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Analysis of Creative Mediation Processes of Multigrade Teachers in Rural Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This research emerges as the result of a deep interest in understanding the confluence between theory and practice, the design and implementation, the model and the enactment of the Colombian rural system from the local perspective of teachers of remote rural schools in the department of Cundinamarca. Extensive and integrated field work was conducted, which included long stays in the field, numerous in-depth interviews and conversations with inhabitants of the region and with teachers of multigrade classrooms. As a result, Giving, Improvisation, Acceptance, Empathy and Waiting were identified as teaching actions through which the process of *re-contextualization* of the government model of multigrade classrooms is been materialized at the local level. Likewise, it was evidenced that Transversality, Student-centered-Education, and the promotion to High School, are three of the most problematic aspects that show relevant gaps in the rural education system between design and implementation. It was concluded, then, that the multigrade classroom model is an alternative model inserted in a highly traditional system, for which it is urgent to ensure the conditions of the context so that such model can be nested, or to rethink the multigrade classroom programs for the rural areas, in order to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in the enactment process of the rural education model.

To rural teachers.

Heroines without a cape.

Brave, resilient and hard-working women.

To them, all my admiration and respect.

PREFACE

Being an elementary school teacher has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It reminded me of the simplicity and depth in children's minds, and it helped me to see the essence behind the rigor of academic forms; essence that is perceptible in everyday life, in experience and in what structured texts hide: laughs, hugs, feeling of gratification and love that arises when seeing a student progress, effort, late night work, frustration, desire to resign, tons of energy invested, and the constant search for methods so that students do not lose their interest or their attention.

This experience as the teacher of thirty amazing first graders helped me to perceive things I would never have been able to acknowledge from qualitative research. Through it, I entered the system from an operant perspective, *embodying* day by day the confluence of structuring forces that shaped my pedagogical practice: the government's instruction regarding the curriculum I had to follow, the pressure of school directives in terms of methods and results, the influence of parents and their expectations, the daily dynamics of the classroom, the varied rhythm of the students who continuously transformed what was planned, and the uncertainty of the time that runs and that is never enough for everything that being a teacher entails.

I understood, then, that teaching practice was way more than just a practice -following Goodson's (2012) critique-; that it implied giving my all. It was never only about giving a lesson, but in each class I shared with the students my life, my essence, my speech and my strength; and as a result, every day, a part of me was planted in them.

I understood, then, that it is a beautiful and valuable work when it is done with the heart, and that certainly exceeds the limits of a job. Ultimately, it is about giving life itself.

And what greater honor would there be for me than to be able to speak about what rural teachers do. Because if teaching in the urban area is quite a feat, rural teachers in Colombia incorporate challenges and dedications that, surely, surpass the craziest imaginary of someone who has never seen what they do.

I realized, then, that talking about them in the middle of the rigid structure of an academic essay would make no sense if the narrative did not change. Their experiences, their lives, their opinions, their struggles and their successes should be the central axis above the concepts and the duty to be politically correct.

And this is how the following pages weave soft narratives through the concrete structure of the writing and the essay. Exposing a work that, in turn, face liquidly in the local the multiple solid structures operating: social, political, cultural and historical structures that teachers manage to circumvent by giving life and love.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. LOCATED AGENCY SPACES

After walking 7.5 kilometers in the mountains on an unpaved road, Luz Helena Castro[1] arrives at 7:30 am at the school of which she has been the only teacher for more than five years. She rushes to have the classroom ready to receive the 25 students of the school: those that begin to arrive at 8 a.m., and that are usually wearing a pair of black rubber boots and an outfit that they had changed once arriving to the school -considering that the mud had covered them on the road- and, most of the times, 25 students that arrive with an empty stomach, because the lack of resources reminds them daily that having breakfast is a luxury that not everyone can afford.

Some arrive on foot after walking for an hour, others on horseback, and others, more fortunate, on motorcycles; although their fortune lasts as long as the clear sky does, since the rain turns the unpaved road into a slide that puts the safety of any crew member at risk (see Figure 4).

The school stands out as a white point in the midst of the greatness of the warm mountains that surround it and protect it from urban stress (see Figure 9). Its remote location makes it to be recognized by the Colombian State as a difficult-to-access school, and it is because until now not even the internet has found the way to visit them.

But that has not been an impediment for Luz Helena to find a way to beautify the white facade with colorful murals, and to give a voice to the walls that speak incessantly of mathematics, peace and autonomy (see Figure 14). Nothing has prevented her from creating a swing with pieces of wood, nor a garden with plastic bottle waste, much less a recycling room whose walls are made of sack.

The school is composed by two classrooms and a dining room. The main room is where the magic happens: there, Luz Helena instructs *all* the school students every day, organizing them at work tables by age or grade, but is also where they share, play, and often eat. On the other

[1] All the names of the teachers, students and alumni who participated in this research and who are mentioned here, have been changed to protect their identity.

hand, the second room was designed as a technology classroom (see Figure 22), but it fulfills its purpose only in dreams, because the constant thefts that the school has suffered has made that the only occupant of that room is a deflated balloon that was donated long time ago (see Figure 12). For its part, the dining room is the territory of the "*ecónoma*" -as Luz Helena calls in Spanish the lady who prepares the lunch financed by the State- (see Figure 23). However, the function of the dining room is limited to being only the place for food preparation, because due to the lack of sanitary conditions Luz Helena has decided to improvise the place to eat in one of the two study rooms.

Next to the classrooms is the school's garden (see Figure 25). They use it to seed potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes and everything that grows. Children are actively involved in its care, and the fruits produced are often sold alongside with the materials they recycle. And, generally, the profits obtained are used to buy basic resources for the school, namely to buy toilet paper.

This happens because the resources for the Colombian public schools are not enough to cover the basic needs, as was evidenced by the MEN (2016) report according to which public funds for rural schools has presented a financial deficit since the 2000s. That is to say that such shortage has grown during 20 years at a point that now the annual mismatch exceeds two trillion COP (about 550.000.000 USD) (Ibid); mismatch that local entities and schools must overcome in some way.

According to Bonet (2006), this has occurred as a consequence of the Colombian constitutional reform of 1991, where it was decided that the Central Government would cede resources and administrative power to Local Governments (ie. departments and municipalities), who went to execute 23% of the national public spending in the 80's to 42% in the 2000s. Therefore, from the year 2000, more than 50% of the local expenditures of the municipalities were financed by the central government. The problem, however, was that the Central Government considerably increased funds transfers to the local regions, but did not considerably reduce its central spending, exponentially increasing its indebtedness (Bonet, 2006).

Thus, the Law 715 of 2001 was established as a strategy to face this situation. According to it, the Government have the power to determine the amount assigned per student, and therefore per school, so funds would be distributed once a year in relation to the number of students in each school (Bonet, 2006; Flórez, 2016). This resolution has been very problematic for small schools, such as Luz Helena's one, which has only 25 students, meaning that do not have

enough budget to reduce expenses by buying wholesale (as large schools do), nor the possibility of concealing the insufficiency of resources by covering, at least, what is essential. Unlike, her school does not have enough budget to even cover elementary items as toilet paper, much less to pay for basic maintenance of the facilities, schools supplies as scissors or paper, or teaching resources such as learning cards or stamps.

And it is that in the middle of the distance and motivated by the love to students, a certainty is breathed in the air: circumstances are difficult to change, so instead of dreaming in vain about having a paved road, receiving more funds or having internet at school, the resources that are at hand are taken and the context that surrounds them is used in favor with the goal to achieve the objective of giving the opportunity to those 25 children to "*get ahead*", as they say referring to not ending up in poverty, to not ending up in the Guerrilla.

So, although it is difficult to understand, in these spaces the complaint is drowned in the multiple daily actions that students, teachers, principals and families carry out to surprise the fate that ruled impossibility on them. It is then when these remote classrooms immersed in the green Colombian countryside take the form of *agency spaces*, where the actors constantly and creatively -consciously and unconsciously- fashion strategies to mediate between a bureaucratic governmental system thought from the urban *technologies of imagination*[2] (Sneath et all. 2009, in Farrugia et al., 2014), and their daily reality traversed by a context with little state presence and with dynamics that have nothing to do with what is thought from the city (Farrugia et al., 2014).

Thus, with a deep yearning to understand the dynamics that governs these schools and the insertion of the national system in the rural context and the local reality, I aim the main objective of this research to analyze how teachers *re-contextualize* and *enact* the pedagogical model of *multigrade schools* stipulated by the National Government for rural schools in the hard-to-reach rural public schools of Colombia (concepts and model to be explained later).

To this end, the following pages will take us through a cultural, historical and pedagogical journey, which will begin by 1) exposing the conceptual and methodological approaches of the research, 2) followed by the presentation of the historical and social context of the Colombian rural system, 3) to then disclose the findings through the description of a set of actions that

[2] Concept used to refer to the practices that create "the particular vistas on which that which is imagined assumes its form" (Sneath et al., 2009:14 in (Farrugia et al., 2014)

evidence how the model is being enacted, and the contrast between the design of the rural education system and the way it is being re-contextualized, 4) to finally end with a visual chronicle of those remote rural schools and with some final reflections.

1.2. CREATIVE MEDIATION, AGENCY AND AUTONOMY

Diana Restrepo, a teacher who has worked for 17 years as a multigrade teacher, has always advocated for a didactic, playful and creative education. However, just like in Luz Helena's case, the resources that her school received have never been enough to cover basic expenses, much less to buy the pedagogical resources that were important for her, such as a set of stamps with happy and sad faces that are often used to reinforce students' positive behavior.

So, many years ago, she decided to make use of the resources she had: a black ink pen. With it, she drew a happy or sad face on her students' hands, depending on their behavior. And that little drawing was such a successful pedagogical tool in her classroom that it became the daily monitoring indicator -for parents- to follow up their children's progress in school. Whereas, for the students, it represented a means to highlight their effort and to publicly show that they were doing things right. According to Diana, when she made a happy face, most of the time children stopped washing their hands for days because they wanted to proudly show their effort.

After a while, she was sure about the positive effect of her strategy and that she would never receive funds to use real stamps. So, three years ago Diana decided to save from her own salary to buy a stamp kit. Since then, she has had her own kit and lends it to the school within her daily activities, but as she says:

"The stamps were bought with a lot of effort, and the day I leave school those stamps will go with me"

Diana's actions show a *proactive adaptation* process, in which she took her reality and transformed it by substituting her resources, altering her possibilities and creating new contexts (Campbell, 2012). These actions are known by Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, et al. (2015) as a *creative mediation* process, a concept that will be used in this research as a theoretical basis, and that is composed by the interpretation, implementation, alteration and adaptation of a given context.

In this way, the concept of creative mediation materializes the processes of *recontextualization* and *enactment*. The former, since it is a process that consists of transferring the education model from its original production context (ie. multigrade schools from the Central Government) to another context called *recontextualizing field*, where it is modified, related to other discourses and repositioned by *recontextualizing agents* (ie. rural teachers) (Comissanha et al., 2014; McTavish, 2014). Namely, based on McTavish (2014), 4 elements are necessary for this process to take place: prolonged time for the recontextualizing agents to engage in the process; reinterpretation options for agents to choose how to create, maintain, change or legitimize the discourse of the Central Government; flexibility to facilitate change; and imagination and challenge. And the latter, inasmuch as it is a process in which the education model is reinterpreted and applied (Parcerisa, 2016). Thus, here, recontextualizing agents (ie. rural teachers) are also located sense-makers that are constantly interacting with multiple and overlapping contexts (Spillane et al., 2002; Mark Priestley et al., 2014).

Likewise, talking about creative mediation would not make sense without linking it to the concepts of *autonomy* and *agency*.

On the one hand, *autonomy* refers to actions that are not necessarily conscious or habitual and that result from the absence of regulation (Mark Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Thus, the concept of autonomy is closely linked to regulatory measures, and has special relevance when studying models that work in systems that decentralize responsibilities and power, for which *school autonomy* is the term used to refer when such decision-making power is transferred to schools (Espinola, 2000 in Parcerisa, 2016). This is certainly the case of Colombia since, as explained before, the constitutional change of 1991 granted to public schools what Estruch (2006) calls *corporatist autonomy*, that is, when decision-making power is delegated to professionals in the educational center (ie. principal and teachers). Therefore, analyzing the creative mediation processes of rural teachers in Colombia implies understanding the school corporatist autonomy on which they operate on a daily basis, and which is evidenced in simple actions as the fact that Diana had decided to buy the stampt kit; a non-mandatory action that resulted from the lack of control and financial support, and from the absence of any regulation for her to acquire and use the tools that she could get. And based on that, 2 units of analysis proposed by Parcerisa (2016) were used here to observe corporatist autonomy in teachers' practice: 1) pedagogical approach (ie. decisions about what and how to teach) and managerial approach (ie. administrative and management dimension).

On the other hand, *agency* was taken from an ecological perspective, that is, seen as a phenomenon that emerges from the conditions of the context through which it is enacted (M Priestley et al., 2013; Mark Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015; Mark Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017; Ting-Toomey, 2017), referring to something that is achieved -not given-, and that does not necessarily depend on regulations. Thus, even if the actors have certain capacities, reaching agency would rely on the interaction of said capacities with the context conditions, for which their actions should be understood in a *relational* and *temporal* dimension (Biesta et al., 2015; Mark Priestley et al., 2012; Mark Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017; Ting-Toomey, 2017). And in this sense *Agency Capacity* would refer to the interaction of temporal influences (ie. between the past, the present and the future: or life stories, future projects and current actions), while *Agency Spaces* to the interaction with ecological conditions (ie. possibilities and limitations of the environment, availability of resources, hisorical condicions and institucional logics). It is visible, then, that Diana's actions also materialized this concept by combining her pedagogical pre-concrepts (ie. stamps strategy), her future aspirations (ie. empowering her students), her resources -or the lack of them-, as well as her aknowledgement of the context where she recognized that she wouldn't receive funds to buy the stamps, but also knowing that she would have permission to implement her strategy.

So as in the case of Diana, the daily life and practice of rural teachers interacts constantly with the concepts of agency and autonomy, in spaces that become recontextualizing and enactment fields, over which they operate to achieve the goal of educating. And that is why the concept of creative mediation, seen through autonomous actions and agency capacity, will serve here as lenses to understand and analyze the actions that make up the process of recontextualization of the multigrade model in remote rural schools in Colombia.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. POSITIONALITY REFLECTIONS

In Colombia there is more territory than State (UNDP, 2011). The fiscal management of Colombian public resources is centralized in that 80% of it is collected by the Central Government, but decentralized in that it is later distributed to Local Governments (Bonet, 2006). However, as explained before, since de decentralization process is deficient, this system has resulted in: high dependence of Local Governments on State resources; increase in national debt and deficit for the Central Government to transfer the budgeted amounts, and therefore, indebtedness of Local Governments (Bonet, 2006). This has caused, in turn, that Local Governments won't have sufficient resources to cover local needs, for which many local sectors -usually the remotes ones- are relegated in the distribution of funds.

That is why in Colombia the presence of the State and the acquisition of public resources depend on how close it is a place to local governments, and in turn, on how close these local governments are to the central government. To understand this, it helps me to imagine the wave that a stone produces when it falls into the water and that fades the further it travels.

And it was in one of those remote rural places far from any local center of resource distribution where I spent a large part of my childhood. Well, although I was born in the Capital, my family had a farm in the mountains of the Department that shelters it: Cundinamarca. Sugar cane, coffee and a variety of fruits so wide that it would compete with the most diverse markets of India or Brazil were grown there. And so, arriving at that farm felt like going to another country: it implied changing my clothes, changing activities, changing the weather and immersing myself in a space that had nothing to do with my daily life in the city.

It was there that I had my first ties to rural life, and to the place I wanted to return to 20 years later when I find out that all the children of the rural people that I grew up with had migrated from the region [3]. And the more I inquired, the more I understood the situation rural people

[3] According to the National Agricultural Census (NAC) carried out by DANE in 2014, by that date 2 million fewer rural inhabitants were registered in the country than there were in 2005, evidencing high migration rates of rural people to the urban cities in the country (Perfetti, 2003).

have to go through. A situation that I could never see in my position of a *Bogotana* traveling to her farm. A reality that I was able to approach from anthropology and from qualitative methodologies, namely, from a perspective comprehensive of the actions and narratives of the subjects as located temporarily and as part of a specific context (García & Goodoy, 2011; Martínez, 2006). I realized, then, that within the many possible approaches that exist to understand their reality and to build suggestions that would positively transform the region, education was presented as a window to work with new generations, so understanding the educational system and rethinking it turned out to be a very tempting activity for me.

And that was the heart that shaped this master's thesis, and the preamble to my approach to the field. From a position clearly marked by being from the Capital, by coming to the region to produce and not to live, by my accent and by my clothes. Aspects that evidenced that spaces are not neutral, are produced and configured in the social (Farrugia, 2014), and are crossed by power dynamics inherent in all relations and practices (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). Aspects that I had to make conscious and to address so that were not an obstacle in my conversations with the people of the region. And I found in empathy a vehicle that allowed me to reach their hearts and to understand them; empathy that I achieve through speech, long talks, active listening and silence, in order to express openness to them, being that although I could not configure my habitus or my positionality (Durán, 2012; García & Goodoy, 2011), it could offer them a safe place to freely communicate.

2.2. METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS: EXPERIENCE, LIFE AND WORK

Thus, in October 2020 I arrived at Mrs Cristina's house. She, who lived with her family in a small rural village in Cundinamarca called La Esperanza, hosted me while I did my field work in the region. And, despite the fact that I already knew the dynamics of Rural Cundinamarca since my childhood, and that since 2015 I had conducted an independent and intermittent field work in the region, this time I went back again for a long time, attempting to be immersed in the dynamics of the countryside, and with clear objectives about the type of information and actors I wanted to reach.

By then I already had in mind my interest in approaching the process of recontextualization of the multigrade model of rural education -a model that has ruled the country for more than 40

years and whose current recontextualization is rarely considered-. Likewise, I recognized that the great bulk of literature on rural teaching in Colombia tends to address issues related to the use of TIC's (Alvárez Quiroz, 2016; Cardoso et al., 2016; Espitia Cruz & Cifuentes Alvarez, 2017), teacher training (Bonilla-Mejía et al., 2018; B. Diaz et al., 2014; Ramírez et al., 2017; Solano & Mendivelso, 2016) and challenges of rurality (Gonzalez & Varela, 2017; Martínez-Restrepo et al., 2016; Triana et al., 2018). For that reason, I propose this research to complement the existing literature through an approach to a very vivid interaction that teachers face in their everyday life, and to offer an integrated perspective that embodies and analyzes the concepts of creative mediation, enactment, agency and autonomy, through the main spheres that impact, shape and provoke the teaching practices, touching transversely the trending topics of rural literature.

Hence, I started the fieldwork with such scope in mind. But later, when conducting several interviews with teachers I realized that their role surpasses the dimensions of the mentioned concepts. Their job has implied that, more than once, they give up their salary, their families, their homes, their lives. For instance, it is very common that teachers of remote schools have no alternative but to live in the classroom and to face the risks and sacrifices it entails, especially when the school is located in red zones[4].

I realized, then, that what those teachers do stands at the crossroad of public obligation and personal fulfillment, making part of what Hansen (1995) calls *vocation*. So I decided to follow Goodson's (2012) critique about not referring to their work only as a practice, but rather as life and work actions, since their role involved giving part of themselves, giving part of their lives. And for that reason I sought throughout the planning, execution and even the writing style of this essay a comprehensive and holistic approach to their *lives* and *experiences* (F Dubet & Martuccelli, 2013; González, 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Kaikkonen, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2017), that would account for the personal rather than the abstract, and that would allow the construction of concepts and conclusions from the information collected in the field -and not the other way around- making of this an inductive research.

In this way, I defined as the main goal of this research:

[4] Red zones: Territories recognized for being active scenes of armed conflict between groups outside the law and the national army.

To analyze how teachers recontextualize and enact the Multigrade School Model of rural education in remote rural areas of Cundinamarca, Colombia.

And as specific objectives:

- *To understand how the Multigrade School Model is perceived, enacted and re-contextualized by teachers in remote rural areas*
- *To analyze how the program is implemented through autonomous actions and teaching agency*
- *To interpret how teachers mediate between official perspectives of the model and the local reality*

Thus, based on the concepts of creative mediation, agency and autonomy, combined with the approach to life and experiences I gave life to the *latent thematic structure* that I used to prepare and conducted the interviews:

Description of schools	Vision
	Experience
School operation	Daily routines
	Control mechanisms
	Resources
Infrastructures	Equipment and services
	Security
External standards	Accountability
	Monitoring body
	Relationship with the community
Objectives	Work objectives
	Performance targets
	Mechanisms for achieving the objectives
Organizational logics	What?
	Why?
	Power relationships
Life stories	Professional career
	Educational path
	Personal career
	Beliefs and risk judgments

Table 1 Thematic structure.

Own elaboration.

Following the life and work approach, I was able to see, through freedom of speech, how narratives became a vehicle to enact experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). So in order to access such narratives I chose unstructured and in-depth interviews as the main tool to collect and co-construct meaningful information (Fassio, 2018; Hayes, 2010). In other words, my approach to the people that Mrs. Cristina helped me to contact, the people from the village and my old childhood acquaintances, could be defined as guided conversations that, for the most part, did not have a duration limit. And it is that in the Colombian countryside the dimensions of time become fluid, being that the clock and the agenda are often changed by the sunlight and the needs of the land that surrounds you.

Specifically, the latent structure (see Table 1) was applied in depth to four female teachers from rural multigrade schools in Cundinamarca. For this selection, a typical case sampling was used since their schools are within the common school functioning and performance ranges of the region. Likewise, they were selected because they represent the four remote schools of the main villages[5] of the area and due to them have been multigrade rural teachers for more than 10 years and of more than one school, which could imply a wider and in-depth perspective. It is also worth noting that the four of them are women since all the teachers in the area are, and that is also why I will generally refer to rural teachers here in feminine terms.

Likewise, in-depth interviews were applied to nine inhabitants of the region whose roles varied between being students, former students and parents. The selection of this sample was built on the basis of snowball methodology and was based on a typological approach to the subjects, where being -former- students or parents was prioritized. It means that they were selected according to their role as stakeholders of the schools of the area, and not seeking to meet the standards of a representative sample of the population.

Nonetheless, in order to follow a holistic approach to life and to analyze the recontextualization and enactment processes in the classroom, I considered it essential to include sources that provide a perspective of the system at the national level and official documents that expose the design of the multigrade model. To this end, I interviewed three officials from Escuela Nueva Foundation and one former official from the Ministry of National Education who actively participated in processes to strengthen the coverage and education quality of the rural sector.

[5] The real names of the villages will not be revealed to protect teachers' identity.

With them I used the latent structure (see Table 1), but the questions were aimed at understanding their perception of how these issues were experienced by teachers.

Finally, this information was complemented with a three-phase workshop that I conducted with one of the rural teachers, where we delved into the categories of the latent structure at each meeting (*see Table 1*). Thus, for each session she kept a letter where she described in a detailed and conscious way some of the topics, and then we discussed it extensively. This exercise allowed me to highlight the differences between the politically correct discourse that she wrote and the personal experience that she narrated, revealing more details about her perspectives and the organizational structures that operated on her.

2.3. ANALYSIS: INTERPRETING REALITY

The components mentioned so far make this to be a critical research with an ethnographic approach, due to its orientation to understand local contexts of practice, to closely observing the social life of a given community (Espinosa, 2010), and to incorporate different points of view in relation to the subject of study (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Thus, my main focus was to understand the structures that operates behind the events, and for that purpose I prioritized practical knowledge (ie. implicit and personal knowledge) (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Kaikkonen, 2009), and the experience of the participants -instead of the number of cases and the representativeness of the events- (Muñoz & Mercado, 2012). However, it is worth mentioning that my extensive previous knowledge of the region allowed me to have an assertive perspective on the narratives that were part of the trends and those that were not.

My positionality as a researcher, and therefore my analysis and conclusions, were based on an epistemological assumption where it is impossible to objectively approach reality, and very much in line with the socio-culturally oriented constructivism inspired by Vygotsky's ideas, according to which subjects construct meanings by acting in a structured context and interacting with others intentionally (Serrano & Pons, 2011). Thus, the analysis of the facts was framed in a hermeneutical/interpretive epistemology (Scott & Usher, 1996). And based on these assumptions, I embraced the framework of analysis proposed by Martinez (2006), which consists mainly of three stages:

- *On-site analysis*: this phase took place while collecting the information in the field, and besides the conducted *interviews*, it had *observation* as the main tool for gathering information. It consisted of listening, feeling, reading and experiencing the place (Espinosa, 2010), which was described in a field diary and/or recorded, which allowed me to register the data as close as possible to the time it occurred (Fassio, 2018) -as long as using them did not interfere with the confidence of the participants or the naturalness of the exchanges-. This allowed me, to a certain extent, to avoid the biases produced by memory.

- *Transcription and systematization*: in my experience, I have seen that usually the processes of data collection and analysis are given greater prominence than those of transcription. And although this step is usually seen as the mere action of digitizing, for me, it means a bridge between the field and the analysis, implying a process of reconstructing the discourse, organizing, presenting and categorizing the information (García & Goodoy, 2011), thus, hiding or making some findings visible. For this reason, in this research, the transcription process was carried out with special attention to highlighting the relationships between the data, replacing the use of boxes with links between actors and interconnections between the information.

- *In-depth analysis*: this process consisted of interpreting the relationships established in the transcription process. It was focused on the deep analysis of each participant -*within case analysis*- (Tao & Gao, 2017), where each unit of analysis was understood holistically separately, to later interweave these results among each other -*cross case analysis*- and thus achieve an understanding integrated of cases.

3. THE CONTEXT AT A GLANCE

3.1. PERSONAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

Luz Helena was born on July 27th, 1973 in the municipality of Anolaima, rural area of Cundinamarca, and her life story will be used here as an arbitrary point of reference to understand the evolution of the country's current rural educational system.

Her father, José Antonio, worked as a laborer on farms, and her mother, Adela, was dedicated to housework. The birth of Luz Helena coincided with a time in the country in which the rural population was growing exponentially[6] (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2016), so the government was actively searching for investment strategies that fostered the development of the nation (Cifuentes & Camargo, 2016; McEwan & Benveniste, 2001). So the Ministry of Education established a new agenda that for the first time prioritized investment in school infrastructure (Carrero & González, 2017), with the main objective of eradicating illiteracy, which by then reached 39% of the population (Havens, 1965).

Thus, while Luz Helena was taking her first steps, the Ministry of National Education was exploring its first rural educational pilots (Mapeal, 2008), embracing the recommendation given at the XXIV Geneva International Conference (Borreguero, 1961; Schiefelbein, 2017), where it was advised the use of the Escuela Nueva model, which had been very successful in Spain for increasing educational coverage of less favored populations.

By then, the strategy of opening schools using the Escuela Nueva model seemed to be very encouraging: First, it promised a cost-efficient model by proposing multigrade schools whose workforce was reduced to 1 or 2 teachers per school (ie. all students of all the different grades of elementary school would share the same classroom and would attend simultaneous instruction given by the same teacher). Second, it was perfect to address the cultural diversity of the country, since it was supposed to base the learning experience on active pedagogies that would rely on the personal interests and individual speed of the students, avoiding a fixed curriculum (Benitez, 2009). And third, it was presented as a path par excellence for the peace

[6] By then, Colombia had an annual population growth rate of 2%, and a 7% increase in the rate of school enrollment in relation to the previous decade (OEI, 1993).

of the country, since it promoted autonomy, leadership, cooperation and creativity (Díaz & Gutiérrez, 2019; Narváez, 2006).

By Luz Helena's 2nd birthday, the Ministry of National Education had already opened 100 pilot schools in the North of the country, with such success that it was determined to double efforts to replicate the model throughout the national territory (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia & Corpoeducación, 2010). This allowed Luz Helena's 6th birthday gift to be to enter a rural multigrade school Escuela Nueva in her town, because fortunately the expansion was taking place at such a speed that in just a few years they had managed to open a branch in the remote municipality where she was born.

Luz Helena had the opportunity to be one of the first students of this new rural educational system. She remembers that her elementary school process taught her to read and write, but at a very high cost: as the school was 1 hour away from her house, her daily routine was arduous, since she had to arrive at school at 8am and at 12 noon walk home to hydrate and eat, and then go back to school at 2pm. Later, when he returned home at 6pm, he had to help with the housework, among which she has duties like going miles away to get water or firewood, since at that time there were no public services in the area.

Even so, like 20% of all those who enrolled in primary elementary schools of Escuela Nueva at that time (OEI, 1993), Luz Helena managed to graduate. But then, she faced a new academic challenge: high school[7]. As Escuela Nueva schools only provide elementary education, she decided to continue in the secondary school of the municipal seat of Anolaima, but the long distances and the lack of resources of her parents forced her to migrate to Bogotá.

Thus, by the time she migrated, in the 1980s, the Escuela Nueva model had already become national policy. With an execution never seen before in the country, the Ministry of Education had managed to open approximately 20,000 schools. So, by then, they determined that while the execution and administration of the opening of the schools was the responsibility of the State, its operation and quality was delegated by law to the Escuela Nueva Foundation (FEN),

[7] The Colombian basic education system is made up of the cycles of basic primary, basic secondary and vocational secondary. *Basic elementary* school comprises 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th grades, which are ideally attended by children between the ages of 5 and 11. *Basic secondary* school marks the beginning of what is known in Colombia as the baccalaureate, and comprises 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th grades, which are ideally attended by young people between the ages of 10 and 16. And vocational secondary school includes grades 10th and 11th, and ideally young people up to 18 years old attend it. Complying with all the grades of this system is a mandatory requirement to access any higher education service in the country.

created and directed by Vicky Colbert, former vice minister of education and who had directed the process of implementation of Escuela Nueva from the beginning (Perfetti, 2003).

However, a couple of years later, in the 1990s, while Luz Helena at 18 years old finished her basic education and successfully graduated from high school, Escuela Nueva Foundation also completed a cycle: that of working under the cover of national politics. This was due to the fact that once they achieved enrollment rates in primary school for children between the ages of 6 and 11 to covered almost 90% of the population (OEI, 1993) the State decided to separate the operation of FEN from its national policies in order to reduce costs (Alzate & Quinceno, 2014), and FEN for its part, decided to continue working with mixed funds to ensure the quality and continuity of the Escuela Nueva model mainly in rural areas of the country, now bearing the name of Fundación Escuela Nueva Activa -*Active New School Foundation*- (FENA) .

Since then, the Central Government decided to formalize its decision to opt for curricular decentralization through Law 115 of 1994, according to which the Ministry of Education assumes the responsibility of designing and disseminating curricular guidelines, while educational institutions enjoy autonomy to instruct compulsory areas and to introduce optional subjects, as well as to adapt the content of the curriculum to special needs and contexts (Colombia, 1994; Gómez, 1994). In other words, the State formalized its decision to promote *curricular autonomy* of schools (Beltrán et al., 2015; Gómez, 1994; Silva, 2014). However, the State's relationship with rural schools has never been so simple: despite decentralizing curricular autonomy, the Ministry of Education has assumed the role of *implementing agent* by being in charge of the technical and administrative functions in the opening and management of multigrade rural schools -talking about centralization of resources and local decentralization mentioned in previous sections-. To date, these dynamics around decentralization and centralization of administrative power, resources and the curriculum have been the cause of great achievements and also challenges for Colombian rural education in the 21st century -that will be exposed in the following sections-, to which Luz Helena returned to take part in 2012, but this time exercising a teacher role.

3.2. CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF ESCUELA NUEVA AND MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS

Today's educational system, to which Luz Helena returned after fighting with all her might not to end up dedicating herself to working the land like her parents and her husband did, is a hybrid system entangled in the ravages left by politics and the passage of time when the story is not told.

I could not say that all remote rural schools look equally good or bad. The effect of decentralization has been different in each one, and together with the differences in context, location, climate and personnel, each school has been building its own personality.

However, in the vast majority of rural campuses in Cundinamarca that I have had the change to know, it is common to find classrooms that were built during the boom of the Escuela Nueva in the country, before the divorce of FENA with the State. There are old buildings, cracked or repaired, and shelves whose objects cannot hide their age (see Figure 17). The passage of time has built hybrid classrooms, leaving shelves littered with dusty books published in all the decades since the 80's (see Figure 19); books that give testimony of all the programs that have passed through national politics, the training and the resources that each Minister of Education on duty has considered pertinent.

So, in sum, Escuela Nueva model (the one that FENA tries to adapt and implement) is the model transferred from Europe that aims for active education in multigrade classrooms. While multigrade schools refer to schools where two or more grades are combined in the same classroom, sharing, likewise, a teacher. And this is why although Escuela Nueva schools are multigrade -because the model dictates it-, not all the multigrade classrooms follow the Escuela Nueva model; a distinction that is not always clear for teachers, much less for civil society.

The truth is that before the separation of FENA with the State, rural public schools in the country were clearly schools sheltered by the Escuela Nueva model. But that after the quality and continuity of these schools no longer depended on FENA according to national policy, the country was left with thousands of schools that at some point tried to incorporate the Escuela Nueva model, but that now, with accuracy, could only be described as Multigrade Schools, because although they do not apply the Escuela Nueva model, they surely have one point in common: they have 1 or a maximum of 2 teachers, and all students share a classroom

So, without exception, asking the teachers, parents or students if their school was based on Escuela Nueva was a riddle, because nowadays there is a tendency to confuse the *Escuela Nueva model* with a *multigrade classroom* and with *actions from the Fundación Escuela Nueva*. And I do not blame them, since the official speeches of the Government and the Foundation rarely make explicit allusion to this difference.

4. ACTIONS OF RECONTEXTUALIZATION

But then, if it is not clear for them which educational model they use, what is the model they apply?

In *theory*, at present, it would be expected that they would be multigrade schools that somehow involve strategies of the Escuela Nueva model and that function pedagogically based on the PTA (*Project Everyone to Learn -for its acronym in Spanish*). This program was implemented since 2011 by the Ministry of Education, and provides pedagogical tools for students and teachers to strengthen the areas that historically have had the worst results in the national standardized SABER tests, that is, it focuses on the areas of reading and mathematics (Diaz et al., 2015).

However, in *practice*, the implementation of these programs become more complex when faced with the variables of reality, being mixed with the dynamics of rural life, and when dealing with the centralization of resources as well as the decentralization of pedagogical practice.

And it is that behind each action there is a logic that does not always coincide with what is politically correct (González, 2018). On the contrary, the actions and decisions that teachers make reveal how the mediation process looks in practice, and that is why I find so much richness in understanding how the actions of teachers speak for themselves about how abstract designs look like in practice, and how their perceptions about the educational model materialize.

Thus, the analysis that covers the following pages took as a base line the actions of the teachers through which they re-contextualize the history, the model and the design, in the real and daily life of the classroom.

4.1. ACTION 1: TO GIVE

"Here we have to work with the nails"

The vast majority of municipalities in Colombia have one or more main rural educative institutions which we will call here "Rural EI" to differentiate them from multigrade classrooms. These are generally characterized by being schools that offer elementary and

secondary education, and by having more than 100 students. They are public schools that operate under a traditional system similar to that of public schools in cities, and are generally located in the municipal downtown. These schools, despite being rural, are not multigrade, as they have a teaching body differentiated by grades and by subjects, as well as a psychologist -only if the campus has more than 500 students enrolled-, and a principal -who would be the bridge between the Education Secretariat of the municipality and the administration of the school-.

In turn, by law, each of these Rural EI must house the remote rural schools in the region that are assigned to it. Thus, for example, if a Rural EI is responsible for housing 8 rural schools -the majority of which are multigrade-, the responsibility of the principal will be to monitor and lead the teachers of the rural campuses, to manage the budget, to give authorizations, etc. In other words, the principal of the Rural EI becomes the visible and responsible face of the small rural schools before the Education Secretariat.

And that is why the day Professor Paola was accepted to work as a teacher in a multigrade classroom, it was the principal of the Rural EI in charge who welcomed her and said something that she would never forget:

"*Here we have to work with the nails*".

Curiously, that same phrase was the one that all the teachers I interviewed used to describe their work, referring to the lack of external resources and the need to make ALL of their own resources available (ie. even their nails, the work of their hands). And in that way, to ensure through this strong expression that work there is possible only if they give their all, their time, their material and social resources, without waiting for any solution to arrive externally.

Working with nails is necessary mainly for two reasons: the lack of resources at their disposal and the structural conditions of the context.

On the one hand, if we return to the metaphor of the decentralization process of resources, it could be said that very little of the impulse of the waves that Cundinamarca produces reaches its Rural EI, and from that little, the force of the wave almost fades before reaching the multigrade rural campuses, and it arrives in the form of what is strictly essential, that is, the

salaries of the teachers. Given this, the former official of the Ministry of Education Bibiam A. Díaz assured that

"When the resources destined for investment in rural education are broken down, they are minimal. The largest expense is teacher payrolls and those related to the basic functioning of schools (...) but not to educational innovation or teacher professional development. And these investments are necessary, but not sufficient to guarantee the development of skills in boys and girls "

Interview with Bibiam Alyda Díaz

Therefore, thinking about having sufficient external resources is a utopia that is mitigated by the individual effort of what teachers can contribute with.

On the other hand, the context presents obstacles that exceed the margin of action of the principals or the Rural EI even if they had more resources. For example, the lack of connectivity, the lack of paved roads or the geographical conditions of the area (ie. mountainous areas, difficult to access, with extreme climates), conditions that evidence the close nexus between geography and governance mentioned by Green & Reid, (2004).

Thus, the way to circumvent the context and the functioning of the system has been addressed by the teachers through *actions of giving*, sometimes smaller than others, but as the principal inferred when talking to Paola, actions that ensure the sustainability of the schools.

A first example is marked by the fact that the situation produced by the COVID pandemic dictated that education had to be remote, it had to be online. But the reality in these regions, according to the teachers, is that none of their students' homes have Wi-Fi, but rather they access internet through small and limited packages (e.g. 2MB for 7 days) that was what they could afford from time to time, and, by the way, that was for the use of the entire family. Therefore, it is very common that their students do not have internet for many days, preventing them from receiving instructions or sending homework.

Faced with this situation, the teachers I interviewed mentioned that it was very common for them to take money out of their salary to give some parents the $ 3USD they needed to pay the internet, so that their students did not have to suspend their studies.

A second example is related to the structural violence and insecurity surrounding these schools. All the teachers I was able to speak with mentioned that every time the Ministry of Education provided the schools with computers or printers, it was only a matter of days before thieves looted the venues and stole the equipment. Professor Diana even mentioned that the robbery of rural schools seemed to be a fad, as it was a situation that was repeated throughout the country.

Faced with this reality, the teachers who received technological equipment just before the pandemic decided to keep such equipment at home. This action implied bringing the school to the privacy of their houses and even putting their homes and families at risk by being guardians of valuables.

And yet, nothing compares to what hundreds of teachers have to give up to do their job. The life stories of Professors Luz Helena, Marcela and Paola agree that the remoteness of some schools where they have worked has forced them to go to live in the campuses. They say that the challenges in these types of schools are very different, ranging from facing snakes to hiding in the bathroom with the students when there are confrontations between guerrilla groups and the army. Two of them agreed that they had to practically hide in those schools throughout the week because they were advised that it was better for no one to know that they were there alone, and to only went out on the weekend to visit their relatives.

These resignation actions are, honestly, brave and admirable. Because even though handing over money from one's own salary can be a challenge for many, it has no comparison whatsoever with handing over the possibility of seeing their children to grow up or of sharing with their couples, as was Luz Helena’s case, who had to give up being close to her family for eight years to take care of the education of the children of the municipality of Nilo, Cundinamarca.

All these actions are based on giving, the renunciation of themselves. Through them, teachers iterate over time showing their agency capacity by being *projective* (ie. future-oriented and based on the ability to imagine alternatives) and *practical* (ie. involving actions in the present) (M Priestley et al., 2013; Mark Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). And they are based on *strategic* action logics (ie. rational actions where goals are set and resources are sought to achieve them) and *subjective* (ie. differentiating themselves from the society that dominates them) (François Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998; González, 2018), achieving thus their objectives through the work they do "with their nails."

4.2. ACTION 2: TO IMPROVISE

"We must always have a workshop up our sleeves"

At 8 am. begins each school day in the classroom. All the children, from preschool to fifth grade, enter the same room, where they will share the whole day together.

They start greeting each other, to which they add a song or a prayer, followed by repeating the motto that everyone has memorized: "*I want, I can and I will make it*". Subsequently, the teacher delivers the work guides to the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders, in which she reinforces the topics already seen in previous classes, and which, generally, she was designing and printing late into the night the day before. It is then assumed that the students will develop these guides while the teacher explains the subject to the youngest students, those of preschool and 1st graders. After explaining, she assigns them an activity (ie., coloring) and then returns to the "big kids" to review what they are doing, and so on.

This teaching dynamic is only applied when instructing basic subjects -the ones mandated by the Central Government: mathematics, Spanish, science, social studies and English- which, according to the teachers, cover different topics per grade. However, for the other classes – over which they have curricular autonomy: arts, religion, physical education, ethics and values- the same explanation and activity is given for all students.

And this is how a quotidian day looks like in these rural classrooms... in theory. But what theory does not tell us is that the social construction of schooling (F Dubet & Martuccelli, 2000), made up of a myriad of uncertain events, such as the fact that almost every day some parent takes time in the morning to ask the teacher about his/her kid's performance, and since in the whole school the only teacher and staff is her, the time that their conversation lasts will be time subtracted from the classes of the day.

Nor does the theory account for the countless eventualities that come up all the time when working with children under the age of 10: a preschooler must go to the bathroom in the company of someone older; 1st and 2nd graders lost their pencil and have nothing to write with, and the class must stop until the pencil appears; a student did not understand the instruction and

did the activity wrong and now has to repeat it; the older children finished their work guide faster than expected and while they are assigned something new they make so much noise that they do not allow others to concentrate; PTA booklets did not arrive on time and teachers must make their own guiding materials while they arrive; one more time, those of the Secretary of Education did not update the number of children enrolled, and they sent 3 less PTA booklets than needed, so teachers must decide: 3 children are left without book, or 3 children will have to use photocopies -copies that clearly the teacher must pay for-, and how to choose those 3 children who will have to work differently?

And all this, without considering the contingencies that do not happen every day, and that do not necessarily have to do with academics, but that put the skills of these teachers to the limit to improvise on a daily basis and protect children who have under their responsibility. For instance, when the mountain caught fire, and the teacher had to take her students to a safety place with the help of a farmer, with no way of calling the firemen or the parents for lack of phone signal and internet; or when a child choked on a toy in the classroom and the teacher, again unable to call for help, had to use her instinct to make this student vomit in a matter of seconds in order to save his life; or when they know that a student is going through a serious family crisis, of violence or abuse, and they do not have psychological support for the school -because remember that only when schools exceed 500 students have the right to that- and they must improvise strategies from *common sense* and *love* to take care, contain and support their little ones -as they refer to their students-.

Just like that, these teachers become principals, psychologists, nurses, administrators, facilitators, firefighters, cooks and cleaners on a daily basis. So, more than multi-grade classroom teachers, they should be recognized as *multi-role rural teachers*, roles for which they have rarely received training, but which they have to perform in some way, evidencing what Green & Reid (2004) mentions about the incongruences in the relationship between the academic providers of teachers education and the profession itself in practice.

And how do they manage to perform such different roles? They *improvise*. Improvising is the action of doing something that was not planned or prepared. It involves flexibility and creativity, and the ability to think strategically in the moment in a way that allows you to face the unpredictable surprises of everyday life.

Their ability to improvise and meet objectives with the resources they have is amazing, and it is backed by a strong mentality directed to action: there is no time for complaints or demands, there is only time to resolve and act. And that is why they often say that "*they should always have a workshop up their sleeves*", alluding to the saying that is used in poker -"to have an ace up your sleeve"-, referring to save a hidden resource for when it is needed. They keep work guides, they keep activities in their minds that they know they can develop when the routine changes course or speed, they keep tips of all kinds: pedagogical, first aid and family counseling principles. They keep all these resources up their sleeve, waiting for the moment when everyday life calls them to improvise in a situation.

These confrontations with the uncertainty of daily life lead them to implement autonomous actions, since are not necessarily habitual or conscious, but they reflect a constant negotiation with the ecological conditions of *agency spaces* (Campbell, 2012; Mark Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017), as they implement a strategy in record time based on their risk judgments (ie. evaluative matters), on their possibilities and limitations (ie. practical conditions), on their resources and their socioeconomic conditions.

This makes this category one of the most complete actions in this analysis in terms of agency and autonomy application, showing its relevance within mediation actions for re-contextualization. Likewise, it incorporates the complexity of action logics (González, 2018) that operate behind, being at the same time logics that operate based on institutional norms (ie. integration), logics that seek to achieve an objective (ie. strategic) and logics that are particular to each teacher, since it is not certain that all teachers would react in the same way to every situation (ie. subjectivation).

4.3. ACTION 3: TO ACCEPT

"It is up to you to adapt to what you have"

According to the ROYAL SPANISH ACADEMY (RAE, 2014), the verb to accept refers to voluntarily receiving something that is offered or proposed. It is a voluntary action in the sense that it is an act that individuals decide, but which in turn can be mediated by a myriad of conditions and social structures that operate on the subject to receive what is being offered.

Sometimes something is received because social norms indicate that it is appropriate. Like when the teachers accept multiple donations for the schools and that include all kinds of things in all kinds of conditions, such as encyclopedias from the 70s (see Figure 20), deflated balloons, paper, used notebooks, old toys, etc.; things that mostly end up collected in the corner of the room, and which are rarely used.

Other times, something is received out of necessity, such as when the teachers accept all kinds of help that comes from the community or from parents to repair some damage in the school, to paint the walls, to mow the lawn, or to build a park; support that teachers know they will not get from the State, but that sure they will find in the community, and without which the physical sustainability of the school would be put at risk.

On other occasions, something is received out of fear, such as when the teachers accept the approval of the illegal armed groups that operate in the rural school areas; militants who control some regions and who most of the time find out about the lives of teachers and their influence in the community, for which they generally prefer to maintain a distant but impartial relationship with the armed forces in the area.

And some other times, something is accepted because it is not believed to have the possibility of saying no, or of claiming something different. As when teachers receive 20 PTA booklets but have 25 students, or when they accept the commitment to respond for the academic performance of students with -motor or cognitive- disabilities who are assigned to their schools, without the teachers having prior training in special education and, generally, without having the school facilities designed for children with disabilities.

Thus, looking at the situation from the outside, it is easy to think that they should demand something different or take more radical positions on certain aspects. But, in these regions, it is common to find a cultural force that operates on this type of decisions, and it is perhaps a historical consequence of centuries where it has been taught in practice that voices that demand something different have no place in the system, that the consequence of the claim is expulsion from work and that, in the end, the force of the bureaucracy and the centralization of resources and power is so strong that everything is risked for nothing when complaining. And it is this experience repeated generation after generation, since the days of slavery, that has made it clear to the social sub-conscious of these populations that, instead of demanding, it is better to act.

Rarely saying "No" is a viable option for them, and not because it is not a right, but because it seems that years ago that option was removed from their range of possibilities.

This situation creates an endless circle, in which the State -represented by the Mayor's Office, the Ministry and the Secretariats of Education- obviates the conditions in which it should intervene (ie. to provide the correct number of booklets, to ensure an inclusive infrastructure in schools, to train in special education or to provide the aid of a helper for students with disabilities), while teachers and students accept this lack of State intervention and meet their objectives using whatever they have on hand (ie. using the workforce of parents, photocopies, help from other students to mobilize children who are in wheelchairs, etc.).

It is visible, then, that the action of *accepting* has become a pillar of the institutional logic on which the agency capacity of these teachers operates. Likewise, it inscribes their actions in integrative logics (González, 2018), as they construct their practices in the present by integrating their objectives with the institutional norms.

4.4. ACTION 4: EMPATY

"Here loses the year those who do nothing"

When talking to anyone in the community (ie. alumni, students, parents) it is easy to see a great difference between their perception about teachers of Rural EI and those of multigrade rural schools, and it is that the former are conceived as *teachers*, while the latter as *moms*.

This differentiation has its origin in structural and practical causes. On the one hand, the pedagogical model of multigrade schools implies that the same teacher shares with her/his students in the same classroom 8 hours, 5 days a week, during the 6 years that last elementary school and preschool, thus building a very strong, intimate and profound relationship with the students, way more than a teacher of any Rural EI could dream of. On the other hand, the profile required for a unitary teacher includes people with a high sense of belonging and *vocation* -as a kind of public service that yields personal fulfillment (Hansen, 1995)-, due to the conditions of the context of these schools and the amount of self-managed, autonomous and individual work that this model entails, which is why in practice these teachers tend to have to work with their heart -as Heriberto Castro of FENA expressed in our interview-.

These two conditions lead to highly proactive teachers who manage to develop very strong emotional ties with their students; ties that are based on empathy and that go beyond their role as teachers. In other words, to overcome the challenges of what they do, the teachers of these rural schools constantly exercise their ability to become affectively involved in the reality of their students, trying to understand them, rarely assuming a position of accusation, and almost always of justification and solution to their actions.

These behaviors show that emotions cannot be compartmentalized away from the work of teaching, but instead they are constantly integrated with the previous knowledge of the teachers (ie. cognition) and their practices (Hargreaves, 2000). So here is where the *emotional geographies* of schooling and human interaction of which Andy Hargreaves, (2000) talks about are enacted, that is, the set of experiences in social interactions in school spaces, that nourish, create and configure the feelings and emotions that drive them to operate under ethic or *other-centredness*, even when they fail in this purpose (A Hargreaves, 2001; Lynch et al., 2021).

One side of this coin is clearly positive. Especially in war zones and in contexts of violence, where children tend to come from very complex family contexts, where they are often war orphans, raised by a relative or neighbor, and part of environments full of abuse and aggression. Therefore, for girls and boys in these spaces, having a hug, a smile, a discipline instruction, or simply an adult in whom they can find support, can mean a different future.

But the other side of the coin does not appear to be so promising. As many may imagine, not having a good relationship with the one teacher they will have throughout their preschool and elementary school years can turn into a daily ordeal that will surely end in highly unmotivated students or dropouts. In this sense, it is visible that the complete authority wielded by multigrade teachers has a high risk of falling into personal or professional biases that can profoundly affect their students.

In any case, given the adverse context in which these schools operate, it is very common to observe these rural teachers having such deep knowledge of their students and their specific family contexts that are able to understand, and can justify them almost a natural impulse. For example, during the interview, Professor Paola stated that:

"*What breaks my class planning the most is when the children don't show up on time. Although that happens when it rains, and one understands, because the road becomes impossible, so then I send them homework so they can catch up* "

Interview with Professor Paola

Similarly, Professor Luz Helena said:

"They always give me problematic children. But I look at them, I don't yell at them, because I know they need love. They almost always live with their stepmother, their father is never with them because he works and the mother never calls them. So I know they are only seeking for attention and love"

Interview with Professor Luz Helena

Or, in another interview about homework, she stated that:

"That boy had to walk in the sun for an hour and a half to get home after school. And I know that he ate only rice and lentils at home. They also do not have a table to work and have to find firewood to cook. So, I understand that with he doesn't have enthusiasm to do any homework".

Interview with Professor Luz Helena

These statements made by Paola and Luz Helena show the logic that determines their reasoning about how to act in the face of discipline and academic performance of their students. By putting themselves in their shoes, they decide to react from an empathetic and non-punitive stance.

The matter becomes a bit more complex when speaking with people in the area, especially with young people, students and former students of the Rural EIs, because it is evident that the general perception of others about these multigrade schools is that, as they say, "*no one loses the year*" or "*the academic demand there is very low*." And this perception is corroborated by what the same multigrade classroom teachers expressed, since they all agreed that "*to lose the year in these schools, it has to be someone who really does not go to school or someone who does literally nothing*."

The line is then drawn between empathy, academic demands, and excellence. A long-term ethical and pedagogical debate, in which it is not the intention of this research to intervene, but it is to make visible the position from which these rural teachers operate. They enact actions

aimed at empathy that as a consequence generate deep affective bonds with their students, while sowing the general perception among the community of a soft education, which is reinforced by very low academic results[8] in comparison to the urban ones, and that are attributed -in the collective imagination- to the low level of academic demand in multigrade schools.

4.5. ACTION 5: TO WAIT

"Who is responsible?

The Escuela Nueva model, as mentioned before, does not only consist of multigrade classrooms. It is made up of strategies that encourage active learning, cooperative education using work tables, dynamic classrooms with talking walls, autonomous work through self-monitoring attendance mailboxes, and grade promotion that is by objectives, rather than by years. These strategies and tools should, in *theory*, be implemented in the classroom dynamics so that the model is enacted as it was designed.

But in order to do so, schools need staff who *know* the model and *resources* that make it possible. For example, for students to study in work-tables: desks, tables and chairs are needed (see Figure 12); also, for the classroom to be organized with walls that "speak": instruments that promote communication and self-regulation -such as mathematics or language billboards, suggestion boxes, friendship mail and self-control attendance boards- are needed; for the students to learn through active education: concrete elements - such as cardboard, markers and a school garden- are needed; among others.

Now, let's remember that these tools are part of Escuela Nueva model and hence fostered by FENA's actions. But also, let's have into account that FENA is not part of any public policy anymore, so its operation is now limited to specific projects with private organizations (ie. Ecopetrol) and, sometimes, public ones (ie. Ministry of Education), to ensure the adequate implementation of the model in specific schools that are covered by each project. Therefore, the common denominator of rural public schools in the country is not to implement Escuela

[8] In rural areas, students study an average of 6 years, while in urban areas, the average reaches 9.6 years. This is due to the high levels of school dropout, which occur especially between secondary and higher education, being 2.64% for urban areas, 3.1% for intermediate areas, 3.48% for rural areas, 4% for dispersed rural areas and 3.71% for post-conflict areas (MEN, 2016). On the other hand, in tests applied by the Ministry of National Education (SABER and LLECE), it is evidenced that elementary rural schools show the best performance in mathematics, but not in language, but in secondary (grades 7 and 9), students obtain the lowest results, especially in mathematics, where only 1% reach the expected learning levels (Perfetti, 2003).

Nueva strategies, but to work in multigrade classrooms using PTA booklets (as explained above).

However, as it was FENA who in the 70's, 80's and 90's was in charge of opening the bulk of the country's rural schools, even today we find lags of its model in these rural institutions, and it is still expected, to some extent, that active school methods are applied in their classrooms. And that is why the regional education secretariats frequently urge teachers to participate in training sessions about this model and on the implementation of active school pedagogical techniques.

This means that if rural schools are not on the radar of the interests of some private entities (eg Ecopetrol who finances projects with FENA promoting schools located in remote rural areas where they extract oil), they are at the mercy of the provision and care of the State (Hammier, 2017). So, how do they apply the ideal model if they do not have the resources to buy the supplies they need to carry it out? Because, if the budget is not enough to have toilet paper every month, much less will it be sufficient to buy scissors, paints, markers or colored paper.

And, what do teachers do about this? Or better yet, why to think that teachers *should* take action on the matter? A question that leads us to the inquiry that Bibiam A. Díaz made in our interview about *who feels responsible for learning at the end of the day*?

These questions are key to understanding the re-contextualization processes, because although we could see in an official report of the Ministry of Education that responsibility is shared between the Ministry, the Mayor's Offices, the Secretariats of Education, the principals and the teachers, in real life, *on how many of these actors falls the responsibility for the good or bad academic performance of students*? Who are sanctioned or rewarded when students have a certain score on national standardized tests? And who of these actors spend the afternoon looking for scissors so that all students, without exception, have the tools to work with the next day? The answers to these questions shed light on how the national system builds and delegates the burdens and responsibilities among the actors, and how, at the end of the day, it is the teachers who have to bridge the gaps in the system.

Thus, as we saw in the previous sections, teachers enact actions of all kinds to do everything in their power in order to overcome these situations, but there is always a remnant of conditions that get out of their hands, especially when resources are all they need. And that is where the

action of *waiting* takes center stage, because, although it is a passive and often invisible action, it is as strong and as present as the others. Such action is visible in the speech, when they show flashes of hope expressing that they trust that one day they will receive an answer to their requests, then it seems that waiting is an action that they execute not so much by decision, but mostly by resignation.

The requests they make are of all kinds, and whether or not they receive a response seems to depend on the subjectivity of the official in charge, since a common pattern between the cases is not visible. For instance, the majority of secretariats replaced the stolen computers within 6 months -equipment that were stolen again. However, sometimes the waiting times are longer, as happens with the request for painting to renew the facilities, before which a principal took approximately 3 years to provide it -while others have not yet said anything-; or asking to repair a wall in the classroom that is unstable and at risk of falling, and about which the teacher has literally been waiting 8 years for her request to be answered.

Thus, the lack of clarity about 1) the type of model that the bulk of rural public schools should follow, and therefore, the lack of certainty regarding the material resources they need, 2) who is responsible for the teaching processes that involve the conditioning of learning spaces, and 3) the urgency with which certain requests are made, leaves adrift the solution of the essential gaps that must be closed in the classroom and without which effective learning spaces would not be achieved. And it is in this limbo of responsibilities where the agency takes the form of *waiting*, arrives by inertia and is inserted in the daily actions of re-contextualization, as it shows how institutional reality is interpreted and how dynamics are also adapted through passive actions.

5. EXPECTATION VS REALITY

5.1. CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING AND RE-CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE MODEL

Thinking about actions of *Improvisation*, *Giving*, *Empathy*, *Waiting* and *Acceptance* provide us insight into how political reality is translated into the local reality of these remote rural regions. Through these acts the teachers of these schools *creatively mediate* between the structures (ie. social, historical and political) and the day to day in their classrooms. And, therefore, since these actions make it possible to insert government guidelines into local life, they are also the basis for a new *construction of meaning* on rural educational models (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Ting-Toomey, 2017).

In other words, creative mediation actions, and all the factors and conditions that surround them, give rise to the ways in which the multigrade school model is interpreted, perceived, transformed and adapted in these rural contexts. And that is why, based on the information presented so far, the following pages will change the narrative a bit, including now the official discourse, giving an explicit account of that contrast between the government design of the multigrade classroom model and its application in rural life, bringing to light those aspects that the analysis showed as problematic or contradictory between theory and practice.

5.2. TRANSVERSALITY

How to be a teacher in a multigrade classroom? How to teach classes simultaneously to more than 20 students of different grades? As one might imagine, an alternative[9] pedagogical methodology is needed to achieve this, and it is in this methodology that the greatest difference between the multigrade classroom model (be it PTA or Escuela Nueva) and the traditional teaching models by grades lies.

[9] According to Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), traditional education is generally conceived as educational models with a rigid authority and vague teacher-student relationships, for which, generally, alternative educational models seek for positive teacher-student relationship, students greater responsibility and a supportive atmosphere.

FENA discourse and the theory behind the multigrade model indicate that it is not about teaching classes simultaneously, but about working on the same concept at different levels of complexity, which is known as *transversalizing* the subjects. Thus, one should take a topic (ie. cells) and create activities about that same topic with different depth and focus for each grade (ie. its definition, its form, its components, its functionality).

Given this, the former official of the Ministry of Education Bibiam A. Díaz said that:

"Generally, teachers develop three classes simultaneously. But the concept of the multigrade is not necessarily that, but rather to work with transversality, which requires a lot of teachers preparation".

Interview with Bibiam A. Díaz

Bibiam's comment reflects her extensive knowledge about the model and the teachers' perception, except for a slight detail: teachers do not claim to have to prepare 3 classes simultaneously, but 6, or 7 if they count the individual classes they must teach for children with cognitive disabilities:

"It takes me a long time to prepare. In the afternoons I usually have to plan up to 6 degrees simultaneously. It gives me midnight planning. And the PTA sometimes helps, but preparing always takes a long time"

Interview with teacher Paola

"When I first got to work, I didn't understand what I had to do. At the University or at the Higher Normal School they would teach you some things, but they never said that you had to prepare 6 classes in simultaneous "

Interview with teacher Diana

Additionally, with regard to transversalizing their classes, the teachers stated that:

"Due to virtuality, we have had to modify the curriculum and transversalize more intentionally"

Interview with teacher Marcela

"We never have enough time. Let's say we have 2 hours of math, and in them we have to explain here and there, and when you turn to look at the clock, the time has passed. It is never enough. So, when one is behind in the plan, it is necessary to transversalize the subject with another subject to be able to cover the curricular plan"

Interview with teacher Luz Helena

A gap between the model and what is being done in practice is completely evident. On the one hand, class planning in rural classrooms seems to be following the traditional model by preparing classes for 6 grades simultaneously without transversalizing. And it is worth mentioning that the challenges in planning and execution of teaching multigrade classes under the traditional model are very large, and make the lessons neither efficient nor effective.

That is why, many times, to alleviate the burden of preparing and teaching 6 classes simultaneously, the teachers lead activities so that while they explain the content to one or two groups (ie. the same instruction for preschool and first-school children), the other students are busy developing a workshop. Here, then, there would be no transversalization, but *grouping*, making students of similar degrees to receive the same explanation and develop the same workshop. And this when it comes to basic subjects (as explained in previous sections), because for the instruction of complementary subjects, such as arts or ethics, the same lesson and activity is given for all students in the school.

And although it might be thought that this situation would benefit the little ones who are pushed to a more advanced level of complexity by sharing instruction with older children, in reality the opposite is true. According to what was discussed with the teachers, it is generally the older students who want to carry out the activities of the little ones, especially when it comes to coloring.

Likewise, in the moments in which teachers transversalize, they do so mainly as a strategy to run against time, and they actually tend to do it among subjects and not among grades. In other words, unlike de model, they use the same topic in different subjects with the same grade -or grouping- (ie. the cells in natural sciences and in arts to preschool and first grade), and not the same subject to instruct different grades.

These facts corroborate what was also expressed by Bibiam A. Díaz and by Professor Diana, when referring to the complexities that the country faces in terms of teacher preparation.

Generally, the approach in Colombia for teachers training teaches the traditional model, and even when the multigrade models used in rural areas are taught, there is a lack of preparation in classroom management, multigrade class planning and time distribution, not counting the little or no contact they have with real rural classrooms.

Therefore, and despite attending workshops and trainings, these teachers end up playing their role based on their *pedagogical common sense*, formed by their previous training, their experience and their agency capacity. And the result is that, in one way or another and despite knowing the theory of the model, the classes end up being dictated, most of the time, *differentiated by grouping and simultaneously*.

5.3. STUDENT-CENTERED EDUCATION, WOEK GUIDES AND AUTONOMY

In addition to transversalization, to make the multigrade model effective, the unitary teacher theory proposes a new role for the teacher: in this, more than instructors, they are supposed to act as facilitators of the booklets. This new role assumes a manageable workload for teachers, because instead of having to prepare and teach 6 classes simultaneously, they should guide students in an autonomous process in which students would discover by themselves the contents to learn and would be leaders of their own education (Rincón, 2010).

For this to be possible, there must be three elements dancing in perfect harmony: 1) teachers must know the model and be willing to give up part of the power that traditional education has given them, to generate new dynamics and power relations in the classroom, and thus give a more autonomous role to students; 2) students must recognize what self-directed and guided work means, and be willing to take greater control over their education responsibly; 3) The guides should be designed in an intelligible way, applicable to the context and that encourages guided learning.

To make this possible, FENA included teachers in the construction of the booklets (Rivera, 2015). Nonetheless, in some regions of the country -especially in the Pacific coast-, the result of teachers' participation did not seem to be successful since, after the process, the guides were not fully intelligible for students and parents. For this reason, FENA decided to intervene in the construction and modification of the booklets to create the ones they currently use. Either way,

both FENA and PTA guidelines claim to be flexible and easy to adapt to the context of the students, as well as designed for a friendly use by teachers.

However, the perception of the teachers is very different. For her part, Professor Diana pointed out the following in our interview:

"When I started as a teacher, there were some older children who had already been working with the Escuela Nueva booklets, and they began to fill them out, and they told me that they had already finished 3rd grade and that they were going to start with 4th grade. And they told me that you could go that fast from one grade to another, and I didn't believe it, but then a colleague of mine confirmed me so. I told the students, then, that I was interested in their learning and not so much in them finishing the booklets. So, I asked them 4 questions and they didn't know how to answer. And when they realized that they knew nothing about 3rd grade, they asked me: "How come, we had to read? Because they just transcribed. And that day I piled up all those booklets and I didn't want to work with that anymore. And I got material where I saw that they could learn better"

Interview with teacher Diana

Diana's experience is overwhelming and reveals great discrepancies with the official discourse about booklets. On the one hand, she shows what happens to students' learning when they are not properly guided in the autonomous work process. And, on the other hand, it shows how these teachers, amid the decentralization of power in their classrooms, have the power to make decisions that alter the implementation of the FENA or PTA model, as happened with the decision to whether promote or not her students, which according to the model must be based on achievements (ie. it is promoted upon completion of the booklet of the grade at the student's pace), while in reality it is done per years, as the teacher Paola corroborated in her interview:

"Promotion should be by achieving goals, but, in reality, we promote students by school year. Before, we did it when they finished the booklets of the grade. And there were 3 objectives, for example, in mathematics there was Guide 1, Guide 2 and Guide 3. And when they finished guide 3, they had to start with Guide 1 of the 4th grade. And it turns out that the children were very used to it. And if there was not a good accompaniment from the teacher, the children did not learn anything because they only transcribed. So we decided to start promoting them by year, not by completion of the booklets".

Interview with teacher Paola

And the truth is that the experience of Diana and Paola is not isolated. On the contrary, the other teachers also expressed their dissatisfaction with the learning process when using these booklets and the autonomous measures they have taken to face this situation:

"We have the Escuela Nueva booklets that the government sent us. But when I find topics that I need to complete, I don't limit myself to just those guides, I look for other books. Because these guides have a lot of reading in all subjects, and children get tired and only transcribe, so one has to look for other alternatives "

Interview with teacher Marcela

"The problem with Escuela Nueva is that, although they give you the tool, you have to organize yourself very well so that everyone is working as they should and so they can really learn"

Interview with teacher Luz Helena

They also pointed out that they feel that the PTA guides are often decontextualized from the local rural reality of the students, so they usually prefer to create their own work materials, using mostly content from Santillana textbooks -arguing that they have more illustrations-, and complementing them with PTA or FENA as the case may be:

"The guides they give us, even the PTA, are not contextualized to their environment. The booklets talk about Europe, but almost never about the place where they live. So, I have created my own guides to contextualize my students"

Interview with teacher Marcela

"The material they give us about mathematics has very complex content. It didn't work during the pandemic. Just imagine, if it is difficult for me to explain them that book in the classroom, it was impossible at home. So, I had to make some guides that didn't have so much text, and I selected the topics that I thought the parents could understand and explain easier at home"

Interview with teacher Luz Helena

Likewise, the fact that using the material autonomously at home during the pandemic would have been such a challenge, to the point that the teachers had been forced to create their own work guides, corroborates what Professor Paola, with more than 20 years of experience in rural schools, said in the interview:

"At school, children ask you for an explanation all the time. That does not happen that we are only facilitators"

Interview with teacher Paola

Thus, in practice, unlike what theory would expect, teachers continue to play an active role in the learning process, and not as primer facilitators, but explaining and teaching classes. This shows that power relations have not varied as much from those of the traditional model, since rural teachers handle a high level of autonomy and agency in the classroom, accompanied by little regulation by the State. As a consequence, although the model promulgates to be based on a student-centered alternative teaching, it is the teachers who decide the content, the focus of the topics and the speed of learning and promotion of the students, which takes, late or later, to replicate roles and functions similar to those of traditional schools, but in alternative structured multi-grade classrooms.

5.4. HIGH SCHOOL

"*Moving to high school is very hard"* is what all the teachers and students interviewed said.

As previously mentioned, rural multigrade schools are elementary schools that comprise the levels of preschool, first, second, third, fourth and fifth grade (with students ranging from 4 to 11 years of age, when there is no extra-age). Thus, the rural education system is designed so that once students graduate from multigrade classrooms, they go on to study high school at the nearest Rural EI (as mentioned before, secondary education goes from grade six to eleven), which operates under a traditional pedagogical model.

So, in theory, multigrade schools serve to give a first boost to children from the most remote rural regions, to move them away from illiteracy, and to prepare/motivate them to continue their studies as high school students.

However, what the theory does not count is that many times the distance from the homes of multigrade students to the municipal capital, where the Rural EI are located, doubles or triples in relation to what they previously had to travel to their multigrade schools. For example, the former student of the Rural EI of La Esperanza, Mateo, expressed that:

"I did not do very well in the academic part. When they transferred me to high school, I lost sixth grade and then I lost seventh grade. I remember that I felt very tired, because my routine was very tough since the morning. I had to get up at 4 am, and walk about 1 hour and a half back and forth. And since we lived in the countryside, I had to take care of the cows and the crops in the afternoon"

Interview with former student Mateo

Mateo's story illustrates the tough routine that awaits many multigrade students once they are transferred. And, even more, it makes visible that the empathy that multigrade teachers had with respect to understanding that they did not do homework for their rural extracurricular activities, is different when they enter high school. From the sixth grade they find a traditional, stricter system, with more responsibilities and with more teachers with whom they do not share the same level of intimacy that they used to have with their multigrade teachers (Cuadros, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2018). Given this, multigrades teachers recognize that:

"Moving to high school is hard. Because we spoil them at elementary school, we are too flexible. But, in the school of the town, they work at a different pace "

Interview with teacher Luz Helena

"It is very common for students to lose sixth grade, because that transit is very hard"

Interview with teacher Marcela

And, as if the academic shock were not damaging enough, this clash of systems has generated a gap between teachers in remote rural schools and those of Rural EI, a breach that has been materialized in professional friction among each other:

"High school teachers say that children from the countryside arrive without knowing anything"

Interview with teacher Paola

"High school teachers say that the children in our school are poorly prepared, but they do not sit and look at the context of them, the fact that they have nowhere to study at home"

Interview with teacher Diana

And the problem, in the long term, is that these pedagogical discrepancies end up preventing the articulation between these two worlds:

"The truth is that we have not taken the time to articulate with High School teachers. We need, above all, to be able to talk about the processes of children and make a connection with them"

Interview with teacher Luz Helena

In sum, this professional hazard, produced by the collision of two worlds, two systems, two ways of thinking about teaching and empathy, ends up directly affecting the relationships of the local community, and the academic process of the students, who are the ones that, ultimately, must face and adapt to the system if they want to complete their studies.

6. VISUAL CHRONICLE

Narration made image

Photos taken during field work.

Figure 1 Stone path to school

Figure 2. Paved road to school

Usually, grandmothers are the once in charge of their grandchildren's education.

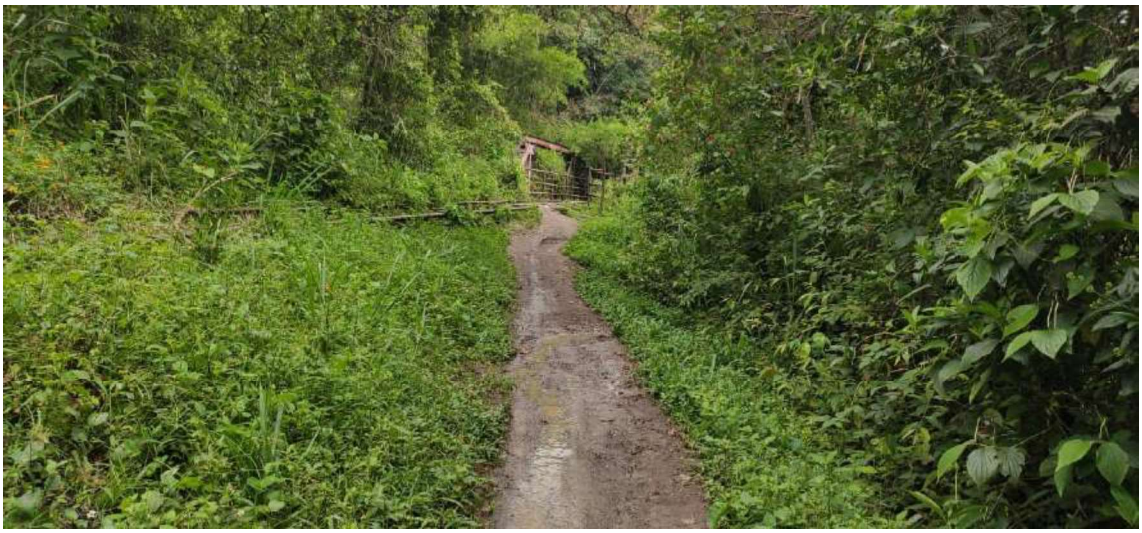

Figure 3 Hidden roads to school

Figure 4. Muddy roads to school.

The trail of a motorcycle that passed, shows the main transport used in these roads, and the state of the path when it rains. For this route, students generally bring changing clothes to school.

Figure 5. Bridge.

An old bridge that children of the town cross every day to get to their school

Figure 6. Autonomy.

The children, from a very young age, are left free to move along the paths of the municipality.

Figure 7. Welcome! Entrance to the town on holidays

Figure 8. Down the hill.

View from the truck into a mountainous area to get to a remote school. The car travels down in a narrow road that serve as the only path for cars, horses, motorcycles and people walking.

Figure 9. Shadow and color.

Remote school entrance with a shady old-fashioned structure covered in colorful mural.

Figure 10. Remote school entrance.

Rusted and closed bars, surrounded by grass whose length reveals the ravages of the pandemic and virtuality.

Figure 11. Beautifying.

Old and dilapidated doors, covered by the colorful poster that the teacher made by hand to welcome visitors to the school. In the background, the classroom with the chairs stacked because of virtuality.

Figure 12. Multigrade Classroom.

This teacher also welcomes her guests and students with a poster made by her. In the background, the classroom with chairs (not work tables), organized in rows and a broken window that shows the passage of time and insecurity.

Figure 13. God, Country and Honor.

The symbols of the classroom that reflect the slogans of a country.

Figure 14. Talking walls.

Figure 15 Painting as a repair strategy.

Classroom painted by a teacher

Figure 16. Individual work.

The arrangement of the chairs shows the contrast with the cooperative work model. Likewise, the state of the floor shows the conditions of the infrastructure.

Figure 17. The essential.

"There is no place for luxury here"

Figure 18. School library.

Gathering of books, materials and scraps from all decades since the 70's

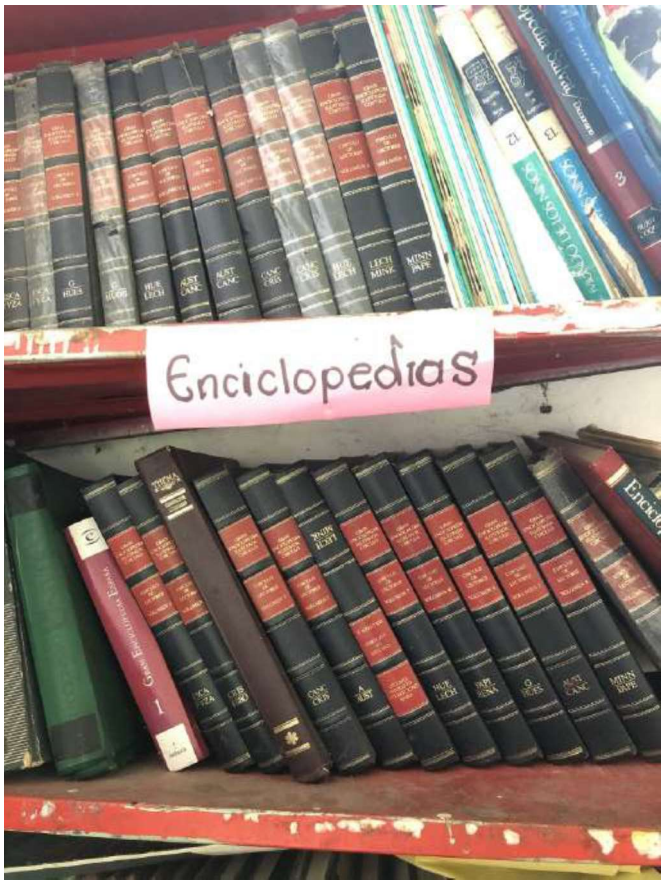

Figure 19. Donation.

Encyclopedia collection received by this school as a donation more than 10 years ago. Cobwebs on it reveal its use.

Figure 20. Recursion made library.

Figure 21. Computer and technology room.

Figure 22. Kitchen and dining area for the whole school.

Figure 23. School corridor between classroom, kitchen and garden.

It is worth mentioning that one of the students at this school has paralysis and must move around in a wheelchair.

Figure 24. School garden.

Figure 25. School park.

Figure 26. Recycling room.

7. FINAL REFLEXIONS

Rural life in Colombia is embedded in a constant struggle to find its place among the changing, technological and globalized world of the 21st century, while facing the lack of resources characteristic of their structural conditions; it is known that the change is there, that it is happening around them, but they are also aware that the time it takes to reach it seems endless. And it is in such search for a place in a changing world, where they take what they have and play with external structures to do what, according to the criteria of each, is what is necessary to "*get ahead*".

And rural schools do not escape from that reality. So far, we have seen how teachers mediate between the structures that exceed them -such as government, public policies, resources, history, pedagogical models, etc.- and the spaces where they effectively have agency -their local reality, their classrooms-. And this journey through their logics, their experiences, their decisions and their actions, has shown in practice that creative mediation, although not necessarily closes gaps, does serve as a temporary glue for the points where the system breaks down, creating bridges and making the impossible possible.

Getting to know teachers' experiences and to analyze them under the magnifying glass of creative mediation also made it possible to evidence a reality that seems not to be so clear for the civil society involved or for decision makers: for years it has been tried to insert an alternative pedagogical model (ie. multigrade classrooms) at the center of a highly traditional national system. In practice, this has demonstrated to entail great challenges and turning points, since the distribution of resources, the curricular guidelines, the academic demands are made *from* a traditional system, but have been expected for these alternative classrooms to operate structurally in a different way from such dominant system.

So, for example, the traditional system gives resources and provides psychological support based on the number of students -because its logic is broad, not deep-, while forgetting that multigrade schools operate on a deep and not broad logic, leaving them without sufficient resources and without the support of the personnel necessary for its effective operation. The

same happens if we talk about academic processes, since the national promotion system is designed to function per year and, therefore, the evaluation systems are too; while active multigrade classrooms are designed to function by objectives (FEN, 2020), implying a radically different temporal logic, but which in the end has had to adjust and function according to national guidelines; A situation that over time has resulted in multigrade schools adapting the temporality of their promotion systems to the predominant traditional model, thus changing the whole logic of alternative and student-centered pedagogy towards a logic of promotion and power relations based on a traditional model.

Thus, it has been shown, through teaching experience, that the same contradictory condition experienced by the Colombian rurality shelters also the rural educational system. This contradiction causes multigrade schools to constantly oscillate between the alternative and the traditional, with the result that they sometimes succumb to the prevailing system and sometimes seek the means to make the multigrade model work. But the truth is that, in one way or another, the model that was designed and proposed by the government at the national level is not operating - because it *cannot* operate - in the way it was expected.

This suggests 1)a profound transformation of the structural educational conditions of the country so that they can welcome and give life to an alternative model, or 2)the change towards another rural pedagogical model that can survive in the middle of a highly traditional national system. But, in any case, it is clear that creative mediation actions should be mechanisms to *adapt* the pedagogical model, and not become the only means to *sustain* a national education system, because, if so, the base would be weak and in any moment the system could collapse. The *need* for change is, then, imminent. The rural education system needs to rethink and rebuild, not just repair and, much less, settle for plugging gaps.

Now, if we take up the argument of Hamid & Nguyen (2016) where it is questioned whether teachers' agency involves free choice for teachers or whether it is the result of policy actors and decision makers evading responsibility at the national level, the question would then be: in whose hands is the change?

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