal working-plans aid teachers to organize time and create opportunities to follow up on the individual pupil. Thus, a useful tool for differentiation among the pupils at their different levels (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 102). Third, peer-learning is defined as “different practices in which students may learn from and with their peers in multigrade classes” (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 98). They elaborate by explaining how older pupils help the younger ones when they are done with their

own tasks, and how younger pupils watch what the older ones are doing while asking for- and receiving explanations. Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) call this social learning (p. 104), but I understand all three tools that they introduce as connected to academic learning, the learning of subjects. My definition of social learning is from the *Core curriculum* (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d., ch. 2.1) where it is a specific dimension of learning, separate from- but parallel to academic learning which helps pupils develop personally. Thus, it is a central addition to Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) three practical tools, also to show its important position in the Norwegian framework for education.

14.3 Method

14.3.1 *Field Work*

Importantly, this study is about multi-grade teaching and the study is conducted in a small community school on an island in Northern Norway. With that said, I imply that both the community and the practices in the school most likely represent something that is different from the regular single-grade/age-divided schools in other, more urban, areas. I am learning about, and reporting on, a culture through doing fieldwork in that culture. Thus, this chapter is an ethnographic study, as it joins fieldwork and culture (Van Maanen, 2011) as part of the meaning process.

As mentioned in the introduction, the community where this study was conducted is very small and the school could possibly be recognized if described in detail. To ensure anonymity for the school, teachers, children and community, I have given a more general description to show how a small rural community school organizes its schooling in a multi-grade fashion. I use descriptions of pupils such as “the youngest” or “the oldest” when describing the lessons so that the reader may follow who is involved in the different teaching activities.

The school is a grade 1–10 school. Three teachers work at the school, all full time, due to the division of subjects and levels. The number of pupils is less than ten and their ages span 9 years, from the youngest to the oldest. There are pupils of different nationalities, but all of them speak Norwegian and all teaching and learning sessions are in Norwegian. At recess, the pupils use mostly Norwegian, but some communication among the pupils is in their first language.

The fieldwork was conducted over two full days at the school, where I was a non-participating observer in the classroom, but a participating observer during recess. Each school day has six teaching sessions, two short breaks and one longer break for lunch. The lunch break is in the middle of the day, after the third teaching session. All pupils leave the building during breaks, to go into the yard where they move around, play or hang out.

The study includes observations of classroom sessions, field notes from the classroom sessions and during recess, as well as informal talks with the teachers.

The field notes consist of 11 hand-written pages structured chronologically according to the schedule of the school days. The notes include topics of teaching sessions, descriptions of what happened in the classroom, teachers and pupils' interactions in classroom and at recess, drawings of classroom set-up, as well as my own thoughts and questions that I wanted to raise to the teachers. As far as possible for an experienced teacher observing a new teaching environment, or 'culture' to use Van Maanen's (2011) words, I wrote the notes as objectively as possible noting down simply what I saw. The informal talks with the teachers happened at the teachers' office before welcoming the pupils in the morning, between classroom sessions and at the end of the school day after the pupils had left. The talks centred on questions I asked to clarify the teachers' choices and actions in classroom sessions.

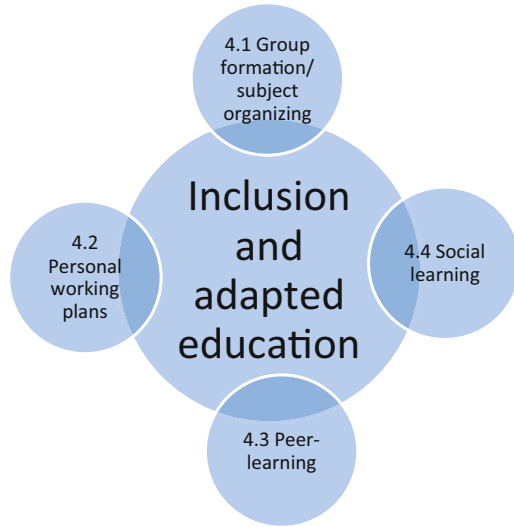
14.3.2 Limitations

As the study is based on field work conducted over two school days only, it gives merely a glimpse into the school's culture. Still, because of the low number of pupils and teachers it was easy to get an overview of the teaching and learning activities despite the short time-span of the school visit. Another limitation to this study is the fact that it is based on the practice in one school only. Thus, the findings will not represent a general picture of multi-grade schools in rural Northern Norway. However, the description provided based on my acute observations shows examples of the ways of teaching in a multi-grade rural school that may transfer to other teaching communities similar to the one shared here. In particular, the chapter's description and focus on how the multi-grade teaching practices enhance inclusion and adapted education could be useful for other school settings.

14.3.3 Analysis

I analysed my observations and the notes using the theoretical backdrop from Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) as a lens, adding social learning as a fourth element. This helped me structure the findings from the field work into the four sections in the results and discussion chapter below. During the analysis it became evident that each of the four categories together contribute to the overarching principle of inclusion and adapted education, which is central in Norwegian schools (The Education Act, 1998; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d.). The analysis led to the research findings that may be illustrated by this figure:

Fig. 14.1 Shows the link between the four tools and ‘inclusion and adapted education’. (Figure made by author)



The results and discussion section is divided according to these four categories as seen below.

14.4 Results and Discussion

14.4.1 *Student Group Formation/Subject Organizing*

During my field work, both school days were divided between theoretical and practical subjects. Day 1: Mathematics, Norwegian, Physical Education and Home Economics. Day 2: Norwegian, Mathematics, Religion, Music and Art. The group of pupils were divided in all theoretical subjects – Mathematics, Norwegian and Religion; first through fourth grade together in one group, and fifth to tenth grade in another group. However, both groups followed the same time schedule, meaning that all of the pupils in the school had recess together, as well as practical subjects – Physical education, Home Economics, Music and Art. Put another way, this means that throughout the school day the pupils were together for parts of the day and divided into two smaller groups during other parts of the day.

The informal talks with the teachers showed that the division in mathematics and languages is useful because the pupils’ abilities vary greatly in these two theoretical subjects. The youngest is learning to read and write while the older pupils, naturally, need to focus on other subject tasks than beginner training. To exemplify, one teacher wrote the schedule for the whole day on the blackboard in the beginning of the first session. In addition, the teacher also spent time going through the day orally, explaining in detail what the pupils needed to remember in particular sessions, for instance getting ingredients for the home economics class. In our informal talk at the end of the day, I asked about the choice of doing both, and the teacher explained that some pupils prefer the schedule on the blackboard so they can refer to

it throughout the day, while others prefer it explained orally because they are weak readers or because they remember better when they have heard it.

Even though the Norwegian Subject curricula is structured around competence aims that include more than one year-courses, the teachers still had to follow all four chapters of the competence aims due to the spread in age between the pupils. However, the fact that the competence aims are divided into four chapters that span 10 years of schooling illustrates how some competence aims are meant to be stretched across a bigger time span than a single school year. This again gives the teachers greater flexibility when planning the teaching sessions and learning activities, and it creates possibilities for including multi-grade pupils in the same session and yet the group may work towards common competence aims.

14.4.2 Teachers' Overview of Personal Working Plans

Although Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) stress the importance of independent working plans that the pupils themselves have control over, this was not the case in the school in this study. Here, the teachers kept their own log and overview of the curriculum that they had worked with, and where they needed to go next in the teaching of the pupils. During the observation of a session in a theoretical subject, it was clear that the teacher had good knowledge of the academic level of the pupils, when help and explanation were necessary, on what aspects they needed more practice before moving on, as well as making smooth shifts between individual and pair work among the pupils.

To elaborate, at the start of the session the teacher quickly put the individual pupils to work with their different themes according to their level of knowledge in the subject. While the pupils worked with individual tasks, the teacher explained two different problems on the blackboard – one at the time. These two explanations were aimed at two individual pupils and the support they needed in order to be able to move on in their independent work. While the pupils listened attentively, one at a time to their separate instruction from the teacher, the rest of the group carried on with their own individual tasks. The teacher then moved around the classroom and approached each and every pupil to “keep in touch” (Ur, 1991, p. 265) and make sure they understood the tasks and were able to solve the problems. According to Ur (1991) keeping in touch with all pupils during classroom sessions is essential because the pupils notice that the teacher is aware of them, and this encourages the pupils to participate. Keeping in touch may mean having an overview of the classroom and all pupils from the teacher’s desk, or approaching each pupil’s desk by walking around in the classroom to reach out to the individual pupil (Ur, 1991). When I visited, the teacher moved around the classroom, thus coming closer to the pupils, their course books and notebooks, which again gave the teacher a chance to see their work and more easily spot how the pupils were moving along with their tasks. The teacher encouraged two pairs of pupils to help each other when they had difficulties with their tasks, by giving reassuring comments such as “You understand this, please explain to the other pupil”. At the end of the class, the teacher introduced a riddle to the whole class, which was shared on the blackboard. All the pupils were

engaged in trying to solve it. The task was more of a general character, involving the topic of shopping and paying for goods, which ensured that all pupils, whatever age, could get involved in discussing the riddle. Here we see that the teacher uses a series of different approaches in the session; besides both individual, independent study and common tasks, there is also a shift in teaching approaches between individual work, pair work, and the whole group working together.

The session in the rural school described above, is an example of adapted education in practice. Even though the pupils did not have individual working plans that they themselves had control over, the teacher put each individual pupil to work on certain tasks according to how far they had come and which course book they used. In the informal talk, the teacher explained that it was quite easy to keep the detailed overview because the group consists of very few pupils. The teacher explained that it allows time to help all pupils, and focus on their individual levels. The observation of this example from the session may be understood as a positive aspect of multi-grade teaching in a small school. Both the observations and my talk with the teacher confirmed that the different learning activities aimed at the different pupils in the group also seemed to meet the individual learner's needs.

Often the pupils' different ages in multi-grade classrooms presents challenges to teachers because of the "variety and diversity of learners' needs" (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 91), where the concern is how to create teaching sessions that meet all the different learners. As inclusion and adapted education are central principles in the Norwegian framework for education, it means that teachers must adapt their learning activities to a heterogenetic group of pupils, whether teaching in a multi-grade or single-grade/age-divided school. In both settings, the teacher will have to differentiate the subject sessions to the abilities of each individual pupil within the group. This suggests that a transfer of the multi-grade practice in the rural school described above, to regular age-division schools is useful, "since every class is characterized by heterogeneity" (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015b, p. 111). In addition, this shows how the nature of multi-grade teaching may form a practice that is recognized by inclusion and adapted education, and which is transferrable to all schools whatever way they organize the division of their pupils.

14.4.3 Peer-Learning

As well as peer-learning in the theoretical subjects, as shown above, the elements of peer-learning were particularly vivid in the practical subjects. Perhaps it was even more vivid in these subject-sessions because all the pupils, from youngest to oldest, were together. In the following discussion, practical subjects are exemplified through Art and Home Economics.

The teachers expressed that it is easy to include all pupils in practical sessions as there will always be some tasks or activities that are suitable for all, whatever age and level. In art class, the whole group of pupils was first indoors where they were introduced to a video about stone balancing. This was followed up by a talk about

materials, stones and the seashore and what one may find and use to create sculptures. It seemed as this first part of the session was included in order to inspire the pupils by showing examples of what they could construct outdoors with random stones they found around the yard. The video surely did inspire, and all the pupils both young and old, made stone balancing sculptures. They interacted with each other during the building; they commented on the creativity of their peers, helped each other find suitable stones, as well as holding the structures for each other while in the making (Figs. 14.2 and 14.3).

Again, this is an activity where age does not matter neither when performing the learning activity, the process of the task, nor the outcome of the final product. The younger pupils managed this just as well as the older ones, and this gave them a sense of mastering that was easy to see when they compared and discussed options and possible ways to better balance the rocks while making the sculptures, as well as when comparing the final products.

My observation of home economics showed that all pupils collaborated well. One example is when the youngest made and stirred the meat-and-spice-mix in the frying pan while the oldest helped read the recipe of the named mix. They divided the tasks of cutting vegetables, setting the table, serving, and cleaning the table, kitchen, dishes, and pans amongst them. Each pupil had their own tasks that they performed, and it looked as if all were busy the whole time; while preparing the meal and when cleaning up afterwards.

The action of sharing a meal together, whether it is the daily lunch or weekly home economics class, is an important arena for social learning (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, *n.d.*, ch. 2.1). It is debated whether meals and lunch hours should be considered settings for learning or rather be a break from schooling and learning (Persson Osowski & Fjellström, 2019). Still, it is argued that adults should eat together with the pupils to “spend time with the children socially



Figs. 14.2 and 14.3 Stone balancing sculptures made by pupils during art class. (Photos by author)

... [moreover] children appreciate the presence of adults” (Persson Osowski & Fjellström, 2019, p. 394) during meals. The practice in the school I visited follows that of Persson Osowski and Fjellström’s (2019) findings – the teachers had their lunch together with the pupils, and they also enjoyed the meal that the pupils made in home economics together with the whole group. To my understanding, the meal-times were a combination of break time and a setting for learning, as the pupils were calm and well behaved, made conversations and cleaned up after themselves after all the meals. I consider this an essential arena for social learning (Lalli, 2020, p. 599), as the conversations around the table while eating were not subject based, but about issues of more social nature such as favourite music and TV-series.

These descriptions from the sessions in practical subjects show examples of peer-learning, but the last example also bridges into the fourth aspect – social learning.

14.4.4 Social Learning

In addition to Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) three tools that help to conduct teaching practice in multi-grade schools, social learning is added as a fourth dimension. As discussed in Sect. 14.2.4, social learning is considered equally important to learning subjects in school, and it is when interacting with others that the pupils develop identity and self-image. The Norwegian framework for education underlines that in everyday schooldays, academic and social learning are interconnected (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, n.d., ch. 2.1). Thus, I find this fourth dimension relevant because, together with the three tools (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a) that are useful for planning and conducting multi-grade teaching practice, social learning contributes to the goal of meeting the principles of inclusion and adapted education. Actions that may be understood as social learning occurred numerous times during the school days, for instance during meal times as shown in Sect. 14.4.3. Another example is when pupils of a similar age sat together during parts of recess in private conversation. One more example is when young and old pupils played together at recess, and the older “overlooked” the younger so that the short legs of the younger had a chance to keep up with the older pupils in the race towards the goal line.

Even though Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015a) connect peer-learning to social learning, they still “suggest that teachers require more knowledge on how they should guide peer-learning processes and organize peer groups in order to optimize their ‘social pedagogic’ potential” (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 107). This clearly shows how peer-learning is a way of practically “doing” social learning in school. Still, in my understanding peer-learning is first and foremost a method in the teaching of subjects, which sometimes leads to social learning as some sort of bonus along the way. Thus, peer-learning is a didactical tool that is useful when focusing on subject content, but it includes a “social value” (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015a, p. 106). Nonetheless, I argue that social learning should be a dimension on its own, simply to mark its central position in

the framework of education and schools' practices. Social learning is not only connected to subject teaching but rather an equal parallel to subject teaching, which overarches all school activities in the pursuit to prepare the pupils for life (The Education Act, 1998, Section 1-1).

14.5 Scholarly Significance

The question that this chapter sought to answer was: *What characterizes the teaching practices in a multi-grade school setting in a small rural community school, and how do the practices enable inclusion and adapted education?*

The study has shown what characterizes the teaching in a multi-grade school setting in a small rural community school, by describing examples of observed classroom practices and talks with the teachers about how this specific school organizes teaching and learning activities. Presenting these examples within national frameworks for education and theoretical perspectives as backdrop creates new understandings of pedagogical possibilities when teaching multi-aged groups. In addition, the study may enhance our understanding of inclusion and adapted education, both as principle and as practice. As a principle, by showing how they are implemented in the framework for education. As practice, from the examples provided in the chapter showing how the four elements; student group formation/subject organization, personal working plans, peer-learning and social learning together contribute to ensure an inclusive practice and an education adapted to the individual pupil.

This school's practice may transfer to other school settings; whether a school has a multi-grade or single-grade/age-divided organization, all pupil-groups will consist of a variety of individuals with different aptitudes and aspirations. Thus, the way the teachers in this study work to meet the level of the different pupils in their multi-grade setting, could be useful for teachers who work in other school settings and with other ways of organizing the school days.

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