

# Comparing Classroom Activities

## *International Comparison of Qualitative Pedagogical Studies*

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### Introduction

During the last decades, qualitative international comparative studies, including case studies and classroom studies, have gained increasing attention (Alexander, 1999; 2009; Broadfoot, 1999; Phillips, 1999; 2009; Ragin, 1987). Robin Alexander's (2000) major comparative work *Culture & Pedagogy – International Comparison in Primary Education* (hereafter shortened to *Culture and Pedagogy*) and subsequent articles are major works within this research methodology. They are also important sources of inspiration and knowledge acquisition in this article; hence, Alexander's stances and arguments are highlighted along with those of other scholars. However, the main example related to this research project is *International Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion* (Johnsen et al, 2020; WB 04/06, 2006) with participating teams from the Universities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tuzla, Zagreb and Oslo<sup>28</sup>.

The intention of this article is to discuss possibilities and problems related to international comparative qualitative studies as they appear in the field's expanding literature. The article starts with one of the most typical problems of international comparative research; the problem of naïve borrowing and the question how this can be avoided. A main issue in the current discourse

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28 Hereafter the joint project (Johnsen et al, 2020) is referred to as *Inclusive practices* and Alexander's (2000) is called *Five cultures*.

on qualitative research concerns generation of evidence. This topic is discussed in the article: *Qualitative Research – Does it work? A Discussion of Qualitative Educational Studies and Generation of Evidence* (Johnsen, 2020). The article focuses on Guba and Lincoln’s “map for evaluating the quality of qualitative research” with its two main pillars; trustworthiness and authenticity, each having a number of criteria and evaluation tools developed by them and adapted in a steadily increasing number of articles (Guba, 1981; Johnsen, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986/2007). One related topic gaining increasing attention concerns the relationship between researcher and research. It is called “insider-outsider positioning” and is topic of discussion in this article. The last half of the article is an account of the trustworthiness and authenticity of *Inclusive Practices*.

## Avoiding naïve borrowing in international comparative education

International comparative educational research is based on a belief that lending and borrowing policies, research-based knowledge and practices all contribute to educational development; in other words, countries and cultures learn from each other. However, countries and cultures consist of complex networks of contextual differences and power relations. Hence, a major problem of trustworthiness and authenticity in international comparative research concerns naïve borrowing. For example, when comparing teaching practices, which is an activity on a societal micro level (Alexander, 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Johnsen et al, 2020), the challenge is to avoid naïve borrowing, which means to borrow examples between cultures without taking into consideration the previously mentioned networks of differences, including policy, economy and other relevant factors. Supporting this warning, Phillips (2009) points out that the transfer of ideas, practices or policies needs to meet the following conditions:

1. ‘Borrowing’ should be seen as a purposive phenomenon, where deliberate attempts are made to learn from the foreign example and to ‘import’ ideas in the shape of policy and practice into the ‘home’ system.
2. A significant feature of the examination of foreign approaches to educational problems, whether or not they are ‘borrowable’, is that they help us to better understand problems ‘at home’.

3. In analysing ways in which borrowing takes place, it is essential to tackle the difficult question of context and its appropriateness in terms of accommodating imported policies and practices (Phillips, 2009: 1073).

In a brief review of the history of comparative education written in the early nineteenth century, Phillips (2009) describes how borrowing policies and practices have been both glorified and scandalised. He points out that contextualisation is a key factor in the process of borrowing. Different constructions have been developed such as differentiating analysis between stages (Phillips & Ochs, 2004) or between levels, including national, local and school levels, as a means to avoid naïve borrowing.

In recent years, rapid technological development has brought countries and continents closer together into what has been called “the global community”. Accordingly, educational comparisons have developed into global or regional evaluation programmes as well as coordination- and cooperation programmes, such as *The Bologna Process* of European Higher Education (<https://eua.eu/issues/10:bologna-process.html>), which is a coordination program, and *Programme for International Student Assessment* (<https://www.pisa.no/>), which is a large-scale international comparative evaluation project testing pupils’ performance in central school subjects. Are these programmes applied in accordance with Phillips’ (2009) three recommendations above? The emerging large-scale evaluation programmes are implemented in accordance with high-level standard quantitative methodology. The results are then judged reliable, valid and statistically generalizable – and they are made available in order to award countries and local cultures their results in the form of “international standards” and “best practices”. There are, however, growing concerns that this kind of cross-national lending and borrowing strategy within international comparative discourse will cause a host of problems, such as:

- a) the tendency to place a one-sided focus on educational politics
  - b) a one-sided belief in comparative research based on natural-scientific methodology and the use of measurable “international standards”
  - c) a weak emphasis on the importance of contextual factors in comparative borrowing
  - d) the use of “international standards” and “best practices” as relevant measures for the process of teaching and learning at school
- a) The problem of one-sided attention on educational policies has a long tradition from an earlier focus on comparing educational macro levels, as discussed

by Phillips (2009). This problem is strengthened and made more sophisticated through the cross-national lending and borrowing strategy referred to above. However, Broadfoot (2009) also has an optimistic belief in turning away from this one-sided focus, pointing to the eighty articles of the *International Handbook of Comparative Education*:

... in place of the previously more typical focus on education systems and policies, national contexts and international surveys, we are increasingly seeing bold attempts to reconfigure the epistemology of the field: to apply hitherto untapped theoretical perspectives; to conceive new units of analysis and to widen the range of building blocks that form its focus, such as micro comparative studies of classroom life (Broadfoot, 2009: 1249).

Unfortunately, more recent critics have argued that as yet, the turn away from one-sided comparative macro-analyses does not seem to have reached relevant aspects of “classroom life”, as Broadfoot (2009) hoped.

b) Steiner-Khamsi (2014) and Sutoris (2018) characterize measurable “international standards for best practices” found in large quantitative international comparative studies as “thin descriptions”, to use Geertz’ (1937) qualitative and ethnographic characteristic. They argue that classroom implementation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully grasped by using surveys alone. On the contrary, in-depth interviews and classroom observations are the methods to be used here. This view is shared in Attia and Edge (2017), Dhillon and Thomas (2019); Hellowell (2006); Johnsen et al (2020); McNess and Crossley (2015); Milligan (2016) and Shah and Quinn (2016).

c) In accordance with the above arguments, “best practices” of large-scale global and regional programmes place a weak emphasis on contextual factors. Offering “best practices” directly indicates to lend naïve or ‘thin’ descriptions of practices. The other aspect of application -- borrowing results from these comparative studies -- needs to be translated from the large-scale study and adapted in accordance with the complex context of a receiving local culture. This action then calls for qualitative studies in order to explore the introduced practices’ suitability to the local culture (Alexander, 2012; 2015; 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Sutoris, 2018).

d) Does the conceptual landscape developed in the systems of “international standards” and “best practices” meet the everyday practice of the teaching-learning process? Alexander (2015) argues that they do not.

## Alexanders' international comparative pedagogy and *Inclusive practices*

Robin Alexander (2004; 2009) elaborates on an approach which he calls “international comparative pedagogy” (note: not “education”), pointing out his interest in studies of the many aspects of teaching-learning processes. Studies of activities taking place on the micro-level – within the school and classroom – are his starting point and prioritized research arena. However, in order to situate findings on a micro-level within different cultures and avoid naïve borrowing, Alexander (2009) develops a three-part framework dealing with a) the abovementioned micro-level teaching-learning activities; b) pedagogical ideas, values and beliefs; and c) curriculum from macro to micro-level with general intermediate levels. He argues that each of the three levels may need different methodological tools. In his major work, *Five Cultures* (2000), Alexander compares pedagogy in five countries on three continents, starting with an account of the context, the macro-level, in the studies. Thus, descriptions of educational systems, policy and history are structured in separate chapters for each of the participating countries; France, Russia, India, United States of America and England. In a large section of the study – describing and discussing classroom activities – Alexander applies another structure. Here, findings from all five countries are discussed in a cross-cultural comparison (Alexander, 2000: 265). These discussions are structured in accordance with a model or set of predetermined main aspects based on Alexander’s desire to develop not only a holistic but also a multifaceted construction of teaching-learning processes found in the five countries’ schools. Alexander’s (2000: 325; 2004; 2009) general or *generic model of teaching* consists of the following categories or aspects:

**Frame:** Space – pupil organization – time – curriculum – routine, rule and ritual

**Form:** Lesson

**Act:** Task – activity – interaction – judgement

Each aspect is selected through a line of reasoning. Alexander (2009) is open towards how to apply the aspects to research. He states that it is a matter of choice a) what research questions to formulate or what to explore; b) how to analyze each of them; c) what if any kind of sub-aspects to construct; d) what research methodologies are relevant; and e) what kind of research tools are useful in order to answer the selected questions. Thus, Alexander’s framework for comparative pedagogy is a thorough and flexible framework, or construc-

tion, that may be applied to a variety of relevant research issues. *Five Cultures* (2000) is an example of how a pre-determined framework contributes to structure and clarify cross-cultural analysis and discussions such as the studies conducted by Alexander and his research team in the five different countries. The large sections of *Five Cultures* (2000) that describe and discuss empirical findings are supplemented by chapters where Alexander argues, accounts for and documents the underlying theoretical foundation “in conversation with” other scholars – those with whom he disagrees as well as those who support his arguments. Together with the concluding reflections, these chapters connect the cross-cultural discussions of findings related to teaching-learning processes on micro-level with macro-level; or pedagogy with culture in a broad sense. Thus, *Five Cultures* (2000) does not contain one separate chapter that focuses on connecting findings in the framework’s three parts – frame, form and act – described by Alexander (2009), but several discussions that take place across these parts throughout the book. He concludes with the following statement concerning the three parts’ comparison:

The book has engaged with primary education at the level of system, school and classroom, so it may also speak to the condition of those who work at these levels: policy-makers and administrators, school heads, principals and directors, parents, teachers. However, the levels are not discrete – pedagogy manifests the values and demands of nation, community and school as well as classroom – and no level in this model can be understood fully without reference to the others, so to extract this or that policy or practice without regard to how it fits into the total picture would be ill advised (Alexander, 2000: 563-564).

In this way, Alexander (2000) sums up how he avoids naïve borrowing. In which way is Alexander’s line of arguments relevant for *Inclusive Practices*? This important question is addressed below through the clarification of two other crucial concepts.

Referring to both his earlier international comparative research project, *Five Cultures* (2000), and later works, Alexander asks: “Why no pedagogy ...” (Alexander, 2015:254)? His answer contains a reflected proposal to a conceptual framework for the teaching-learning process that may indicate empirical possibilities for international comparative classroom studies. They consist of two main pillars:

*Teaching as an act:* Planned acts – interactive actions – judgements concerning organisational, curricular, epistemic and temporal elements

*Teaching as ideas:* Values, beliefs, theories, evidence, policies and justifications on classroom – system/political – cultural/societal levels

Alexander states that teaching as an act identifies the cross-cultural invariants of teaching, while teaching as ideas addresses the cultural aspects of meaning. In this way, his conceptual framework contributes to adapting a borrowed phenomenon to a local community and school by placing it in the local conceptual landscape – as a local “thick description”. Alexander’s (2015) proposal about the development of a practice-near and educational-professional terminology moves in the same direction as in his previous works (2000; 2004; 2009). *Inclusive Practices* (Johnsen et al, 2020) follows a similar logical path. The issue or main question of the joint international comparative classroom research is:

How does school teach in accordance with pupils’ different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process (recourses, barriers and dilemmas)?

The research is based on a pre-determined pedagogical construction consisting of seven interrelated didactic-curricular main aspects, or themes, as a joint frame for the qualitative research processes and product; through field studies, compilation and conclusive discussions. The main aspects are knowledge of the pupil/s – assessment – educational intentions – educational content – methods and organisation – communication – care (See Alexander, 2000, and above in this section; Braun & Clark, 2006; Johnsen et al, 2020). This is a practice-near study of inner activities at school focusing on the abovementioned seven joint aspects on micro-level and “embraced” by discussions of contextual similarities and differences on macro-level. Thus, similar to Alexander’s construction, *Inclusive Practices* a) applies a set of pedagogical concepts that are generally understood and accepted within international educational research; and b) accounts for a number of relevant contextual differences and similarities. Hence, findings presented and discussed in the rapport are situated within common pedagogical conceptual frames and contextual diversity, as pedagogical and “local-international” thick descriptions.

As this section indicates, naïve borrowing is a recurring problem within international comparative studies. The problem concerns research credibility regardless of whether it applies to quantitative or qualitative studies, and there is good reason to strive to avoid it. Constructing research process, compilation and reporting on *Inclusive Practices* have therefore focused on avoiding naïve borrowing. Hence, placing findings in the pedagogical and cultural context as thick descriptions is one of a number of research methodological details. However, this is an important detail concerning trustworthiness and authenticity of a qualitative international comparative research project such as this (Alexander, 2015; Johnsen, 2020; Johnsen et al, 2020).

## Insider-outsider aspects of international comparative qualitative studies

Another important topic of continuous discussion is the researcher's relationship with the research. Is the researcher an insider or an outsider? Which is the preferred role? The so-called "inside-outside question" is a central issue connected to participatory roles, power relations and hence validity within qualitative research in general, and qualitative international comparative research in particular, as is the case in *Inclusive Practices*. Accordingly, *Inclusive Practices* is also used as an example in the subsequent summative discussion of current arguments concerning the insider-outsider issue.

Historically, the outside researcher has been considered as preferably objective and neutral. However, Merton's (1972: 21) knowledge-sociological arguments for a structural conception of insiders as members of not only one, but several groups and collectives as well as occupants of specified social statuses, extends the use of the concepts from static dichotomy to dynamic and multifaceted concepts; hence, it changes the discourse. His arguments are expanded upon in several disciplines; among them educational sciences. There are ongoing efforts to clarify and further develop Merton's conception of the researcher's multifaceted roles. Thus, the static distinguishing of the researcher as either outsider or insider is changing into a perception of a dynamic identity shift in accordance with situation, role and responsibility. This new perception describes the positioning as an insider or outsider or somewhere in-between. Several terms are used in order to characterise this "newly discovered" dynamic positioning, such as the abovementioned "in-between position", "the third space, the researcher as "the stranger", "the other" or "the home comer" (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Hellowell, 2006; McNess et al, 2015; Milligan, 2016). The many characteristics of the researcher's position to the research cover what might be called a continuum between the insider and the outsider at the outer edges. Both these roles are recognised and attached to different characteristics. Hellowell (2006: 487) argues that:

"... ideally the researcher should be both inside *and* outside the perceptions of the 'researched'. That is to say, that [...] both empathy *and* alienation are useful qualities for a researcher.

Hellowell's two aspects may also be described as closeness and distance. A joint trend in current developments is the attention to the dynamic character of the insider-outsider as being layers of complexity and fluidity in



different roles; “the inside, outside, upside, down”, as Thomson and Gunter (2011) metaphorically describe them. Another way of putting it is as discretely varying shades of “insiderism” and “outsiderism”, while the terms “in-between” and “the third space” signal a possible third dimension (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Hellowell, 2006; McNess et al, 2015; Milligan, 2016; Thomson & Gunter, 2011).

Co-researching is a recurring issue in the inside-outside debate. This is of special relevance in international comparative qualitative studies since they as a rule consist of more than one researcher. Studies referred to here, discuss inside-outside aspects in co-researching between researchers and assistants or students as well as between local and foreign researchers (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Hellowell, 2006; McNess et al, 2015; Milligan, 2016). In *Culture and Pedagogy* (2000) Alexander leads a team of research colleagues from the UK in comparative classroom studies on several continents. In *Inclusive Practices* (Johnsen et al, 2020) Johnsen coordinates research teams from seven European universities. Dhillon and Thomas (2019) point out that different researchers may have abilities “to see phenomena through different cultural lenses” and thus add valuable information to a study. They highlight co-researching as a methodology that includes co-interpretation and co-analysing. This is in accordance with *Inclusive Practices* where the cooperation between the research teams also implies co-construction, co-compilation and co-disseminating in a dynamic sharing of responsibility (Johnsen et al, 2020). In *Inclusive Practices* as in other studies, local researchers have cultural as well as local language skills and responsibilities as insiders (Attia & Edge, 2017; Caretta, 2014; Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Hellowell, 2006; Johnsen et al, 2020; McNess et al, 2015; Milligan, 2016; Thomson & Gunter, 2011, Vulliamy & Webb, 2009). Other researchers may have different types of insider as well as outsider knowledge, experience and responsibility such as those found within pedagogy, curriculum and didactics or methodology (Alexander, 2010; McNess et al, 2015). Central features of qualitative research are the unique ideographic elements of phenomena which, when seen from different insider perspectives or perceived in different contexts, illuminate otherwise hidden aspects of its complexity. This is crucial in international comparative qualitative research in order to reveal contextual differences and thus prevent naïve lending and borrowing of research findings. Consequently, it is important that not only researchers but also all participants in a study have a voice in the inquiry as well as in review of **trustworthiness and authenticity** (Johnsen, 2020; Lin-

coln& Guba, 1986/2007). Within educational sciences, there are several groups of informants in addition to the researchers, including professional teachers and special needs educators, parents and pupils as well as other stakeholders such as local and national officials and politicians. *Inclusive Practices* has relevant informants from all these groups.

As indicated above, an important reason for co-researching is the need for targeted and trustworthy contextual studies. Thus, McNess et al (2015) point out the following:

Within the field of international and comparative education studies, new methodologies have been employed to develop more contextually relevant understandings when working cross-culturally. The active development of collaborative and inter-disciplinary international research teams has sought to harness the strengths of combining multiple linguistic and cultural perspectives, not only in the collection and analysis of data, but also, importantly, in identifying key issues and appropriate research designs. Such collaborations make it possible to investigate phenomena across national and cultural boundaries, addressing issues of conceptual and linguistic significance from both the inside and the outside and, in so doing, seek to enhance contextual relevance  
McNess et al (2015: 298)

The article proceeds with examples of contextually relevant co-researching. *Inclusive Practices* fits perfectly as an example of this relevancy, as it has a) different research teams with first-hand language and cultural knowledge – including research-cultural experience; and b) a permanent project interpreter mediating between the collaborating teams during the entire cooperation period (Johnsen, 2014b; 2014d; Johnsen et al, 2020). Thus, participants' and researchers' first-hand knowledge and experiences within different contexts contribute to envisioning the diversity of emic, subjective perspectives of complex phenomena in their different insider roles, thereby strengthening the truthfulness of the research. The insider perspectives – including thick, contextual descriptions – are related to theoretical and methodological reflections and conceptualisations. In this way, insiders' meanings are balanced with outsiders' research-based interpretations, reflections and formulations (Gall et al, 2007; Geertz, 1997; Williams & Morrow, 2009). In this process, participating researchers may move between different insider and outsider roles, as discussed above. This is the case in *Inclusive Practices*.

As indicated above, the insider-outsider dimensions of international qualitative comparative methodology span an area from the insider's subjective diversity – even the individual “fluent” life-story of diversity – to the dialogism-

based communicative common space. In their attempt to re-examine insider-outsider discourse in view of these aspects, McNess and colleagues (2015) pose the question whether Gadamer's hermeneutics and Bakhtin's dialogism can act as mediating tools between the cultural and linguistic meaning of insiders' and outsiders' contributions to a common interpretation. They ask a) if Gadamer's (1975) hermeneutically conscious pre-judgement and historically embeddedness can enable researchers to disclose questions that have not yet been asked and search for a fusion of horizons between the insiders' meanings and outsiders' conceptualisations; and b) if Bakhtin's (1986) dialogism can support Gadamer's hermeneutic fusion of horizons? McNess and colleagues quote Bakhtin as follows for discussion purposes:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning. ... We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we see answers to our questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths ... such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin, 1986: 7 in McNess et al, 2015: 306).

Neither the short references to Gadamer and Bakhtin in McNess' and colleagues' texts nor this text "guarantee a complete fusion of horizons" between insiders and outsiders. However, an in-depth understanding of their texts reveals methodologies that may function as mediating tools of historically embedded cultural and linguistic meaning. Rommetveit, who is also a pioneer in dialogism, points to the two Continental European epistemologists and moral philosophers, Gadamer and Buber, arguing the following:

In their reflections upon the ideal dialogue, they are both strongly concerned with the aspect of linguistically mediated meaning related to epistemic co-responsibility and co-authorship. Buber calls the attitude one has to one's conversation partner in the ideal dialogue an "I-You" attitude, and the significant distinction between an "I-You" conversation and an "I-It" communication appears to be this: During an "I-You" conversation, you meet your conversation partner as a fellow human being, a subject, a potential co-author of your own biography (Rommetveit, 2014: 56).

The communicative act is further illustrated by Buber's (1947) discussion of the notion of 'inclusion', which he relates to the concepts of 'dialogue' and 'dialogical relation', stating that 'inclusion' is:

... the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfilment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates. Its elements are, first, a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons, second, an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates, and, third, the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other.

A relation between persons that is characterised in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation (Buber, 1947: 124-125).

Thus, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Rommetveit and Buber – pioneers in hermeneutics, dialogism and humanistic philosophy – argue that the dialogue between all participants is not only a methodological tool but also an ethical principle in qualitative research.

This insider-outsider discussion highlights researchers' many-sided relations to research colleagues and participants as well as the research itself. This point is especially relevant in international comparative qualitative studies where several cultures, and even nations, participate. The discussion emphasizes a) the range between insiders' subjective diversity and the search for a fusion of interpretations into a dialogue-based communicative common space; b) development of researchers' awareness, reflexivity and dialogue throughout the research process, from preparation to dissemination, or "how to be(come) a reflexive researcher" (Attia & Edge, 2017; McNess et al, 2015; Rommetveit, 2014 ); and c) a subsequent contribution to the trustworthiness of research (Johnsen, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986/2007). *Inclusive Practices* is mentioned as an example related to several dimensions in the discussion of insider-outsider aspects. In the following, a more coherent summary of the research is presented with a focus on trustworthiness and authenticity.

## Trustworthiness and authenticity in *Inclusive practices*

In the following sections, the trustworthiness of *Inclusive practices* is summarily discussed. In everyday language, *trustworthiness* simply means to deserve trust (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trustworthy>). In research terminology, trustworthiness means rigor, unbiasedness, quality, even "goodness". The concept is applied since the dawn of current qualitative research tradition and relates to validity or confidence in information accuracy

(Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson, 1997; Loh, 2013; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1995; 2006). Several of these texts refer to the classical article of Egon G. Guba (1981), where he discusses how to judge or evaluate "... the trustworthiness of inquiries conducted within the naturalistic inquiry paradigm. (...) also referred to as the phenomenological, anthropological, or ethnographic ..." methodology (Guba, 1981:75). Adding case studies to the mentioned qualitative designs, he has mentioned several of the qualitative main approaches. Guba's important contribution to the field consists of his systematic breakdown into four aspects of trustworthiness; a) credibility, b) transferability, c) dependability and d) confirmability, and his detailed description of each aspect. Several scholars refer to and further develop these aspects and apply them in their research.

Together with Lincoln, Guba adds a complementary aspect concerning the quality of qualitative research, namely *authenticity* (Lincoln & Guba, 1986/2007; Morrow, 2005; Schwandt, 2007). In everyday language, authenticity means genuineness. Authenticity draws attention to cultural and individual diversity, to the uniqueness that may be revealed through insider knowledge and experience. Learning about informants' and other participants' experiences makes researchers able to approach a common interpretation -- or at least a joint understanding -- of each other's interpretation, taking into account both insider and outsider perspectives or the emic-etic relations between participants, informants and researchers. In the case of *Inclusive practices*, approaching authenticity concerns relations between the seven research teams from different university cultures in six countries and their participants, informants and other stakeholders. Authenticity is approached through fairness, ontological-, educative-, catalytic and tactical authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986/ 2007; Johnsen, 2020; Morrow, 2005; Schwandt, 2007).

Qualitative studies have been developed alongside philosophical, historical and other textual analyses characterized as ideographic studies; studies that seek holistic and nuanced understanding of phenomena within fields such as education, as argued by Rich (1975; Johnsen, 2020). During the rapid influx of qualitative studies within an increasing number of sciences, there is a growing urge to develop methodological criteria suitable for assessing their rigor. Lincoln and Guba are amongst the pioneers in this development, followed by a steady stream of scientists. Thus, the search for relevant assessment processes for the two main aspects is still ongoing (Schwandt, 2007; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014). Evaluating the quality of *Inclusive practices* as an inter-

national comparative qualitative research is based on these assessment tools and processes.

As mentioned, Alexander's *Five cultures* (2000) has been an important "a role model" for *Inclusive practices* from the very beginning. However, there are, naturally, several differences between the two studies. Thus, *Inclusive practices* differs from Alexander and his British team's research in that the team implements the studies in all countries, while in *Inclusive practices* the studies are implemented by seven different teams, each from their local university, as mentioned above. Some of these teams are from newly established faculties or departments, others from well-established research societies, such as the Universities of Belgrade and Zagreb, which have served as important catalysts for establishing the more recent ones. Furthermore, the seventh participant is the University of Oslo on the "northwestern outskirts" of Europe. Hence, although the university cultures are different, every research team has inside knowledge and experience of its study's culture and context (Johnsen, 2013a; 2013c; 2013d; 2013e; 2013f; Johnsen, Rapaic et al, 2013; Johnsen, 2014d; Johnsen et al, 2020). Visualizing differences as well as similarities between the seven participating research teams serves to a) embed the findings of the classroom studies in their local contexts; and b) create possibilities for taking cultural differences and similarities into account when interpreting the findings on micro-level and hence avoiding naïve borrowing – or at least contribute to an awareness of contextual limitations with comparison. Contextual aspects are endless, and it is an art in itself to shed light on only those aspects that are considered most relevant for any given study. As presented above, Alexander (2009) focuses on two contextual aspects in addition to his main focus on classroom activities, namely pedagogical ideas, values and beliefs as well as curriculum from macro to micro-level. The focus on contextual aspects surrounding the inner activity of the schools in *Inclusive practices* may also be divided into a) pedagogical theories and research; and b) cultural-historical aspects. They are accounted for in several articles in the three anthologies covering this joint international research project as well as in the main article describing and discussing the research findings (Johnsen, 2013; 2014; 2020; Johnsen, et al, 2020). Two important questions remain: How is trustworthiness taken into account through the research process? Is it fair to characterize *Inclusive practices* as a holistic and trustworthy international comparative research? In the following trustworthiness and authenticity is accounted for in all phases of the research project; planning, implementing, compiling and dissemination of findings.

## The preparation and planning process of *Inclusive practices*<sup>29</sup>

Securing a high degree of trustworthiness and authenticity in a research project starts in the preparatory phase. While developing a research topic, questions and methodology, it is also necessary to ensure its quality or “goodness” (Morrow, 2005) step by step. How is trustworthiness and authenticity embedded in the main issue and construction of *Inclusive practices*? This overarching question generates further questions concerning the project’s main aspects. The planning process is decisive for the trustworthiness of the entire work. The question of planning credibility concerns whether the intended research purpose and construction of the joint research project is perceived as meaningful to all participants connected to the seven universities (Guba, 1981, Johnsen et al, 2020; Moon et.al., 2016; Tracy, 2010). As this research project consists of seven research groups and researchers from different university cultures as well as different nations, how do we raise awareness about cultural differences and approach authenticity among both research teams and informants? Since this is an international comparative study, how are cultural aspects taken into account? And, how are they connected to findings on micro-level? These are questions discussed in the following sections.

**Approaching cultural differences between research teams.** As mentioned, of the seven universities participating in this research, six are located in the Western Balkan region of former Yugoslavia. After World War II Norway and Yugoslavia developed different kinds of welfare societies. However, while Norway has experienced a long period of peace and stability as well as democratic and economic development, the other five countries have recently endured radical societal systemic changes and fragmentizing wars that have put development several years behind, leaving them at the start of rebuilding their social structures and economies. However, due to their shared history and similar Slavic languages, the five countries in the Western Balkan region are assumed to have “regionally internal” similarities even though in their current development states may differ, whereas Norwegian language and culture are more

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29 The preparatory period, including joint and individual research plans, are described and discussed in the first of three anthologies related to this research cooperation (Johnsen, 2013), but not related to micro-macro dimensions or research credibility. Likewise, important aspects of the implementation process are described and discussed in the next anthology (Johnsen, 2014), while this third and concluding anthology (Johnsen, 2020) accounts for findings.

distant. How is it possible to raise awareness about cultural nuances and differences and increase joint understanding; in other words, to handle authenticity between research teams and informants? Several actions have been undertaken in the preparatory phase; a) A four-year innovation project was carried out among three of the research teams (SØE 06/02); b) a permanently employed interpreter participated in the abovementioned innovation project and current research projects; c) the research project has a joint theoretical foundation; and d) joint methodological frames; as well as e) joint main frames for classroom studies.

**A: From innovation project to international comparative research cooperation within the same theme.** WB 04/06 *Inclusive practices* is a systematically research-focused continuation and extension of a former project. The first and very important steps towards joint cultural and pedagogical understanding took place through the four-year innovation cooperation project *Special Needs Education towards Inclusion* (SØE 06/02) completed at the universities of Tuzla, Sarajevo and Oslo. The project had a number of activities “towards inclusion” and may – in the aftermath – be seen as a pilot project. (See literature from SØE 06/02: Ćišić et al (Eds.), 2004; Johnsen (Ed.), 2005; related Master theses, articles and chapters (Dzemidzic, 2007; Pavlovic, 2005; Pepeljak, Begić & Buljubašić, 2005; Ruud, 2005; Smajic, 2004; Zekic, 2004). The main activity consisted of an innovation project implemented between a number of regular schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the universities of Sarajevo, Tuzla and Oslo. The intention was to try out concrete approaches in upgrading professional teachers towards inclusive practices in regular schools. This was done through lecturing and discussing educational and special needs educational tasks that were implemented between the seminars (Johnsen, 2007). The innovation topic gave participants from the Bosnian and Norwegian universities a joint arena for exchanging information. Additionally, six Bosnian students attended the international Master of Philosophy programme in Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo.

During this first project Bosnian colleagues initiated conference visits for colleagues from the universities of Belgrade, Zagreb and Macedonia. At the end of the project period, participants from seven universities in the Western Balkan region were ready to participate in a new and more research-oriented cooperation with the University of Oslo. While the joint plan for this research project was based on former innovations related to educational inclusion, it placed a sharper focus on the former project’s following aspects:



- To investigate the ongoing upgrading process of inclusive practices in the regular school
- To investigate further two specific qualities of the inclusive school that were introduced through innovation activities under these concepts:
  - ▶ The classroom as a socio-emotional safe haven
  - ▶ The creative school for all
- To investigate how regular and special needs teachers and –educators (defectologists) cooperate in planning, implementing and assessing individual educational plans related to a class or group
- To continue cooperation within research methodology and theory, focusing on qualitative approaches and action research.

**B: Project interpreter.** Project SØE 06/02 had the same interpreter from the project's preparatory phase to its conclusion Mr. Goran Đapić from Sarajevo. He provided consecutive interpretation between Bosnian and English on all meetings and headed synchronous interpretation at conferences. Having an authoritative interpreter accompanying the project and steadily developing more professional and scientific terminology within the education and special needs education research fields greatly benefits the development of a joint understanding among the participating cultures. Mr. Đapić also participated in the current project WB 04/06 from start to finish.

**C: Joint theoretical foundation.** The WB 04/06 project plan draws attention to the interplay between regular and special needs education in developing inclusive practices in the regular school. The plan focuses on the interrelation of two theoretical approaches; 1) cultural-historical approach to the study of teaching, learning and development based on Lev Vygotsky's and the post-Vygotskian school of thought; 2) a didactic-curricular perspective of inclusive practices. The theoretical approaches have been introduced during the SØE 06/02 innovation project, and researchers from the universities of Tuzla, Sarajevo and Oslo have followed up and discussed practices in project schools.

**D: Joint methodological foundation.** Case studies have a strong tradition within classroom research using a qualitative or so-called mixed method approach, and they are applied in this project. Being internationally anchored, qualitative international comparative methodology is one of the project's theoretical pillars, as briefly discussed in the project description (Johnsen, 2013a). Taking into consideration general cultural differences and different research cultures, each university is advised to select relevant research questions, design,

methods, instruments and ways of analysing their studies within the common frames described in the joint plan. Thus, the flexible connections to the common research plan are accepted, and each university team presents their own plan as it relates to the joint research plan (Igrić & Cvitković, 2013; Jachova, 2013; Johnsen, 2013a; 2013b; Kogovšek, Košir & Ozbič, 2013; Rapaić, Nedović, Stojković & Ilić, 2013; Salihović, Dizdarević & Smajić, 2013; Zečić, Čehić, Kristiansen & Hadžić, 2013).

**E: Joint foundation for classroom studies.** What, then, is the common basis for this project? It is best described by presenting the joint research question or issue and a set of didactic-curricular main aspects or arenas for research. The main research question is:

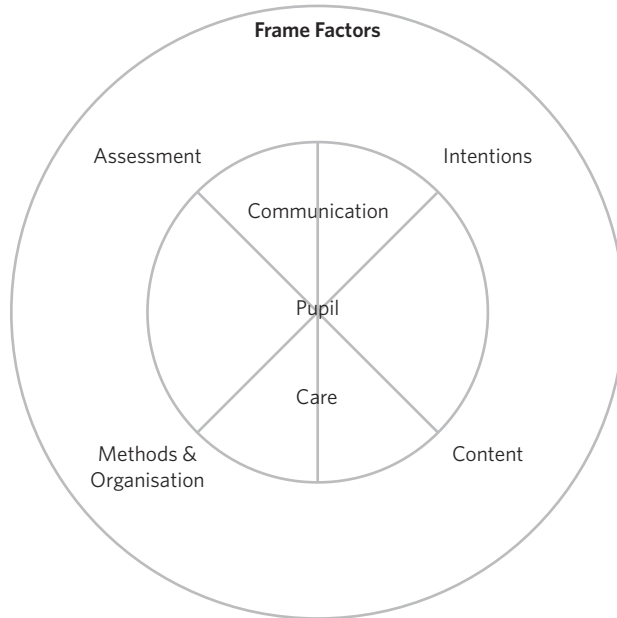
How does school teach in accordance with pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process (recourses, barriers and dilemmas)?

The plural form of “pupils” and “needs” signalises the community of the class and thus the development of the inclusive class. Focus is on the teachers', special needs educators' and other teaching participants' activities in the interaction between school and pupil, also called “the master-apprenticeship relation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 94). Eight didactic-curricular main aspects are selected as joint topics for information gathering in order to describe, analyse and discuss the research issue. These are the following:

The pupil/s – Assessment – Educational intentions – Educational content – Class organisation and teaching methods – Communication – Care – Context

Research question and main aspects constructs a joint umbrella or frame for comparative analysis and discussions of the classroom studies with focus on the inner activity of schooling – called the internal micro dimension by Alexander (2000). Within this frame there is flexibility concerning the research teams' choice of research focus on studying teacher activities related to a) number of pupils in focus; b) type of special need/disability/vulnerability and c) which of the eight topics to study in depth (in the foreground of attention), and which ones as background aspects (Johnsen, 2013a). The rationale behind the eight didactic-curricular aspects is discussed in Johnsen (2014a) and in more detail in Johnsen (2007), and summed up here in the following figure.

Thus, the eight didactic-curricular main aspects constitute the pre-determined categories that provide structure for the research focus as well as the analysis, findings and discussions of the seven classroom studies on the internal



**Figure 1.** *The Curriculum Relation Model revised 2006 (Johnsen, 2007).*

micro dimension. They are not the same as in Alexander's (2000; 2004; 2009) generic model of teaching since the research issue is not the same. However, the logic of applying predetermined focal points to the joint studies is similar to Alexander's logic. This constitutes the common pedagogical research focus and is key to establishing a coherent common area of study – and thus also contributes to strengthening the credibility of the international comparative classroom study.

## **The implementation process of *Inclusive practices***

Activities introduced in the project-planning phase in order to secure flexible insider-outsider dimensions, trustworthiness and authenticity and avoid naïve borrowing are followed up in more detail in the implementation phase. As pointed out, classroom activities are the focus of the implementation of the seven studies. Although they are carried out with considerable nuances in content and methods, this is done under the joint didactic-curricular umbrella referred to above, having been described and discussed in detail in the two former anthologies (Johnsen, 2013; 2014). Following up the discussion on trustwor-

thiness, the question remains: How is it possible and methodologically sound to compare different sites, such as classrooms, within different socio-cultural contexts? As shown, Alexander answers the question by presenting a framework consisting of parts or levels. The first level, which is in the foreground of Alexander's work as well as this project, focuses on the classroom. The second level refers to pedagogical ideas informing activities on micro-level, such as ethical, theoretical and relevant former studies. The third level focuses on curriculum theories from macro to micro-level (Alexander, 2009).

**Theoretical discussions.** In *Inclusive practices* a series of articles elaborate on different aspects of the main theories applied in the study; a) Vygotsky's culture-historic school on teaching-learning-development; and b) didactic-curricular aspects of teaching-learning processes, or pedagogy, as Alexander calls it. Several of these articles have been published in the second anthology of this work: *Theory and Methodology in International Comparative Classroom Studies* (Johnsen, 2014). They are written by internationally renowned scholars from England, Scotland, Serbia, France and Norway, of whom some have been invited to workshops on behalf of the WB 04/06 project. Thus, Ivan Ivić from Serbia is invited along with James Wertsch from the USA to the project workshop at the University of Oslo. Ivić (2014) writes an article on Vygotsky and Piaget. Harry Daniels from England lectures at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje. He contributes two articles, whereof one discusses Vygotsky's theories related to disability and the other to pedagogy (Daniels, 2014a; 2014b). Another article reviews texts concerning Vygotsky's legacy regarding teaching-learning interaction and development (Johnsen, 2014b). The article also discusses interpretation challenges for those who are not able to read Vygotsky's texts in the original Russian. The translation- and interpretation problem, which challenges authenticity and trustworthiness, is also discussed by Alexander (2009). Colwyn Trevarthen (2014) from the University of Edinburgh contributes with an article on the origin of communication with reference to the culture-historic school. The didactic-curricular main aspects framing the joint classroom studies are discussed in a lengthy article (Johnsen, 2014a). Ethical discussions related to research standards are initiated already in the joint research-planning phase and followed up by the research teams. However, political matters are discussed more than ethical ones throughout the project; these are mostly related to international and national policies of inclusion and their impact on practice, as may be observed in articles by all research teams in the anthologies (Johnsen, 2013; 2014 & 2020). Looking back, ethical discus-

sions have not been systematically placed on the main agenda in any of the joint research seminars, even though gaps between policies and practice have been eagerly discussed and also documented to some extent. The lack of systematic joint focus on key ethical matters should not be repeated in future research cooperation within this area. Around the same time as the research project's implementation, an emerging ethical-political program is developed through criticism and optimism by the Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva. Her program concerns the relationship between all citizens, or between individuals with and without disabilities. In her letter to President Chirac on the conditions for individuals with disabilities (2008), she asks, "Why they are not seen" and "Why it is so difficult to create an inclusive society". As answers to her questions, Kristeva has developed a psychoanalytical construction using the concept of 'the other' or 'the stranger in us' at its center. She argues that confronting this 'stranger' – for example a person with a disability – provokes anxiety in an unfamiliar able-bodied individual. The consequence is invisibility and marginalization. In her critique of conditions in France, Kristeva points to countries such as Canada and Sweden where conditions for disabled individuals have greatly improved. She also urges French society to remember that the cradle of special needs education was in Paris. Inspired by the slogan of the French Revolution, Kristeva calls for a new and expanded form of enlightenment with the notions of liberty, equality and community, adding a fourth key concept, namely vulnerability. Julia Kristeva's ethical-political approach is applied as inspiration (Gardou, 2014), as topic of critical analysis (Koren & Engebretsen, 2014) and as criterion for a critical analysis of the gap between political intentions and practice in Norway (Johnsen, 2014c).

**Historical diversity.** Historical dimension is a main theme in comparative educational research. In Alexander's comparative pedagogy, it also plays a role as an important cultural aspect (Alexander, 2000; 2009). Historical aspects relevant to comparative studies visualize contextual conditions and thus contribute to mentioned thick descriptions of the phenomenon in focus. They invite insider information; hence, they contribute to minimize or avoid naïve borrowing, instead strengthening transferability and dependability, which are important aspects of the trustworthiness found in this mainly qualitative international comparative research cooperation. The historical dimension is not at the forefront of this project since the main issue concerns how current schools are managing to teach in accordance with the different individual needs and possibilities existing within the community of the class. However, several historical aspects

contribute to modifying and explaining the empirical findings on micro-level. As argued above, on micro-level there are considerable differences in Norwegian and Western Balkan history with cultural consequences, including economic and social ones. Three historical aspects shed light on the classroom studies; 1) the general history of the two European regions as well as current history in the Western Balkan countries; 2) ordinary and special needs education history; and 3) the history of education and special needs education research and higher education in the participating countries. Historical milestones in the establishment of universities, education and special needs education- or defectological-sciences and doctoral degrees at the cooperating universities are presented in Johnsen, Rapaić et al (2013). In the article, higher education and research from Yugoslavian times to the Bologna process are in focus. The development of education, special needs education and research as well as research mentality in Norway is discussed in textual-analytical and interview-based articles (Johnsen, 2013d; 2013e). Thus, a variety of historical and current inside aspects in the participating countries are presented.

**Methodological issues** are presented and discussed in a number of articles. Foremost among these are the two articles written by educational philosopher Tone Kvernbekk (2013a; 2013b). The latter one, *Evidence-Based Practice and Educational Research*, is followed by *Qualitative Comparative Research – Does it work? A Discussion of Qualitative Pedagogical Studies, Generation of Evidence and International Comparison* (Johnsen, 2020) and this article. Since action research is a new and interesting methodology used by some of the research teams, two methodological articles discuss its use in different settings; Postholm (2014), and Engebretsen, Andersen, Urstad & Wahl (2014). There is a focus on methodological issues in two of the ambulating project workshops, by Professor Tone Kvernbekk, University of Oslo, in the Sarajevo workshop and Professor Harry Daniels, University of Bath, UK, in the Skopje workshop. In addition to the previously mentioned articles, each of the seven research groups account for choosing and applying their methods and instruments (Igrić, Cvitković & Lisak, 2014; Jachova, Angeloska-Galevska & Karovska, 2014; Johnsen, 2014d; Johnsen, 2014f; Kogovšek, Košir & Ozbič, 2014; Rapaić, Nedović, Stojković & Ilić, 2014; Salihović & Dizdarević, 2014; Zečić, Kristiansen, Hadžić & Čehić, 2014). The articles document the nuances in choosing methodology and connecting to each study's concrete research issue. They a) report traditional research ethical considerations, b) show background data, c) use in-depth studies resulting in thick descriptions, d) make use of several other validation techniques, such

as member checking, and e) apply triangulation through using two or more methods. In this way, the articles show several efforts to increase and strengthen trustworthiness through confirmability, dependability, transferability and credibility. First and last, they are examples of insider-outsider discussions belonging to the joint research *Inclusive practices*.

## Dissemination

The planning, implementing and writing period of *Inclusive Practices* – which has taken several years and is covered in three anthologies, including this work, have been and are distinguished by hermeneutic back-and-forth movements (some would call these circle movements) between different aspects of the three levels of a framework having certain similarities to Alexander's levels (2004; 2009); a) the main level, which is the classroom and the inner activity of schooling, b) the broad pedagogical context, and c) the culture-historical context.

The main part of this third anthology presents the dissemination of the joint findings of inclusive practices taking place on micro level in classrooms. Here the seven research teams address the common issue, each applying their own individual research focus in accordance with joint research structure and research issue:

How does school teach in accordance with the pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process (recourses, barriers and dilemmas)?

The joint research report consists of the fifteen chapters: Introduction -The pupil in the community of the class – Assessment – Educational intentions – Educational content – Educational methods and organisation – Communication – Care – Context – Summary of jointly reported findings and discussions – Further reflections – International Comparative Classroom Studies of Inclusive Practices in light of pedagogical traditions and ideas – Methodological considerations – Conclusion – References.

The fusion of the seven studies has taken place in a process consisting of collection, analysis, review and compilation. It has been comprised of eight steps a) the first compilation where each research team describes their findings within the seven main aspects concerning internal classroom activities of the curricular-relation approach; b) a series of internal reviews in written form in addition to joint seminar discussions ; and c) the transfer of the insider information towards a steadily more accepted fusion into a joint report has gone

through a series of either member checks or internal auditing and reflections; d) in addition to the findings of individually adapted and inclusive classroom practices on a micro level, a number of contextual aspects are discussed, which helps avoid naïve borrowing; e) relevant studies, theoretical clarifications and methodological aspects – specifically concerning checking truthfulness and authenticity – contribute to outsider perspectives and research-based formulations; f) as may be observed in the completed report (Johnsen et al, 2020).

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