

A Classroom Study of Inclusive Practices

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Introduction

This is a single case study of inclusive practices in a purposefully selected class of a regular elementary school in Norway. The study is a contribution to a larger cooperative project entitled *Comparative Classroom Studies towards the Inclusive School* (WB 04/06), comprising studies of developments made towards achieving inclusive schools within seven universities in six countries of the south-eastern and north-western regions of Europe.

Research topic and context

Studying inclusive practices means to explore and analyse educational practices in view of the normative principle of inclusion. In this work inclusion is seen as the global policy prescribing development towards achieving a local, regular school that welcomes all children with their unique individual characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs; all children with and without special needs and disabilities; a school combating discriminatory attitudes and offering meaningful and individually adapted education to every pupil within the community of the class (Frederickson & Cline, 2002; Johnsen, 1998/2000; 2007; 2013; UNESCO, 1994; WB 04/06).

The following section offers an argument for the international relevance of studying inclusive practices, my professional interest in the topic, and the theoretical foundation of this particular study of inclusive practices.

An increasing amount of innovative projects and studies related to the principle of education for all and inclusion have been implemented on the international arena over recent decades³⁴. However, to change from the deep-rooted tradition of the competitive whole class teaching approach to inclusive practices based on the plurality of differences in the pupil group represents a major turn in professional knowledge, skills and attitudes for the regular teacher, special needs educator and other stakeholders in the school. Thus, it is fair to say that no country has reached fully inclusive schooling practices, and that the development towards inclusion is in its beginning phase in a continuous struggle for dominance amongst a multitude of different and even contradictory educational trends.

Since I started my career as the first adviser in special needs education outside the capital of Iceland in 1979, it has been my aim to open the regular school to literally all neighbourhood children and develop flexible education of increasing quality which is meaningful and adapted to all pupils in the community of the class. Several years' of innovative work together with 23 regular schools and the implementation of the first Icelandic part-time higher education programme in special needs education for practicing teachers (Johnsen, 1985; *Nám í sérkennslufræðum*, 1986) had strengthened my curiosity regarding how educational ideas and traditions influence professional choices and priorities in planning and implementing the teaching; whether the ideas are old or new, conscious or tacit, in the mind of the educator. My doctoral studies therefore led me to the history of educational ideas in order to shed light on "the prehistory" and the soil which created the development of the principle of individually adapted education (Johnsen, 1998/2000). In my current position at the International Section of the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo, I am engaged in projects with universities in countries on several continents. This work has extended my former Nordic experience considerably and offered "global glimpses" into this huge, many-sided and culturally-bound turning process towards achieving education for all and inclusion. Special needs education as in-service education for practicing professionals has been one of the main activities in a former cooperation project with the universities of Tuzla and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SØE 06/02), and development of a sustainable Master-level study program has been successfully completed through projects with Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia (NUFU 35/2002). This study follows the

34. UNESCO's homepage contains some information, discussions and practical guidelines towards Inclusive Education (<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev>.)

same perspective towards inclusion as the above mentioned projects, building on the scientific, innovative and cultural knowledge generated from them. However, focus in the Norwegian contribution of this project is sharpened and delimited to a single case study whose arena is a selected Norwegian regular school class.

This study is theoretically situated in the meeting place between didactic-curricular and culture-historic approaches to teaching and learning as described in the joint research plan (Johnsen, 2013; WB 04/06). From a didactic-curricular point of view, the Vygotskyan tradition spells out the necessary interplay between former traditional theories of learning and theories of teaching, didactics and curriculum. Didactics and later also curricular theories have deep-rooted traditions for detailed discussions of the most commonplace aspects of teaching, such as aims and goals, content, methods, classroom organisation and assessment (Gundem & Hopmann, 1998; Johnsen, 1998/2000; Klafki, 1997; 1998). It seems that up till now the two major traditions, didactic-curricular and culture-historic theories, have developed their own discourses more or less isolated from each other. This study builds on the assumption that integration and further joint development of aspects of the two traditions relevant to individual and classroom education will strengthen and extend the theoretical foundation for empirical research in the field. Revisiting and comparing relevant aspects of the two traditions therefore represent a crucial challenge to which this study may offer a contribution.

In Stake's (1995) terminology, this is an *instrumental case study*, because there is an implicit assumption that the study is instrumental to a generation of understanding beyond the particular case to inclusive practices in other schools in Norway as well as globally. However, in order to do this, findings from the actual classroom study have to be related to the local as well as national and international/historical context. The concept 'frame factors' is applied in order to grasp contextual aspects. The study area 'contextual frame factors' has obtained its theoretical and empirical foundation from so-called ecology or "macro-micro" studies within modern didactic-curricular tradition as well as from culture-historic traditions. Thus, the two classical texts, Goodlad's (1979) North-American "ecological" Curriculum Inquiry and Bronfenbrenner's more sociological Ecology of Human Development (1979), with his experience from the USA and the Soviet Union³⁵, were published in the same year. Bronfen-

35. Goodlad (1979:47) compares Bronfenbrenner's 'total ecology of the child's life' with his application of the concept 'the total curriculum'.

brenner (1979) was familiar with Vygotsky's texts (1978; 1987–1999) as well as early interpretations of his texts in the USA related to the crucial role of the culture-historic context of the learning human being. Vygotsky's argument is that the possibilities of learning are framed by “the tools and the talks” of the environment within which the learner is situated. Today, this accentuation of the contextual background of communication, interpretation, learning and other human activities unites scholars across a number of research disciplines and traditions, such as theory of science (Burke, 1994; Fay, 1996), anthropology (Geertz, 1973; Rogoff, 1990; 2003), literature theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Derrida, 1998; Vygotsky, 1971), research methodology (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995) and education (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rommetveit, 1972; Wertsch, 1991; 1998). The process in this study of selecting ‘what’ context and deciding ‘how’ to apply contextual findings in the discussion of the case – and further in comparative discussions between the single cases in this WB 04/06 cooperation project (Alexander, 2000; Alexander, Broadfoot & Phillips, 1999) – will be based on a cross-disciplinary approach.

Primary research question, focus areas and structure of the study

The phenomenon at the centre of this study is ‘inclusive practices’. The primary research question is: How does the school teach in accordance with the pupils’ different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process (recourses, barriers and dilemmas)? Focus is on the teacher’s³⁶ activities in the interaction between teacher – pupil – pupils, also called *the master-apprenticeship relation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This primary research question, or issue³⁷, directs the attention to the complexity of the phenomenon. Eight main areas have been selected in order to give direction to data gathering and to structure description, analysis and discussion. Seven of the main areas are: The pupil/s – assessment – educational intentions – educational content – Class organisation and teaching methods – communication – care. The selection of main areas is based on the following arguments:

36. In this text the term *teacher* is used both for the individual teacher in the class, other teachers, special needs educators, etc. participating in teaching in the case class, and – if available – also the internal resource team.

37. The concept ‘issue’ is taken from Stake’s (1995) discussion of case study methodology, where he applies ‘issue’ or ‘primary research question’ as a conceptual structure in order to grasp the uniqueness and complexity of the case in study, as well as the embeddedness and interaction of the case with its contexts.

1. They offer a structure to, and thus a clarification of, the complexity of the phenomenon regular and special needs educational practices in the regular class of the school for all, within which the search for and investigation of inclusive practices takes place
2. They direct attention towards different aspects of educational practice/s
3. The seven main areas together are well suited to grasp flexibility, individual adaptation and celebration of the plurality of learning abilities and needs for educational support that are necessary parts of inclusive practice
4. The selected structure paves the way for analysis of interrelationships between the different aspects in this complex issue
5. Five of the seven main areas (The pupil/s – assessment – educational intentions – educational content – class organisation and teaching methods) are historical and international didactic/curricular commonplaces and thus recognisable and well suited as joint arenas for international educational comparison.

These arguments are based on a number of historic, international and Norwegian research contributions. Argument no 5 about international recognition of the selected commonplaces is based on historic educational texts and modern American, European and Nordic discourse (Billig, 1996; Bjørndal, 1980; Bjørndal & Lieberg, 1975; 1978; Comenius in Myhre, 1968; Grundtvig in Bugge, 1965; 1968a; 1968b; Goodlad, 1979; Herrik, 1950 in Taba, 1962; Johnsen, 1998/2000; Klafki, 1997; Hopmann, 1997; Platon in Lee, 1974; Francke in Kramer, 1885; Reid, 1992; Schwab, 1978; 1986; Tyler, 1949; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Arguments no 1 – 4 relate to the methodological aspect of case study design, which is to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon with clarity and structure that facilitates description, analysis, discussions and comparison. The main areas function as bridges between the issue or primary research question and the concrete phenomenon to be studied. The arguments for the selection of the main areas are based on earlier research contributions within the history of educational ideas (Johnsen, 1998/2000) and within classroom studies and innovation (Johnsen, 2007; Smajić, 2004).

The five classic or commonplace main areas mentioned above stem from traditional whole class education with its historical roots from the beginning of the European non-payment school movement (Bjørndal & Lieberg, 1978; Johnsen, 1998/2000). In this study, the focus is turned towards flexibility and adaptations in accordance with individual diversity as well as on the assumed tension between individual and class education in accordance with the primary

research question. This focus on sensitivity towards the individual uniqueness of the single pupil has historical roots in the tutoring tradition, running parallel to and even further back than the non-payment school movement, whereas the focus on specific educational needs and teaching methodologies is based on special needs education knowledge (Johnsen, 1998/2000). Two new main areas have been added to the five commonplace areas, namely 'communication' and 'care'. They are assumed to grasp aspects of teaching and learning that are crucial from an inclusive special needs education perspective. Communication was placed at the core of education by Vygotsky. His line of arguments has been followed up within regular as well as special needs education traditions (Bruner, 1996; Englund, 1997; Feuerstein, 1991; Freire, 1972; Johnsen, 2001; Rommetveit, 1972; Rye, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Befring (1996; 1997) has consolidated 'care' as a basic concept in modern special needs education. From the field of regular education, Nel Noddings (1992; 2003) challenges the school to place care at the frontline of teaching (Johnsen, 2001a; 2007). These two concepts have met a growing interest amongst international Master students in special needs education, as they have placed care and communication in the forefront of their studies (Andenet, 2005; Belew, 2005; Pavlovic, 2005; Teshome, 2004).

As discussed above, description and analysis of the context of the phenomenon in focus, inclusive practices, are accounted for through focusing on the didactic-curricular area 'contextual frame factors' on local, national and international level. In this study, the following frame factors with additional sub-factors are expected to be found: Legislation and policy – economy – professional quality – physical frame factors – social and cultural frame factors (Johnsen, 2001a; 2007). They are assumed to be joint frame factors for all research contributions in the WB 04/06 collaborative project, as they are common objects of contextual education studies due to their relevance. However, a joint selection of frame factors will be decided upon as a result of thorough discussions amongst all project researchers. In this specific study, a small number of sub-factors will be developed in order to give direction to the study. However, it is also expected that new main and sub-factors will emerge through the study process, whereas some of the pre-determined ones may prove to be less relevant (Alexander, Broadfoot & Phillips, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Goodlad, 1979; Johnsen, 1998/2000)³⁸.

38. For a further account of the eight main areas, see the joint research plan (Johnsen, 2013) and Johnsen (2001a; 2007).

Although the eight main focus areas are areas of study and not criteria of inclusive practices, assumptions about crucial aspects that need to be consciously addressed in the development of inclusive practices are implicit in the selection of them. Thus, 1) the main area of focus, the pupil/s is central, indicating that knowledge about the pupil/s is of core importance for inclusive practice; 2) the four classical didactic aspects, educational assessment, intentions, content and method & organisation, point out that deliberate professional decisions regarding each aspect in the concrete planning and implementation of an educational unit are necessary; 3) the areas 'communication' and 'care' demonstrate that professional-human communication and care for the pupil/s are necessary factors in order to make a teaching plan function as a learning plan; 4) and 'frame factors' represent a bridge between the classroom studies on micro level, and the positioning of them through contextual studies also referring to macro level.

Research methodology

This study of the phenomenon inclusive practices has a single case design with a mainly qualitative approach combined with minor quantitative additions. The arena of study has been carefully selected through a process of selecting an approximately prototype Norwegian municipality, and asking the local educational office to select one school, class and classroom teacher, and to secure the consent and willingness of the school to participate in the study. The process of gaining access to the school has already been accomplished, and I have visited the school and class 6 times in order for the informants and myself to become acquainted with each other. I have also been invited to a regular parents meeting by the classroom teacher, where I introduced the study. All parents have received a written introduction of the study, and a letter seeking their consent to administer the study in their children's class. All parents have subsequently given their written consent.

Two main data collection methods will supplement each other in this study; class observation and interview of the classroom teacher and other relevant informants. Approximately one day each month will be used to the main information gathering throughout the elementary grades (from project start and until the end of grade seven). The class observation is implemented as participating observation, where I act as observing researcher and, when convenient, also as teacher assistant. At the end of the school day, the classroom teacher and

I will have two hours to conduct an open interview or dialogue consisting of sharing information about one or more of the seven didactic-curricular main topics described earlier as well as activities and happenings taking place during the preceding school day in addition to the time period since my last visit. This qualitative approach invites to additional methods of information gathering, such as text- and document analysis, use of video as well as oral, written and other forms of statements from the pupils other relevant informants (Creswell, 1998; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003; Kvale, 1996; Stake, 1995; Silverman, 2000).

Preliminary time schedule

As mentioned above, the study is planned to proceed over a number of years, optimally through the elementary level until the class changes school in the transition to the lower secondary level. Thus, this is a longitudinal study. Data gathering and an initial analysis of the part of the study related to the WB 04/06 project will be concluded with a preliminary text ready for delivery to the autumn workshop 2008 in accordance with the joint project plan.

Relationship between this study and the joint WB 04/06 project; Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion

This study contributes with mainly qualitative data describing and analysing inclusive practices in a Norwegian regular class consisting of pupils with different individual needs, where some needs are documented to be of a kind that entitles the school to receive extra resources for the class. The analysis is based on the prime research question focusing attention on the complexity and dilemmas related to how the school teaches in accordance with the pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process. Thus, data gathering will focus on the concrete teaching and learning situations and process in the selected class, and the teacher's reflections on these same situations and process. Resources, barriers and dilemmas, priorities and lack of attentions related to practices that may be characterised as inclusive will be observed in the class and reflected upon in the open interview afterwards. In order to grasp the teaching and learning situations in their complexity, the study applies all the eight didactic-curricular main areas discussed above.

Thus, on the micro or classroom level, the study is expected to contribute to the joint project with the following topics:

- Qualitative examples of inclusive practices, shedding light on the examples from the perspective of the seven discussed main focus areas
- Qualitative examples of educational practices analysing and discussing resources and barriers, actual and potential priorities in view of the seven mentioned main focus areas
- Qualitative examples illustrating and discussing dilemmas between individually adapted practices and whole class practices through the seven mentioned main focus areas
- Development of criteria of inclusive practices

As previously discussed, the findings of this study will be analysed specifically in view of local and national cultural-historic contexts through data related to frame factors such as:

- education law and policy, curricular priorities on the national, municipal, school, classroom and individual level
- financial possibilities and barriers
- physical frame factors such as the school building, class-/group rooms, common spaces, school compound and nearby surroundings
- professional resources within the school, the municipality and national resource network
- cultural aspects such as the schools', parents' and pupils' attitudes to the school and education

Focus on the cultural context of the study is an attempt to overcome the perhaps most serious challenge in comparative studies, which is use of de-contextualised data gathered from many countries for policy decisions and other types of so-called “educational borrowing”. Problems discussed in comparative and international studies of specific relevance to this study and for our joint comparative project are all problems highlighting the socio-cultural context from different angles (Alexander, 2000; Alexander, Broadfoot & Phillips, 1999; Fay, 1996; Osborne et al, 2003; Phillips & Ochs, 2004).

Research ethical considerations

A number of ethical considerations are connected to the study related to obtaining voluntary access to informants, informed consent and participant's rights to inspection, as well as procedures to ensure privacy and confidentiality of research data (Befring, 2004; Gall, Gall & Borg; 2003; Silverman, 2000). In addition, there are ethical aspects related to doing studies and writing texts about vulnerable individuals and groups, such as when disabilities, difficulties and special needs are in focus (Reindal, 1998).

A compulsory ethical principle is the right of the participants to be informed about their possible role in a study and the duty to apply information only from informants who have given their informed consent for participation. In this study, access to the case school and classroom teacher has been requested from the municipal school office in order to avoid the direct pressure that may be felt if the request comes directly from the researcher. Both the headmaster and classroom teacher were informed about the topic of the study from the municipal office, and they were given further oral information about the content and methods of the study at their first meeting with me, the researcher. As mentioned, a letter containing information was prepared for parents and delivered together with a short oral introduction and ensuing dialogue between the parents and me at the parent meeting. As one of the approaches in this study is to gather data about individual pupils, the project has been registered in the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (<http://www.datatilsynet.no>).

Another compulsory ethical principle is the right of the participants to remain anonymous. A series of measures are being implemented in order to secure this: All names of the municipality, school, teachers and other professionals and of pupils will be fictive in the report. However, as this is a single case study, there is a dilemma between the municipality, school and parents' right to receive information about findings and how easy it is for members in a small community where everybody more or less knows each other, to believe that they will be able to recognise any individual or that they will be recognised by others from the presentation.

A third ethical topic specifically related to possible vulnerable individuals and groups lies in the dilemma between the importance of identifying special education needs in order to offer adequate education on the one hand, and labelling pupils in accordance with difficulties and disabilities on the other. The dilemma is related to choice of terminology, choice of focus, such as concerning a certain difficulty or level of mastery and choice of analytical categories.

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Changes in relation to research plan

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Two serious challenges have arisen, one in the preparatory phase concerning gaining access to a school, class and teacher, and the other dealing with lack of time and research assistance during the study and process of reporting.

A long process of gaining access. The search for a suitable school as research arena began a couple of years before the international project started. Formal request regarding permission to conduct research in school was sent to the educational office of a municipality located nearby the university. It was immediately accepted, and the educational office contacted the headmaster of a relevant school. On my first contact with the headmaster, he asked me to please not “use his school”, since they had hosted many researchers and needed a rest. This excuse was accepted, and the next school was contacted in the same way. This headmaster was very positive to the study, but when he held a brief meeting with the relevant classroom teachers, they were not interested. In the third school, the headmaster, deputy headmaster and relevant teachers were all positive and eager to participate. They were proud of their school, as the teaching staff had a high level of education, and they were very satisfied with their generous classroom organisation model. We cooperated throughout a spring semester. However, when I returned the following autumn to start the classroom studies, the school had experienced a serious budget cut, and several of the teachers were transferred to other schools. Unfortunately, the remaining teaching staff did not have the extra energy to cooperate with a researcher. Now I changed my plan slightly and started looking for a new and statistically prototypical Norwegian municipality. Fortunately, I found one with a resourceful educational officer who acted as a gatekeeper, knowing as she did all the schools, headmasters and teachers. She picked out a classroom teacher with several years of experience, a solid educational background and high level of professional self-confidence, working in a highly relevant school and class. Since this time, the selected class has been the arena of a longitudinal research project involving three different classroom teachers.

Lack of time and research assistance. Due to lack of sufficient staff, large amount of lecturing and other student-related work took much of my time away from the research project. A planned position of an assistant researcher was not realised, limiting my available research time even more. The many details in the administration of the comparative research project also took a great deal of

time, which was, however, expected from former experiences as coordinator of international projects. These factors have contributed to delaying the comparative cooperation process as well as the national research project which, in spite of these many delays, will be completed in a foreseeable future.