



Multigrade teachers in Esmeraldas (Ecuador): a silenced reality

Maestras de multigrado en Esmeraldas (Ecuador): una realidad silenciada

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Abstract

The existence of single-teacher or multi-grade teachers in rural areas of Ecuador is a reality of education. The lack of recognition by the administration leads to political and institutional discrimination that calls intercultural education into question. The multigrade activity in rural Ecuador faces complex and differentiated challenges compared to traditional teaching, as in these cases, multiple levels (1-7) of elementary school are taught by a single teacher. This task is largely carried out by women who are unfamiliar with the cultural conditions of these places, and in many cases are not qualified. This paper aims to be the voice of 7 single-teacher women teachers from the coastal area of Ecuador according to Brumat's (2011) proposal, who work in the rural parish of La Unión, belonging to the Quinindé canton, in the province of Esmeraldas. Especially with regard to their training and insertion in the rural context. A qualitative and exploratory study was carried out. The data collection instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview, and its analysis was carried out using the MAXQDA programme. The daily life of these teachers can be characterised by feelings of loneliness and isolation, and a difficult coexistence in disadvantaged sectors where the cultural complex, gender and racial discrimination and discrimination based on place of origin are deeply rooted.

Keywords: Rural education, gender discrimination, educational administration, multigraded classes, Ecuador, intercultural dialogue.

Resumen

La existencia de profesoras unidocentes o de multigrado en las zonas rurales del Ecuador forma parte de la realidad educativa cotidiana. La ausencia de reconocimiento por parte de la administración provoca una discriminación política e institucional que cuestiona la educación intercultural. La actividad unidocente que se desempeña en la zona rural del Ecuador se enfrenta a desafíos complejos y diferenciados respecto a la enseñanza tradicional, al ocuparse en estos casos de múltiples niveles (1-7) de educación básica por una única maestra. Esta tarea es desempeñada en gran parte por mujeres que desconocen las condiciones culturales de estos lugares, y en numerosas ocasiones no poseen la cualificación necesaria. Este trabajo pretende dar voz a siete profesoras unidocentes de la zona costa del Ecuador según la propuesta de Brumat (2011), que trabajan en la parroquia rural La Unión, perteneciente al cantón Quinindé, en la provincia de Esmeraldas. Especialmente respecto a su formación e inserción en el contexto rural. Se siguió un estudio de corte cualitativo y exploratorio. El instrumento de recolección de datos consistió en la entrevista semiestructurada, y su análisis se realizó a través del programa MAXQDA. La vida cotidiana de estas profesoras puede caracterizarse por sentimientos de soledad y aislamiento, y una difícil convivencia en sectores desfavorecidos donde el complejo cultural, la discriminación de género, racial y por el lugar de origen están arraigados.

Descriptorios: Educación rural, discriminación de género, administración educativa, clases multigrado, Ecuador, diálogo intercultural.

1 Introduction

The existence of multigrade teachers in rural areas in Latin America is an unknown reality (Arias-Ortega *et al.*, 2021); Carvajal-Jiménez *et al.*, 2020). The dichotomy between the rural and the urban world enables to visualize the characteristics, circumstances and special needs that require specific attention and analysis (Brumat, 2011; Calderón, 2015; Waissbluth, 2019). In Ecuador, there is little research that seems to address the rural educational reality and the daily life of multigrade (Vaca *et al.*, 2020).

This area is characterized by high levels of poverty, risks of social exclusion, discrimination and deficiency in public services (Arévalo-Avecillas *et al.*, 2018; Padilla, 2018). These problems are faced by teachers in multigrade schools (Mora, 2020; Waissbluth, 2019). In 2019, the Ecuadorian rural area presented 41.8% of poverty and 18.7% of extreme poverty, compared to 17.2% and 4.3% in the urban area, respectively (INEC, 2020).

According to UNESCO (Calderón, 2015), these educational organizations appear in the 50 and are characterized by the concentration of the responsibility of a single teacher for all grades, from first to seventh of elementary school. Likewise, the teacher may also be responsible for the performance of administrative tasks, student drivers and community members, or for the distribution of teaching materials, among other functions (Waissbluth, 2019).

For Cruz and Juárez (2018), since there is not extensive information on multigrade schools, it is recommended to address this reality (Vaca *et al.*, 2020). Those authors, in their work on single schools, analyze the experiences of four single schools with low academic scores compared to urban schools.

Among the challenges faced by the rural educational reality in Ecuador are high student dropouts, the digital gap, bullying and illiteracy (Calderón, 2015; Waissbluth, 2019). As regards dropout, the most frequent causes are the lack of financial resources (46.75%) and the need to work

(17.56%) since boys and girls play an essential role in the family economy; illiteracy in the rural area is 12.9% compared to 3.9% in the urban area (Defensoría del Pueblo de Ecuador, 2018).

On the other hand, the digital gap is significant in a sector where only 24.5% have access to a computer nationwide. 16.1% have internet access in rural areas, compared to 46.6% in urban areas (INEC, 2018).

Coexistence in this rural context is often characterized by racist attitudes or gender discrimination (Jiménez, 2020), isolation and cultural incomprehension with the community. Thus, for example, 58.7% of rural women have suffered some form of violence, especially those women belonging to indigenous groups (67.8%) and Afro-Ecuadorian groups (66.75%) (UNICEF, 2018). Students are most affected by psychological and verbal harassment (Flores and Sigcha, 2017; Jiménez, 2020).

In Ecuadorian culture, there are different meanings in language with racist and social exclusion connotations. In addition, in the mestizo discourse there is permanent ambiguity regarding the identity of the Ecuadorian, which is translated into stereotyped visions of the existing cultural diversity. Thus, it is common in public spaces to use expressions like “longo” a negative word to refer to other mestizos and indigenous people; “cholo” to refer to mestizos who seem more concerned about having fun than working; “chaso” or “pastuso” to emphasize the rurality of the mestizo, or “mantubio” to refer to the working and independent mestizo. Another group that historically suffers expressions and discrimination is Afro-descendant, identifying them with a group related with leisure or crime (Ayala, 2002; Tutiven *et al.*, 2018).

Therefore, teacher training in these educational contexts requires specific training in this complex reality. Brumat (2011) mentions the disconnection between the training programs in degree and postgraduate courses directed to teachers with the needs and characteristics of rural life, predominating the urban.



According to Rojas-Durango *et al.* (2013) this gap makes it impossible to incorporate the needs and wealth of communities, leading to political-institutional discrimination. In view of this situation, Cragolino and Lorenzatti (2016) defend the need for teachers to update strategies that allow them to work in different degrees and to face the diversity of these students, as well as the problems that they deal with as a result of poverty and discrimination. For example, the rural areas have the greatest presence of historically excluded and discriminated groups, such as indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians with 78.5% and 25.6%, respectively at the country level (Defensoría del Pueblo de Ecuador, 2018).

The Organic Law on Intercultural Education (LOEI) (Asamblea Legislativa, 2011) aims to position interculturality as an essential axis in education for the good life or *sumak kawsay* (Lara and Herrán, 2016; Lara, 2019); Vernimmen-Aguirre, 2019; Valdez-Castro, 2021), necessarily including the rural world as advocated in article 31 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008). The education of the good living has been an interesting and new proposal in Ecuador, because it integrates ecology, dialog of knowledge, rationality, pedagogies such as death or prenatal, universality or egocentrism as essential variables for its understanding (Lara and Herrán, 2016; Lara, 2019; Suárez *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, the LOEI (Legislative Assembly, 2011) in article 1 mentions that “it guarantees the right to education, determines the general principles and purposes that guide Ecuadorian education in the context of good living, interculturality and plurinationality”; in paragraph (v) concerning equity and inclusion, it states that “equality of opportunity is guaranteed to communities, peoples, nationalities and groups with special educational needs and develops an ethic of inclusion (...)”.

This work aims to approach the daily life of multigrade Ecuadorian teachers, experienced in seven women who perform their activity in the Esmeraldas coast area. The concept of the

conduction of daily life is used as a tool to capture human subjectivity from the social context in which the person lives and relates (Brumart, 2011; Kristensen and Schraube, 2014). It focuses especially on three major challenges:

- Identify the training needs of multigrade teachers.
- Know the meaning of multigrade.
- Listen to the experience of multigrade teachers in the rural community.

2 Methodology

A methodology based on the qualitative approach was used, since the research focused on obtaining the perspectives and points of view of multigrade teachers as to their emotions, priorities, experiences, and meanings they give to their daily life, in relation to the rural contexts in which they work.

It is exploratory research, located in the rural parish of La Union, belonging to the canton of Quinindé, in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, zone coast. A sample made up of the seven rural teachers of this parish was used. The selection sought to maximize the usefulness of information from small samples (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this case, information was collected from a sample of seven multigrade teachers belonging to rural contexts that are remote from each other and difficult to access. Sampling was performed for its convenience due to its accessibility and willingness. In all cases, there was no paved road allowing access by motor vehicles. Its composition was homogeneous according to the following similar parameters among the individuals that make the sample: A) the seven individuals are multigrade teachers; b) sex (the entire sample are women, characteristic that was at random); c) age: when making a distribution of absolute frequencies of age by classes as follows: 25-30, 30-35, 35-40 and 40-45 —continuous variable concentrated in the second class, 30-35); d) professional experience and qualification:



ranges from nine to 11 years and 71.4% have a third-level education degree (see Table 1).

Table 1

Characterization of participating individuals

Doc.	Sex	Experience	Age	Level of study	Specialization
E1	Femenine	10	33	Third Level	Bachelor's Degree in Child Education
E2	Femenine	11	34	Third Level	Bachelor's Degree in Child Education
E3	Femenine	9	35	Third Level	Bachelor's Degree in Child Education
E4	Femenine	9	33	Fourth Level	Master's Degree in Education
E5	Femenine	11	32	Third Level	Bachelor's Degree in Child Education
E6	Femenine	10	28	Third Level	Engineer in Business Administration
E7	Femenine	9	45	Bachelor's	Degree in Science

Individual and semi-structured qualitative interviews were used as a data collection technique, due to its openness, flexibility, and opportunity to be carried out in different time-space moments, in a dialog based on the categories defined *a priori* (see Table 2) (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). A fluent conversation was achieved, in which perceptions and knowledge about the meaning of multigrade, professional updating, and experiences of discrimination lived were revealed, constituting as categories of study. The instrument was developed by the authors and submitted to consultation workshops with specialists in which it was corrected, re-elaborated and the validity of the contents determined according to their correspondence with the categories determined (see Table 2) (Mattos and Cruz, 2011). Recording the interviews prevented data loss for oblivion or other reasons. Each time the instrument was applied to the interviewees, similar results were obtained, observing moments of theoretical saturation.

The design used was phenomenological (Duque and Aristizabal 2019) in obtaining the perspectives of the participants to explore,

describe and understand their common experiences regarding multigrade, professional updating and discrimination. There were four phases: literature review, data collection planning, data collection and analysis, and discussion and conclusions.

In the initial phase, a bibliographic review was carried out on the subject of study, the identification of the categories and subcategories, and the preparation of the interview. In the second phase, data collection planning was carried out: individual interviews were scheduled during May 2019, once the informed consent of the participants and the necessary authorizations had been obtained. Before starting the interview, the objective of the research, the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses were recalled. The interviews were conducted by a single researcher, the dialogs were recorded and then transcribed. The average interview time was about one hour.

Content analysis was used for data processing. In addition, a mixed analysis was applied (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2005). To this end, first, three categories were deductively determined *a priori*, from which seven subcategories were defined (see Table 2).



Table 2

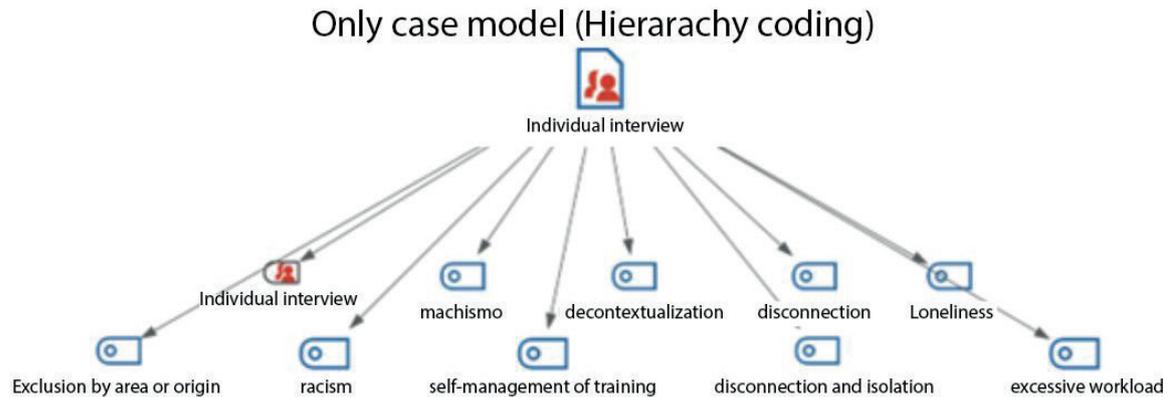
A priori construction of categories and subcategories

Categories	Subcategories
Meaning of multigrade	Self-perception of multigrade Professional satisfaction of multigrade
Professional training	Relevance of updating courses received Attitude for professional updating
Experiences of discrimination during multigrade	Racism Machismo Community exclusion

Once the data were collected, an open and inductive coding was performed. In this phase, the dialogs were transcribed, and the answers were then grouped by questions creating blocks of information according to the categories and subcategories. This first document was ana-

lyzed through MAXQDA Software (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019), which provided a code hierarchy map through the software's MAXMaps visual tool and allowed a code reduction from twenty-three to nine (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Code Hierarchy Model



Note. MAXMapas, MAXQDA, 2020, multigrade project.

Subsequently, the document was divided into three main sections (Document 1, 2 and 3), which encompass the questions by category, generating a case model (see Figures 2, 3 and 4). The various paragraphs of the transcripts were enumerated for their codification. The codes were induced by the answers obtained and by the concepts found in the literary review developed in the initial phase. These codes made it possible

to point out the matches and group the results through the MAXMaps tool for models and code hierarchy, which facilitated the interpretation of the information and the preparation of the results.



3 Results

The results are presented according to the groupings made from the categorizations and coding, which allowed to group them into interpretative texts that represent the perceptions and attitudes of the interviewees about multigrade and its meaning, professional updating, and discrimination.

3.1 Meaning of multigrade: quiet isolation

Paragraphs from one (1, 9 and 17 belong to the moderator) to 24 of the first document were used to obtain the first result, which correspond to the first category “meaning of multigrade” and the subcategories that emerge from it: self-perception of multigrade and professional satisfaction (see Figure 2). Although in the code hierarchy model for this category, four codes (disconnection, isolation, excessive workload, and loneliness) were initially delimited; in the analysis of the individual document, other representative codes were observed in the case model that were considered interesting for this result; these were: autonomy, frustration with not achieving goals, tranquility, self-fulfillment, and professional experience.

A single case model was constructed with this information using the MAXMaps tool that shows the general characteristics of the seven teachers interviewed regarding the category meaning of multigrade (see Figure 2).

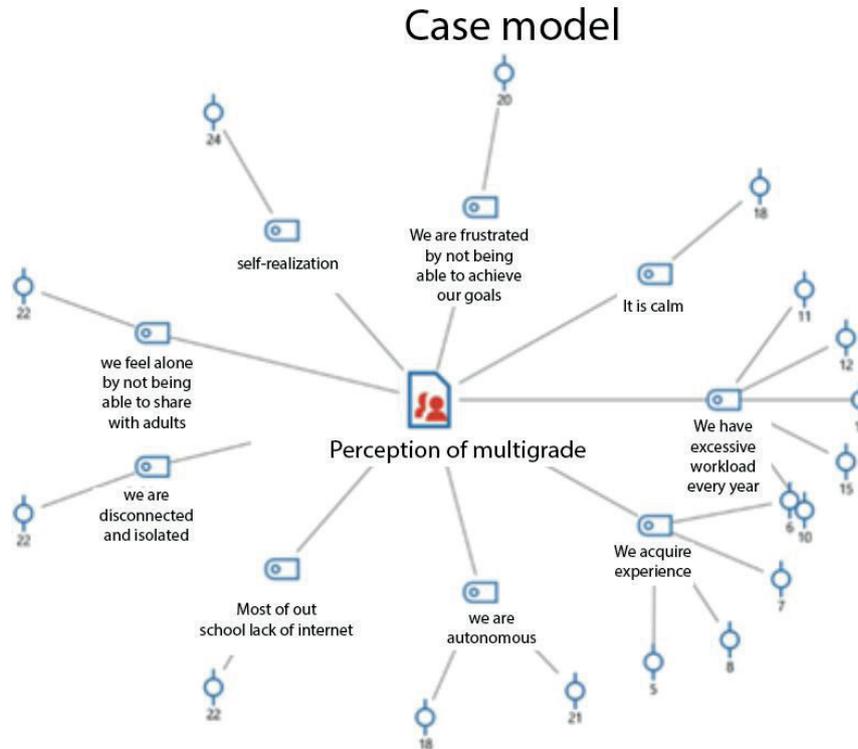
Multigrade, described by the interviewees, is full of different perceptions, which enable a description of how teachers perceive multigrade and their level of satisfaction with their work.

In terms of the level of satisfaction, different positive aspects are mentioned, such as autonomy, tranquility, experience, the nature of the work or personal performance. Thus, while there is a feeling of isolation and loneliness, to some extent it is valued as an opportunity for autonomy and tranquility “although it is difficult at times, the environment is very calm and gives me the possibility to adequate my time” (E1); it is the moment to acquire unique experience to be able to combine teaching at different levels: “I can do many different activities since I teach all the subjects, and I think that being with children of different ages helps with this experience. I can work with any grade” (E4).

Similarly, there is the presence of a sense of personal and vocational accomplishment: “I can proudly see my effort in my students who continue their studies, and above all remind me with affection” (E7), or “I like to work with children and share my knowledge” (E3).



Figure 2
Case model, category meaning of multigrade



Note. The figure shows the codes and number of the paragraph corresponding to the transcript in which they are present. The most recurrent codes were: We have excessive work; we work with all years (paragraphs 6, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 15); and experience is acquired in the different subjects and years (paragraphs 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10, document one, questions and answers corresponding to the first category, perception of multigrade).

MAXMapas, MAXODA, 2020.

On the other hand, among the negative aspects, they express the frustration of not achieving the proposed objectives, feelings of loneliness and isolation, few relational experiences with adults, the lack of opportunities for professional exchange and training. The excessive work, along with the need to meet competencies and learning outcomes, is frustrating to them: “it is difficult to explain all subjects at the same time, and it is also not possible to achieve the proposed goals. As much as I try, I cannot achieve the objective, I would do it if it were a single grade” (E3), or “it is a little more difficult than teaching a single

year of elementary school. In my previous job, I was a single-degree teacher, so it was easier and calmer” (E2).

In this regard, they share their feeling of loneliness and isolation, not only in relation to relationships with other professionals, but also with adults:

No, I don’t like being alone. I have more contact with students, but I cannot share or talk to adults. I have been desperate many times because I cannot share with colleagues or we cannot support at each other because we are alone, and in very distant communities. (E5)



Isolation is not only in terms of physical space, but also in terms of the possibilities of access to educational experiences organized by the district of education. They point out that when they have some questions, they are mainly replaced by self-formation or by the advice of the other multigrade teachers: “with self-training” (E3), and “with the help of the teachers who have the same doubts” (E4).

Regarding the use of information and communication technologies, they mention the existing disconnection of the school with telephone and internet: “without mentioning that in most of our schools we have no signal and are not connected” (E5).

Likewise, the meaning of multigrade for rural teachers is characterized by being a different activity from the traditional one. They are responsible for various tasks, as they are required to attend students of the seven levels of elementary school, as well as to do administrative and maintenance activities:

Being only a teacher for all grades and subjects is really very hard, and keeping in mind that we also have administrative work because we are the principals, ... and many times we even have to clean up and try to keep things clean and running. (E5)

The training to deal with students with various disabilities lies in each one’s own initiative:

I would like to train to teach children with different disabilities. I have two cases and I would like to know how I can help; I have searched on the internet some activities that I can do, but I would like an expert to come. (E3)

3.2 Training to be multigrade teacher: “work to live”

Paragraphs 1 to 32 of document two were used for this result, which collected the questions and answers corresponding to the second category, Professional training. Paragraphs 1, 9, 17 and 25 correspond to the questions raised by the interviewer and enable to observe the behavior of the subcategories: relevance of the updating courses received and attitude toward professional training (see Figure 3). Two codes were identified for this purpose: Decontextualization and self-management of training. The model of the case drawn up in the MAXMaps tool can be seen in Figure 3.

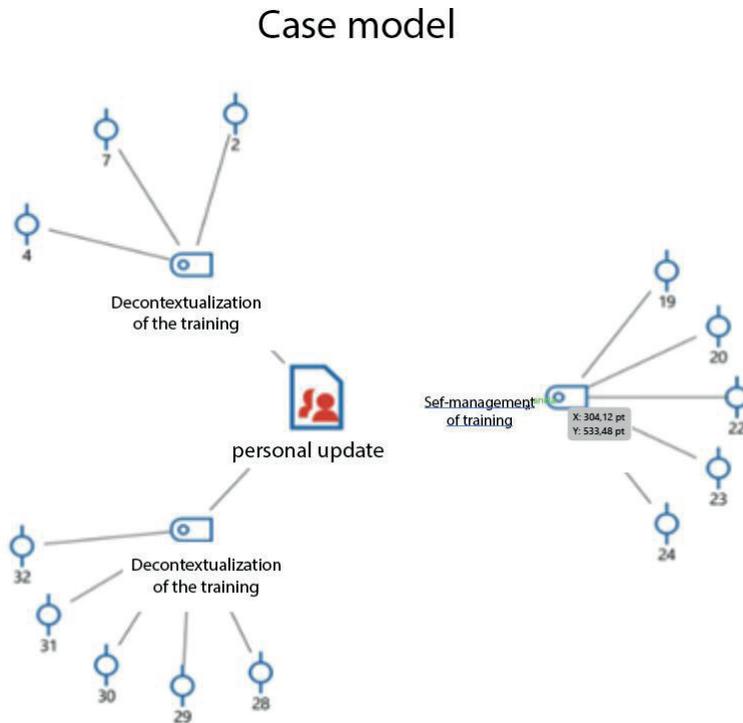
The professional updating of multigrade teachers normally happens by self-management. They agree with the decontextualization of the courses they have attended, and which are offered by the district of education, with respect to the needs of their daily reality.

Hence, when asked about the ways in which they are updated, it mainly depends on their own initiative: “autonomously because the trainings that I have participated have not been well planned and I have not understood” (E5), “looking for information, or something that I need on the Internet” (E1), “with self-training, because if we wait for them to call us it will take a lot of time” (E3), or “reading manuals or asking colleagues what to do in difficult cases” (E7).

However, they participate in district trainings, although they do not like it because “they always say what to do in general, but do not know the specific case of each school, or the needs we have” (E6), or “they make us do activities, but they do not explain well how to apply them according to the different needs that each teacher has in his or her school” (E3).



Figure 3
 Model of a case, category professional training



Note. The figure shows the codes and number of the paragraph corresponding to the transcript in which they are present. In this case, even though the code for decontextualization of training is the most frequent (paragraphs 2, 4, 7, 28, 29, 30, 31 and 32) versus self-management of training (paragraphs 19, 20, 22, 23 and 24), equality between both is observed, different from what happened in the previous category, where there was an imbalance between the frequency of the different codes.

MAXMapas, MAXQDA, 2020, multigrade personal project.

The lack of interest of teacher relies on calls of trainings oriented only to a certain specific level, being more theoretical than practical and not lasting enough, “they always do trainings or workshops for teachers who teach one degree, we do not have many options because we are multigrade teachers. We are a little abandoned and they just tell us to do the same. But you cannot do it because all the grades are together” (E5), “I have been trained but I have not been given strategies, it is more about theory or concepts” (E1), “four months ago I was in a training in a study circle with a very good psychologist,

but we discussed few things because of the time” (E7).

3.3 Multigrade: facing discrimination

This last result shows the processing of the paragraphs that make up the third document analyzed, “experiences of discrimination during multigrade”, corresponding to the same category. The subcategories racism, machismo and exclusion from the community were presented. For this purpose, the codes were determined:



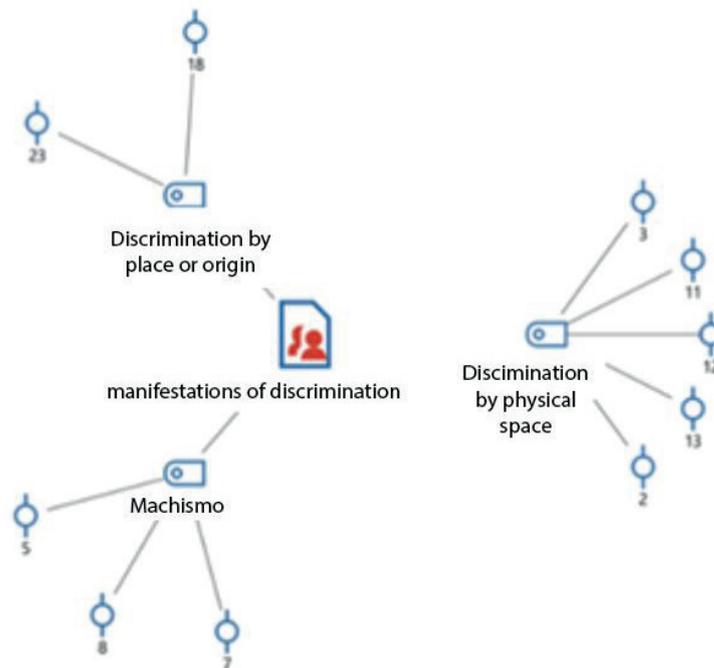
discrimination based on race or physical condition, machismo and discrimination on the basis of place or area of origin. With these codes, the

MAXMaps tool modeled a case shown in Figure 4. la herramienta MAXMapas modeló un caso que se muestra en la figura 4.

Figure 4

Model case, category experiences of discrimination during multigrade

Case model



Note. The figure shows the codes and number of the paragraph corresponding to the transcript in which they are present. In this case, the code for decontextualization of training is the most frequent (paragraphs 2, 4, 7, 28, 29, 30, 31 and 32) versus self-management of training (paragraphs 19, 20, 22, 23 and 24).

MAXMaps, MAXQDA, 2020, a multigrade personal project.

There are constant experiences of discrimination suffered by the students and the teachers in the community in the different testimonies of the interviewees. For example, they deal with racist attitudes to black students: “Most discriminate black students” (E1), condemning the attitude of parents “some parents who are racist believe better than others” (E1).

Likewise, teachers also experience discrimination due to their skin color, because they come from the highlands, or even because they

come from the rural area: “I have been told black, and actually I am black and I am very proud to be” (E4), or “I have not been discriminated by being black, but I have been discriminated because I am from the Highland” (E1). The cultural complex and the lack of recognition of its origins is also observed: “When starting to work in the institution that I currently work, they did not want me to work there, because I studied there, and they said that could not be possible” (E6).



Among other discriminatory attitudes are machismo and harassment in school: “I don’t know what it is called, but many male students think they are better than girls” (E6), “machismo, for example, they say that wives need to work in the house and men are the ones who provide food” (E7), or “one child thought he could control and give orders to the rest; and another student who discriminates two fat children because of their physical appearance” (E2).

4 Discussion

According to the data obtained, it was possible to observe that the daily life of multigrade teachers represents a complex educational reality, and it is very abandoned in Ecuador. Interculturality, inclusive education, teacher training and updating are essential challenges in rural areas.

The meaning of multigrade by teachers is characterized because it is very different from traditional teaching. Uninterest with the task they perform is due to the feeling of administrative, professional, and cultural isolation. Training and experience opportunities are the most valued aspects.

Regarding teacher training, it is possible to perform this profession without a university degree or without the proper specialization, observing a contradiction with the levels taught in multigrade schools, since they are in charge of all the levels of elementary school.

Thus, the lack of training of teachers and levels of attention mentioned by different authors such as Salazar-Gómez and Tobón (2018), who express the absence of public planning for the selection and updating of teachers, is reported. The low level of teaching competencies necessary for their development in this context is another alarm that leads to a gap by the educational administration and the uninterest and dropout of multigrade teachers

Additionally, the workload or the feeling of isolation in these situations of rurality and disconnection. In this sense, the attention and

updating of teachers is a relevant issue for the identity of the teacher and his/her aptitude to face all the responsibility, colliding otherwise as a risk factor (Calderón, 2015). Isolation goes beyond the lack of minimum resources because teachers also refer to the lack of attention from the educational administration by not recognizing their work in the type of trainings that are offered and in the schedule in which they are planned, leading to the self-management of their training. The solidarity between partners is interesting in terms of their training needs.

Cultural conditions of machismo and discrimination found in their workplaces are even more worrying. The cultural complex mentioned by Lara and Herrán (2016), along with the lack of recognition of women’s teaching work, alert the strong distance even from the legal reality that focuses on interculturality (Lara, 2019). Combining cleaning and maintenance work of the school with their role as teachers could increase the macho and welfare culture in this rural area, as pointed out by Mogollón and Solano (2011). Multigrade teachers are apparently more rejected than supported.

5 Conclusions

Being a multigrade teacher in the coast of Ecuador is a task performed by many women who suffer discrimination from a political-institutional, racial, regional and gender perspective. Discrimination is observed in social and professional isolation, as well as in the disconnection from educational policies. The absence of their situation in the proposals for professional updating confirms this fact. Additionally, there is a culture of rejection on the part of the rural community in which they coexist in their daily activities and the silence of the educational administration.

Beyond the traditional work of a teacher, they must deal with the administrative workload and the physical functioning of the center. This is a topic that promotes machismo in these areas.



The challenge for multigrade not only relies in the complex and demanding teaching responsibility, but also in the rural educational culture. The daily life of a woman who is a teacher in this context is represented from a reality silenced by the educational administration, isolation, difficult coexistence with the community, and discrimination. It would be interesting if future research would include the testimonials of parents in these rural contexts, as well as district authorities as representatives of the administration.

However, the passion, commitment, and bonds of solidarity between them are remarkable. Their professional updating is characterized by the self-management of teachers. The preparation obtained in formal educational processes seems to be insufficient and distant from the real needs that teachers require in these contexts.

The educational culture of the kawsay sumak to which Ecuador aspires as a society is far from the story of teachers whose experiences are collected in this work. Regarding knowledge and the horizontal relationship that an intercultural education and the good living seeks, it is observed an egocentric culture in public policy by discriminating against these teachers, along with egocentric behaviors like machismo and stereotyped behavior in the rural population toward multigrade teachers.

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