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## THE DIDACTICS OF AUTONOMY IN MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS

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### **Introduction: From teacher- to learner-centred classroom settings**

The shift “from teaching to learning” has become a major trend in education around the globe (Biesta 2013). It focuses on the needs of the individual learner and calls for the adaptation of teaching in classrooms to these individual needs. Instead of instructors standing in front of their classes, teachers are now considered teacher-coaches: their primary requirements focus on diagnosing and supporting their pupils’ individual learning (e.g., Reusser 2019). Student autonomy becomes a central concern within individualized teaching settings: the focus on each learner as a unique individual requires adapting teaching to individual needs and fostering pupils’ autonomy. Pupils shall become autonomous learners who are to be supported in becoming able to adapt to new challenges and to solve problems. Furthermore, autonomous learners become an important condition in individualized settings, as teachers face the challenge of coping between the individual needs of their pupils and their own limited (time) resources (Breidenstein 2014).

The focus on individual learning is accompanied by the appreciation of individual differences. The new leading ideal is no longer that of treating classes as homogeneous entities, but to focus instead on the heterogeneity of pupils. As a consequence, heterogeneous class organizations are on the rise in the Canton of Bern in Switzerland. More than 50 percent of primary school classes are organized as multigrade classes (e.g., Fiechter et al. 2021b, p. 11). Multigrade classes offer a unique insight into the strategies by which teachers deal with the expectations of adapting to the individual needs of pupils. In our ethnographic research project on multigrade teaching and learning processes (Fiechter et al. 2021a),<sup>1</sup> we placed the spotlight towards the strategies involved in creating differentiated learning events for multigrade classes. Comparing two cases from our study, this chapter focuses on the question of how teachers

differentiate in multigrade classrooms. How do these differentiating measures address pupils and how is autonomy part of the teaching concept?

To begin with, we shall contextualize our research question with a discussion of didactical differentiation in multigrade classes and then analyse the inherent conceptions of autonomy before we discuss our case study. In its conclusion, the chapter sheds light on the two opposing patterns of two teachers' pedagogical practice and manners of reasoning on the question of individualization or differentiation in classrooms, and how concepts of pupil autonomy may influence a teacher's didactic strategies.

### **Didactical differentiation in multigrade classes**

Multigrade classes have increased in the German-speaking part of the Canton of Bern over the past 20 years. This is partly due to the high number of rural communities that have been spreading across vast areas of the canton. In order to offer schools in the vicinity of those rural communities, the canton has also maintained the tradition of multigrade classes at a time when it was considered outdated. However, multigrade classes have also recently become popular in urban regions, where the discussions rather rest on ideas of progressive education (*Reformpädagogik*), to stimulate social learning and to facilitate the "child's self-activity" (Laging 2010, p. 6).<sup>2</sup>

Multigrade classes vary in the form and degree in which the different grades engage in the same tasks or topics, or simply share the same classroom (Veenman 1995, p. 319). Regardless of how teaching in multigrade classes is organized, didactical differentiation is essential. Teachers of multigrade classes must contend with the fact that the diversity of learning goals and preconditions among their pupils is more explicit and urgent. They are to choose and arrange teaching and learning content in a way that accommodates various dispositions. To this end, teachers are compelled to abandon conservative concepts of teaching, which address pupils as a homogeneous group that shares the same knowledge and skills. As Laging (2010, p. 6) observes it, multigrade classes are often introduced to foster a constructivist and individualized understanding of learning and differentiated concepts of classroom settings and teaching. Understanding learning processes in a constructivist way means addressing the preconditions of pupils so they can have access to the learning arrangements and learning goals. In order to achieve this aim, teaching didactics shall offer open and differentiating learning opportunities (e.g., Reusser, Stebler, Mandel, & Eckstein 2013, pp. 21–22). "Differentiation" is hence recommended as a key didactic concept to address any class, be it a mono- or multigrade class setting (ibid., p. 57). The concept refers to various didactic measures that "open up different approaches [...] for the learners in the same teaching situation" (ibid.). Although didactic frameworks avoid calling for complete individualization in an explicit manner, they do suggest that practitioners should aspire to "a good fit between

instructional offerings and individual usage options” (ibid.). Consequently, learner autonomy becomes an important factor within various approaches to didactical differentiation. It helps teachers in managing the differentiated classroom settings and addressing the needs of their pupils by supporting them as individuals or as groups. This constructivist understanding of learning has taken to the Swiss-German didactical discourse, and consequently to the competence-oriented curriculum *Lehrplan 21* in German-speaking cantons in Switzerland (cf. D-EDK 2014).

### **Autonomy concepts in differentiated classroom settings**

The importance of pupil autonomy is reflected in the curriculum (D-EDK 2014), where various aspects of autonomy are outlined and formulated as major learning goals. Thereby, the curriculum makes teachers responsible for fostering autonomy-related skills in their pupils (Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern 2016, p. 9). Autonomy-related learning goals are formulated as a part of the “general competences” (*Überfachliche Kompetenzen*), which are prominently positioned in the opening of the curriculum: under the sub-category of “self-competences”, items such as “Solving tasks / problems; Acquiring learning strategies, planning, implementing, and reflecting on learning and work processes” are listed (ibid., p. 15). Additionally, “methodical competences” should empower pupils to achieve academic goals, by equipping them with behavioural skills that are required to succeed in school and beyond. Taken together, the “general competences” are designed to enable pupils to become individuals who are capable of “pursuing and reflecting on prescribed and self-defined goals and values” (ibid., p. 4).

In the discussion about individualized teaching and autonomy of pupils, Ricken (2016, p. 10) describes autonomy as a social concept that leads to a specific form of subjectivation, which oscillates between “independence” and “self-legislation”. In the pedagogical context, this self-legislation translates into the appropriation of the school’s social order by the pupils. This process aims at producing school subjects who are conditioned to fulfil educational expectations and achievements. These conditions apply strongly to pupils in multigrade classes.

In order to provide customized learning opportunities for individuals, teachers of multigrade classes have to address every pupil according to his or her abilities. Thereby, to render the diversity manageable, multigrade teachers often make up groups along different categories (Fiechter et al. 2021a; also, Reh 2011, p. 47), which are addressed as comparable entities and must be able to work autonomously, without the teacher’s help and supervision for some time. In this process of clustering or differentiating, a teacher practices difference through explicit, implicit, legitimate, or illegitimate categories (ibid.). Hence, this practice exemplifies how the seemingly objective and neutral term

“heterogeneity” implies, in fact, a deeply personal choice and interpretation of certain features by the teacher (Eckermann 2017, pp. 27–28).

As a consequence, autonomy becomes a normative expectation in today’s schooling, in multigrade teaching especially, and a dominant factor among the goals of education more generally. More specifically, competences, which are linked to autonomy and methodical skills and subjugation, become part of educational assessment and achievement (Reh & Rabenstein 2012).

Thus, normalized expectations of self-regulation and autonomy lead to new or different forms of acknowledgement of what is a “normal” or “high-performance” pupil (Reh & Rabenstein 2012). Autonomy thereby becomes a precondition for being a “good achiever” (*ibid.*). Pupils are (pre-)classified along their ability to self-direct their activities and to manage and make use of the teaching and learning materials (e.g., books, worksheets) and to complete them within a defined amount of time. It becomes a central task for pupils in their classroom routine to “not only learn[ing] to learn, but also to organise an operating process” (Reh 2011, p. 48) since these “second-order activities” (*ibid.*) are benchmarks for their subjectivation and categorization and differentiation in the eyes of the teacher.

These tendencies are further accentuated in multigrade classes, where the request for teachers to differentiate and for pupils to organize their learning processes themselves is even more dominant. Following a poststructuralist perspective on subjectivation, our interest in the case studies lies in identifying the implicit or explicit concepts of autonomy teachers have and how these are applied through the differentiated treatment of pupils according to their subjectivation as autonomous or non-autonomous learners.

### **Two case studies: Different concepts and expectations of autonomy lead to different ways of teaching**

The main topic of our previous research project was the (re-)construction of common learning tasks in multigrade classes within cycle 2 (ranging from grade 3 to 6, ages 9 to 13, respectively) in different school subjects (Mathematics, German, French, English as well and Nature, Humans, Society (NMG)) (Fiechter et al. 2021a).

Data were collected through classroom observation sessions, interviews with teachers, and learning/teaching materials. The data were analysed according to the sequence-analytical method. Especially in the interviews, teachers emphasized the importance of routines and the goal for pupils to become self-directed in one form or another. Although autonomy has neither figured as a predefined keyword in the presentation of the project nor in the framing of our interview questions, it repeatedly surfaced as an important issue in the teachers’ narratives. Hence, in the following section, we shall survey these explicit and implicit references to investigate the concepts of autonomy as they emerged in the statements and behaviour of teachers. Based on descriptions of classroom situations and interviews with the teachers, we shall analyse the criteria and categories by

which the teachers differentiate the pupils in their class. In this way, we can reconstruct how pupils are addressed and what subjectivation processes they undergo.

We chose to select and compare two cases from our research project and reflect on the (different) ways in which pupil autonomy is discussed by teachers and appears in their teaching and assessment practices. Both study sites are located in remote rural areas; one classroom comprises 17 pupils ranging between grades 4 and 6 of the primary level, and the other is composed of 16 pupils between grades 3 and 6 (Fiechter et al. 2021a). Both cases are based on observations we made in classes dealing with “Nature, Humans, Society” (NMG). This school subject is considered particularly suitable for multigrade classes because its didactical concepts are seen as most developed according to the requirements for differentiated and individualized teaching (Adamina 2014; 2019; Adamina & Hild 2019; Weidmann & Adamina 2021).

Both chosen cases show how three or four grades engage in a learning process on the same topic but at different levels. Thus, teachers are required to offer different approaches to the topic, so learners find a way of accessing it. We describe how the teachers differentiate and meet the individual preconditions of their learners, how they distinguish and address different levels of the learning subject, and what understandings of autonomy resonate in these practices.

***“They don’t have to bring anything along, but they get many opportunities to train and experience self-efficiency”***

The first case study is set in a primary school that introduced multigrade settings many years ago. The class contains grades 4 to 6. After sixth grade, pupils attend a secondary school located in the nearby district capital.

The teacher whom we observed in this case works closely together with her co-teacher. They often design common teaching projects across different school subjects. These projects are differentiated along grade levels, as the teacher explains in the interview: the fourth graders encounter the main topic for the first time, whereas fifth graders have already heard about it the year before and are required to deal with the topic in more depth. The sixth graders, who are coming into contact with the subject for the third time, need to learn about it systematically and need to be able to share their knowledge with the younger pupils.

In the lessons we observed, the project topic was “Features of Life”. From this overview, the focus shifted to fauna, then was narrowed down to vertebrates. The pupils were to gain insight into the main characteristics of all vertebrates, get an overview of different vertebrate species (fish, amphibians, mammals, reptiles, birds), and learn the characteristics and the classification of selected mammals, and transfer the classification to other species. In order to evaluate their learning progress at the end of the project, the pupils were to answer questions in one-on-one interviews with the teacher. The interview questions varied

according to the grade levels; this is important, especially for the assessment of the 6th graders, who must meet specific learning goals in order to justify their selection into the differentiated levels of the secondary school.

By means of our protocols, we investigated how differentiation procedures were implemented by the teacher during class time. The following sequence is taken out of a class conversation on the “Features of Life”, which marks the opening of a whole project. The fifth and sixth graders watched a documentary on the topic beforehand, which is referred to in the following example. After the lunch break, the teacher initiated the discussion by showing a set of objects – a bouquet of flowers and a burning candle among other things – and asking whether they were alive and why, or why not. After a short discussion in coincidentally collated pairs, the teacher drew the conversation onto the classroom level, whereby she inquired what the pupils had discussed.

*T:* Then, you have talked about the candle. What do you think about it?  
Heidi, what have you been discussing?

*H:* It cannot procreate. It cannot pass on genetic information. [...]

*T:* You are right, no genetic information is passed on. The fifth- and sixth-grade pupils have heard that in the film: What does this mean, to pass on genetic information? Florian?

*F:* Um...if two creatures pass on their genes to their children.

*T:* Can you give a simple example? What have you inherited from your parents? Is there anything that you keep on hearing? The same eyes or height...?<sup>3</sup>

In this quotation (translated by us), the teacher refers to a documentary that had been shown only to the fifth and sixth graders, and she requires them to summarize one aspect for the fourth graders. Hereby, the more advanced pupils are addressed as more knowledgeable regarding a specific topic. At the same time, they are requested to pass this knowledge on to the fourth graders, under the teacher’s guidance.

This example illustrates three elements of the teacher’s involvement in subjectivation and of her conception of autonomy, respectively. First, the differentiation between the more and the less advanced is focused on a scholarly subject and merely of temporary value since each fourth grader is sure to become eventually a fifth and a sixth grader. Thereby, addressing the younger pupils as dependent and in need of instruction is only temporary and restricted to the specific scholarly knowledge at hand. By asking the pupils in higher grades to pass on information to less advanced ones, the teacher dilutes their more advanced status in the classroom by instigating the transfer of specialized knowledge. In this situation, autonomy is understood as relational and in development. Second, this form of differentiation demands some effort on the part of the older ones as well, and they are therefore not merely the teacher’s help or deputies but further supported and required to advance their own

competences by summarizing the documentary. And third, pupils in higher grades are not completely left to their own devices, but by means of a resource-intensive class conversation, their reproduction or summary of acquired knowledge is controlled by the teacher. This strategy helps to minimize the passing on of wrong concepts to the younger pupils, and their consolidation in the older pupils' minds. Thereby, she assumes responsibility for the improvement of their knowledge by understanding her role as someone who offers learning opportunities and involves the more advanced pupils in this process. She controls the correctness of the information passed on by the more advanced pupils. At the same time, she is very attentive to social cohesion within the class. As she states in the interview, she very much thinks about the composition of the groups who work together in class. In all the lessons we observed in her class, the pupils either worked together in teams or were involved in a class conversation with the teacher. It is therefore a recurrent characteristic in her teaching that the topic and learning task are almost constantly public, with group discussions and classroom conversations being dominant forms. These forms of teaching emphasize her idea that a classroom community is a training ground for understanding and practicing one's role, motivations, and autonomy. This is supported by the differentiation she makes: fourth and fifth graders are slowly acquainted with the topics and led into the roles of the ones who are familiar with and increasingly becoming experts in the given topics.

Although autonomy has not figured as a predefined keyword for the interviews, all interviewed teachers mentioned it – in one form or another – as an important issue. The teacher in the previous example tells us that in her classroom organization, pupils have many opportunities to practice autonomy. In this way, she adheres to her remark that autonomy is not a prerequisite for her pupils, but rather something that is trained in class:

*I:* What are the requirements for learners in a multigrade class?

*T:* They just have to get the opportunity to exercise autonomy. They get the opportunity to be in a group with visible differences and find their own strengths and weaknesses. They don't have to bring anything along in that sense. [A]nd...there are certainly children who are closer to it, who can do it faster [...] they get an overview very quickly. [...]

And I mean, when someone looks at my class, I've heard that a few times now, from [teaching interns]: "Wow, they are so autonomous!" [...] But I think here they also have a training ground to be[come] autonomous. [I] mean, the children arrive here with a basis already. [...] Right? They get here, after having already practiced things: being autonomous, being self-effective, and have felt, hey.... Yes!

This statement carries a specific – and particularly broad – concept of autonomy. The teacher views it as a realization of self-efficacy, in the sense of "[having an] overview" and understanding one's own effects on the surroundings. To

this end, the pupils should develop an understanding of their own resources and learn how to use them.

In this case study, the teacher also understands autonomy as something that is not to be found in equal proportion in every pupil upon their arrival in class and that needs to be practiced in everyday situations – within and beyond school. Along this line of understanding, she sees multigrade classes as a particularly good opportunity to practice but emphasizes that it would be out of place to set “self-competences” (Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern 2016, p. 15) as a precondition to succeed in this setting. The pupils ought to prove their achievements in the sixth year. Yet it clearly transpires throughout the observations that some pupils’ preconditions suit autonomy more than others. They have the possibility to contribute. In the interview, she explains, “If I set up groups, I think about who from 6th grade could take the lead, because she or he is more advanced. Sometimes I put a 5th grader next to her or him, who also knows a lot about the subject. Thus, they can support each other in coaching the younger pupils in the group. This doesn’t always work, but I try”. Autonomy is, in the teacher’s eyes, a line of development. Assumedly, she sees it as a precondition for the pupils’ understanding of where and how they can make an impact as a person.

In many ways, this case study presents an exception among what we saw during the field research: much more often, we witnessed relatively rigid subjectivations of individual pupils by teachers, which were hard to overcome over the years that the pupil spent in the classroom with the same teacher. One such case is illustrated in the next part.

***“One cannot assume to be able to work with everybody in a similar way...”***

The class involved in the second case study is made up of 16 learners from grade 3 to grade 6. The school is located in a very small community, much like the first one. The school consists of two classes, one for cycle 1 and one for cycle 2, resulting in a combination of four grades within each class. This is due to the regulation of the cantonal educational authority, which requires a minimum of children entering cycle 1 to keep a school open. Hence, although multigrade classes have a longer tradition in this community, the multigrade setting in this case is also a consequence of the decreasing population in the area.

The teacher is experienced in teaching multigrade classes. Like her counterpart in case 1, she teaches the class in a team of two, with both teachers being in charge of certain school subjects. The following example is also drawn from the classes in “Nature, Humans, Society”. The teacher makes a four-year schedule during which the topics will not be repeated. Hence, each pupil tackles each topic only once.



The lesson which we shall discuss came at the end of a two-week project phase, during which the pupils did research on an animal of their choice. The learners were encouraged to choose an animal that they were not yet well acquainted with. The scale of the assessment of the student production was, like in the first case, differentiated along grade levels: the third and fourth graders were to produce posters, whereas the fifth and sixth graders were to give a PowerPoint presentation in front of the class. The criteria for the assessment process accordingly differ as well. The fifth and sixth graders are to be able to research the internet for information about their animals, identify similarities and differences with other species, and recognize the common structure of the skeleton of animals. The third and fourth graders are expected to demonstrate the ability to recognize relevant information in texts about their animals, summarize, structure it to be presentable on a poster, and complete it with pictures they collected from the internet. Accordingly, the teacher divides the class into two subgroups (third/fourth year and fifth/sixth year). This way she saves time, as she states in the interview: “I’m just less strict with the 5th than with the 6th. It seems to me that if I always prepared everything fourfold, at some point my time is also limited”. The difference between third and fourth graders, as well as between fifth and sixth graders is made by the extent to which the teacher provides content support, depending on her individual assessment of each pupil’s needs. It is thus a more informal and adaptive line of differentiation.

The (self-directed) task process is supported by a manual that each pupil received initially: it is designed differently for the two groups (third/fourth graders and fifth/sixth graders) and describes step by step what to do and contains the evaluation criteria, so pupils know what they need to pay attention to. Classroom observation shows that the teacher’s assistance is mainly focused on formal aspects and technical skills like printing pictures downloaded from the internet.

Beyond the grade levels, this teacher – like many others in our sample – regularly differentiates between “weaker” and “stronger” pupils within each grade. These subjectivations seem almost unavoidable to minimize complexity in multigrade classes, and they correspond to the desire for differentiating beyond the grade level. Yet, they are sensitive from the point of view of equal opportunity, as they offer room for subjective and opaque bias on the part of the teacher.

Another excerpt from the interview with this teacher shows how she applies these categories in the process guide she had handed to the pupils to monitor and “self-direct” their projects:

*I:* How did the process manual seem to work out in your opinion?

*T:* So, I certainly helped them in the process. They also kept asking me, “Where am I now [in the process of tasks]?”, “What do I need to do

next?” But I do have the feeling that it helped them. Because otherwise I would have had some [pupils] who would have just been cutting things out, and then cutting them again at school... um.... I have simply experienced that afterwards [without a process guideline] they lose focus on the content, especially the weaker ones.

In her description, the “weaker” pupils are likely to lose focus of the underlying – or main – objective of the task at hand. Often, the full characterization of what makes a pupil “weak” or “strong” remains vague, relative, and derived from a comparison with fellow pupils. Generally, however, this ascription includes autonomy as a central component. It is understood as the ability to remain on track and to work along the pre-scripted procedures. In the present case, these aspired methodical skills and autonomy are illustrated by the process manual, which is meant to offer support for those who (self-)identify as “weaker”. With regard to her expectations of pupil autonomy, another statement by the teacher suggests her pragmatism:

*I:* How have your teaching practices changed since you operate in a multi-grade setting?

*T:* Now, I certainly benefit from my experience. Or also from knowing the subjects and the teaching materials [Lehrmittel]. I know certain things, certain processes (...). That helps me. And from having acquired certain things in this way. Or also the pupils. They know how things work with me. They also know exactly where to find things. All of that has now become very structured, and I think that helps a lot, when operating in a multigrade classroom.

This explanation shows how classroom routines, or second-order activities (Reh 2011, p. 48; see chapter 3), are highly valued and afforded considerable preparation by this teacher. This seems necessary to keep up her resources for what she perceives as the core of her teaching efforts, namely, to help pupils systematically prepare for their presentations.

The following case is exceptional in this class in that it presents the individual, and externally – pathologically – legitimated, subjectification of a pupil as one with a learning disability. However, it presents the ambivalence of individualized subjectifications in the form of reduced learning – and autonomy – expectations.

In the last lesson of the project phase, each pupil gives a presentation about the animal he/she has done research on for the past two weeks. The presentation of one pupil in the sixth grade, Rolf, especially stood out. He has a diagnosis justifying reduced learning goals and therefore is receiving a lot of support for autonomous tasks. He finishes his presentation about the ibex with a very interesting anecdote about the ibex’s disappearance from the Swiss territory and how smugglers reintroduced them across the border from Italy.

- R: "That was my presentation. Are there any questions?"  
*Some hands are raised:* "How were the ibexes stolen from the Italians?"  
 R: "I'm not sure, but I believe they were caught and transported across the Alps".

The class applauds, Rolf returns to his seat. The teacher casually adds that although she is not an ibex expert either, she doubts that they were stolen, but thinks they were rather probably reintroduced by a consensual contract with the Italians.

After the lesson, we asked the teacher to elaborate on her impression of Rolfs' performance in the lesson that had just ended.

- T: I find now, for example, Rolf, [... h]e is really, really tremendously weak. And that's for him, what he showed today, for me, that's amazing. Really. That he was able to stand up like that, he was able to say the sentences fluently– so really, that's a [grade] six for him as a RiLZ\* pupil, for me.  
 I: Also compared to what, or how he presented last time? So really on an individual scale?  
 T: Yeah. He'd never done a presentation at all. Like that. And that's for me now so, yeah, that's for me the biggest success. She has also just now said that – [...] the IF teacher.\*\* She has also helped him a little bit.  
 \* RiLZ: Reduced individual learning goals \*\* Remedial teacher

This excerpt shows how this teacher evaluates a pupil according to an individualized scale, as she reflects on his performance. Her statement furthermore discloses that the teacher neither has any expectation concerning his autonomy in the preparation nor regarding the performance or the content of the presentation.

Despite receiving the highest grade on his own scale, the teacher does not compare him with his undiagnosed and/or uninhibited classmates. This may be regarded as a truly individualized accompaniment of a pupil's progress. Furthermore, the fact that he has received help from a remedial teacher (*Heilpädagogin*), *a priori* dismisses him from competing with the rest of the class who have received only as much support as is standard for their respective grade. Within this individualized setting, the pupil in question has a benchmark on his own due to his classification as a pupil with special needs. His medical diagnosis is transformed into such a staunch pedagogical subjectification that he is unlikely to get rid of it. This classification prevents him from opportunities of showing what he would be capable of achieving and being an expert in something autonomously and therefore to move beyond the

teacher's expectations tied to his classification. He will remain a pupil who is unable to learn anything without the teacher's help.

In this example, a teacher categorizes a pupil's autonomy *a priori*. After the task is completed, it is again used as a vital element to the teachers' evaluation of a pupil's scholarly performance. This double usage of autonomy as an essentializing criterion of differentiation and evaluation can lead to a hopeless spiral of marginalization, as this case illustrates.

Rolf has shown a lot of personal interest and effort to do research and present his findings on the ibex. However, the teacher's concluding comment in class negates, or at least puts into question, what Rolf has researched on his own, while at the same time dismissing it as unimportant. By this act, she neglects and denigrates his intellectual autonomy and his capability of being an autonomous learner.

This shows that the teacher prioritizes the methodical skills and class-routine aspects of autonomy over creative engagement with the subject matter. The acquisition and mastery of second-order activities (organizing a working process along required routines, procedures, rituals, and rules) are clearly prioritized over first-order activities, such as the substantial engagement with the learning task itself (Reh, Rabenstein & Idel 2011; see also: Reh 2013, p. 48).

### ***Contrasting the case studies***

Autonomy becomes a precondition for being a "good achiever" (Reh & Rabenstein, 2012). Facets of autonomy constitute the general competences formulated in the curricula, and they play a decisive role in the selection of different performance groups at the end of primary school. Our analysis provides insight into two distinct forms and degrees in which the autonomy of pupils is tolerated, promoted, or even assumed as a prerequisite in multigrade class settings, and the kind of subjectivation resulting from a teacher's perspective.

The teacher in case 1 sees her teaching and the multigrade setting as a practice ground to develop autonomy by cooperating and conversing with classmates who are older or more autonomous and in this sense act as role models. She invests considerable time in classroom conversations that include all learners across the three grades. Thereby, the whole class is involved in the production of shared knowledge, and the subject matter remains the central focus of discussion. Since the topics are repeated year after year, pupils have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the topic and consciously observe their own improvement over the three years. Her concept of autonomy implies personal commitment to class content, thus, first-order activities (Reh 2013, p. 48). Conversely, teacher 2 prepares a lot of support material, so that pupils can work towards two different target levels on their own. The work process and teacher support vary by grade and additionally by the expected degree of autonomy. As she explains, "weaker" pupils get lost if they

are not intensely supported. Since she plans her programme over four years, pupils encounter each topic only once and cannot revisit and observe their own knowledge development regarding this precise matter. This case exposes the scope of resources that is demanded of a teacher in designing, accompanying, and assessing the individual learning process of each pupil. The teacher reacts to this challenge by clearly prioritizing method over content: she is therefore not able to absorb and appreciate the content quality of the product – not only in the case of the pupil with reduced learning goals. Instead, the final product, consisting of the presentation of the completed work, gets recognition solely for its methodical achievements, not leaving much room for the subject matter to be commented upon. There is also no classroom discussion on commonalities or connections between the individual pieces of work, or among different topics worked on together as a class. In this case, autonomy refers to second-order activities.

In the first case, the teacher creates opportunities for pupils to experience and practice autonomy by encountering the topic repeatedly, to become aware of their own progress. They are asked to add new knowledge to their existing ideas and to make them all converge in a playful way, while the teacher shows interest in both the factual and fantastic elements of their creations. The pupils work in teams a great deal and assessments are conducted in a private manner so that the differences between them are not so obvious, except for the grade levels, e.g., the expectation for sixth graders to act as role models. The older pupils are expected to have the upper hand when it comes to knowledge and are therefore required to support the younger pupils by sharing information. In the examined sequence, this peer-to-peer teaching format is closely accompanied and controlled by the teacher so as not to deputize real teaching responsibility. This subjectification as older or younger pupil is temporary since all pupils move through each grade level over the course of the three school years.

The teacher of the second case study instead enacts predefined subjectifications through her teaching and classroom activities. In this case, categories of “weaker” and “stronger” pupil within a grade level and/or a pathological diagnosis are constantly resorted to as scale reference for her interactions with individual pupils. Thereby, autonomy acts among the parameters for their expected performance, it defines the form and extent of teacher support and, consequently, the highest achievable mark. This concept of autonomy weighs heavily on methodical competences as guiding principles. It seems in line with the idea that pupils learn methods to follow individualized goals and interests. As we have observed, however, the individualizing part of the topical content remains in a very restricted and predefined range and is only marginally taken into account in the assessment of competences. It is also quite likely that the teacher in example two understands her efforts as a gradual build-up of pupils’ autonomy, in which pupils must first prove themselves as autonomous in the form of adapting to school norms and techniques. Only at a further stage – and

only if the teacher has distinctive resources to allow and appreciate it – may they indulge in a kind of autonomy that includes the pursuit of own authentic ideas, goals, and values.

### **Conclusion: The didactics of autonomy**

Autonomy is understood – in parts – as something that needs to be expanded and practiced in school. Yet it also serves as the basic element of differentiation among learners and therefore becomes a prerequisite, especially in multigrade classes. Multigrade classes emphasize the fact that a “narrowly guided class lesson” (Reusser 2019, p. 159) is no longer a teaching option, and pupil autonomy becomes a central condition for successful teaching and learning (Ricken, Casale & Thompson 2016). This requires teachers to be highly flexible, agile, and well-prepared in order to adapt learning tasks and classroom settings to a diverse set of learning subjects (Reusser 2019, p. 159). In response, many teachers differentiate along group and/or individual categories through both formal and informal – subjective – markers of distinction. The case studies make it clear that the practice of differentiation by the teachers is based to a considerable degree on their informal, implicit, and highly variable concepts and expectations of pupil autonomy. In the first example, the teacher implies autonomy as something attainable, and she sees herself as responsible for fostering it in the classroom. She addresses and subjectivizes the pupils as young people who are gaining knowledge and autonomy through common interaction. Meanwhile, the second case shows how expectations of autonomy are mainly based on working methods (research and presentation). Subjectivation occurs through her estimations of individual learning preconditions, in reference to a grade or diagnosis.

To name this implicit differentiation practice, both teachers address groups of pupils as “stronger” or “weaker” or more or less advanced. The use of these categorizations varies in strict implementation and relevance between the two teachers. In both cases, however, they gain importance when transition into secondary school is imminent. The case studies have shown that the prevalent need for clustering pupils together gives teachers’ personal criteria considerable weight. The power that lies in a teacher’s subjectivation ought therefore not to be underestimated, since these ascriptions are at times hard to shake off during a pupil’s educational journey and “render each pupil more public in their singularity” (Reh 2011, p. 47). The conceptions of autonomy resorted to by teachers strongly shape how they support and evaluate individual pupils. From an equal opportunity perspective, therefore, it seems imperative to elaborate on the concept, its sub-concepts, and the specific responsibilities of a teacher in promoting the acquisition of the relevant competences, as well as the limits to this responsibility.

Generally, it can be assumed that it is more difficult to teach autonomy in the classroom if it is seen as a prerequisite and a matter of constant lagging-behind of some pupils. Conversely, when it is understood as an explicit mandate in the curriculum, teachers may be more likely to address it as a learning objective. More pragmatic and clearer distinctions among the autonomy facets in the curriculum could help make autonomy a more feasible school-based endeavour and turn it into a less secretive, subjective matter. This will require, among other things, to explicitly distinguish between first and second-order activities, and to work on how they are to be valued and assessed.

## Notes

- 1 The project called “*Die Konstruktion des Unterrichtsgegenstands im jahrgangsübergreifenden Fachunterricht auf der Mittelstufe*” (“The construction of a learning subject in mixed-grade classrooms”) (17 s 0001 01) was funded by the PHBern and carried out from August 1, 2018, until July 31, 2020.
- 2 Quotations from the literature, fieldnotes, and interviews are translated by the authors.
- 3 All names are pseudonyms.

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