

Methodological Diversity in Common Explorations

Seven Research Communities Collaborating in International Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion

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Introduction

How does school teach in accordance with pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process? What are the recourses, barriers and dilemmas in schools' development towards achieving inclusion?

These are the two main research questions in the joint *International Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion* (Johnsen, 2013; WB 04/06). The overall objective of the project is to identify and examine teaching and learning activities in regular classes related to development of inclusive practices.

Seven universities in six countries participate in this project; the universities in Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tuzla, Zagreb and Oslo⁵⁷. While international research traditions are expected to have some fundamental similarities, there are differences as well. A vital element of achieving a mutual understanding of each other's research interests and methodological choices has to do with learning to know the contextual features of each university. So, what characterises the participating universities; what is the context of their studies, and what is their cultural and historical background? The first section of this article discusses these issues. The subsequent sections treat the following issues: The

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57. The research groups in the seven universities presented individual research plans based on a joint plan in Anthology no 1, Part Four (see Johnsen, 2013).

nature of international comparative studies in education of specific relevance for this project. The joint research plan contains some common theoretical aspects. What are these? And what are the different methodological choices under the ‘umbrella’ of this joint exploration into the development of inclusive practices?

The participating research communities

The seven universities are located on the North-West and South-East outskirts of Europe. Focusing on the participating countries in the West-Balkan region, the research project has “regional internal” comparative possibilities, as these countries share a history of having the same education policy and governance as one point of departure. As another perspective the project invites comparative analysis between the south-eastern and north-western European regions with different welfare society models, as well as history and social-economic conditions. These different levels of comparison make the project an interesting methodological example in light of overview studies showing that only a minority of comparative studies relates to more than one country of those reported in international journals (Broadfoot, 1999; CIES Bibliography 2013; Halls, 1990; Rust et. al, 1999).

So, who are the participating universities? They belong to countries that share a post-world-war history of having established and maintained welfare societies. However, whereas Norway has developed its welfare model without major interruptions, currently being a prosperous oil and industrial export nation, the West-Balkan countries have experienced rapid major changes in their political systems, national fragmentations, large-scale industrial downturn and war. The new countries are facing both economic and social-structural setbacks from which they are attempting to recover in spite of the slow-down caused by the recent financial crisis in Europe. The process of recovery differs between the countries, not least due to their different relationships with the European Union (EU). Developing from joint Yugoslavian legislative frameworks, each of the new countries emphasizes their unique political and legislative perspectives. This also involves taking different steps in order to meet international standards of educational rights and development towards inclusion (UN, 1991; 1994; 2006; UNESCO, 1991; 1994; 2000). The comparative analysis of the seven studies is anticipated to present indications of contextual diversity, variety in the foci of the seven studies and similarities as well as differences in findings regarding development of inclusive practices in school.

Opportunities and challenges of international comparative research

As an internationally anchored project an important theoretical pillar consists of comparative studies. An implicit purpose of this research project is "...that of reform, learning from other situations with the express intention of borrowing ideas that might enable reform in one's own country context" (Watson, 2001:11). Phillips (1999) offers a number of reasons for undertaking comparative educational studies of relevance for this project:

- To provide a body of descriptive and explanatory data demonstrating various practices and procedures in a wide context that helps to throw light upon them
- Shows what is possible by examining alternatives to provision "at home"
- Helps to foster co-operation and mutual understanding among nations by discussing cultural differences and similarities and offering explanations for them

Watson (2001) points out that perhaps the greatest challenge in comparative studies is the use of decontextualized data gathered from many countries for policy decisions. Problems discussed in international comparative studies of specific relevance to this joint project are related to the already mentioned "educational borrowing", to comparative classroom research and to the problem of cross-national comparison. These are all problems highlighting the socio-cultural context from different angles (Alexander, 2000; Osborne et. al., 2003; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004).

International and comparative education methodology has been subjected to criticism and revisions since it started out more or less as "travelling tales" (Crossley & Watson, 2003), developing as a "cause – effect" discipline inspired by natural science (in line with other main-stream educational research), moving towards anthropology (Schriewer, 1999; Seeberg, 2003), confronting Euro-centrism, even "Western-European/North-American-centrism", identifying and seriously discussing problems such as those mentioned above. Thus, Broadfoot grasps a common understanding of the purpose of contemporary and future comparative education in her argument:

I suggest that the goal of comparative education is to build on systematic studies of common educational issues, needs or practices as these are realised in diverse cultural settings in order to enhance awareness of possibilities, clarify contextual constraints

and contribute to the development of a comprehensive socio-cultural perspective (Broadfoot, 1999:26)

Alexander (1999) describes the development of cross-cultural comparisons during the 1990s as two parallel traditions, one of largely-quantitative pre-test/post-test sampled studies and the other more intensive qualitative-ethnographic investigations. Classroom studies belong to the latter of these traditions. School effectiveness studies have gained increasing attention in recent years, as debate related to the so-called PISA project shows (<http://www.pisa.no/>). In this research project we chose the concept of 'quality-study' instead of 'effectiveness-study'. Case study is a well-established methodological design within comparative studies, as described in the prestigious International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Berg-Schlosser, 2001). Ragin (1987: 16) argues that "the comparative method is essentially a case-oriented strategy of comparative research". Studies of cases from other countries may allow implicit comparisons, which again may lead to critical reflection on policies and practices in one's own country (Buk-Berge 2005), which, as mentioned, is an implicit aim of this project. Alexander (1999; 2000) has conducted a major cross-cultural comparative study of primary education in five countries on three continents. His search for and choice of main categories for studies, analysis and comparing teaching serves as an inspiration in this project.

A main challenge – and vital element – of international comparative educational research relates to this project's attempt to provide a body of descriptive and explanatory data demonstrating various practices and procedures in the different contextual cultures of the participating universities (Johnsen, 2013; Phillips, 1999). This challenge lies in the two opposing questions:

- How many aspects of the seven research plans from each of the universities should be obligatory or similar for all participating universities?
- How great can the differences between the seven studies be without losing the opportunities to comparison?

These questions need consideration related to choice of theoretical and methodological perspectives in each of the studies. Variation in predominant research discourses between the participating universities is an important contextual factor since these universities possess expertise within different methodologies as well as theoretical traditions. This anthology provides insight into a selection of relevant theoretical and methodological perspectives that have been the focus of a common knowledge quest and discussions in the international research

group. The seven presentations of research methodologies following this article indicate variations as well as similarities in methodological choices.

Common theoretical frameworks

Finding a balance between common theoretical foci and individual choices of each research group may be compared to tightrope walking. What are the common denominators for the joint project? The following three theoretical traditions are central elements; 1) Vygotsky and the culture-historical approach to teaching, learning and development, 2) educational inclusion and the interplay between regular and special needs education, and 3) inclusive practices in didactic-curricular perspective (Johnsen, 2013; WB 04/06). Several articles in this book describe and discuss aspects of these theoretical constructions. One of them – inclusive practices in didactic-curricular perspective – has a specific role when it comes to defining and delimiting each of the seven studies and thus accounting for choices made by each research group. The choices are derived from the selected research topics and are incidental to the choice of research methodology. What characterises the didactic perspective employed in the joint

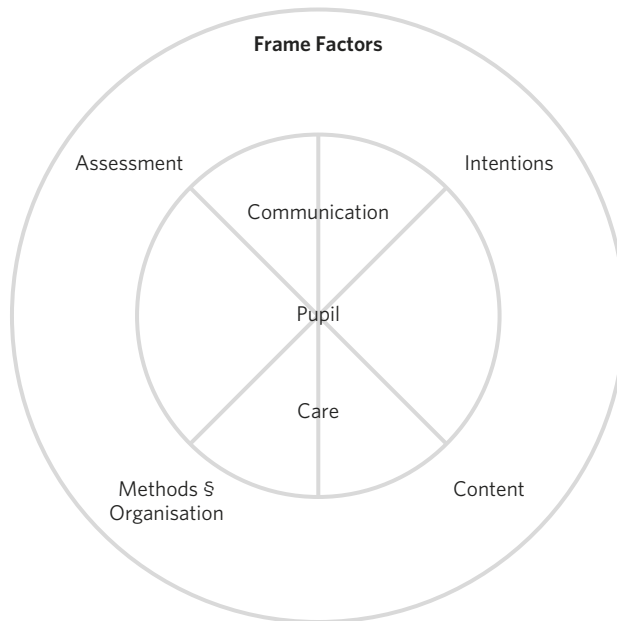


Figure 1 The Curriculum Relation Model revised in Johnsen (2007)

project and in what way is it suitable for clarifying and delimiting the single studies? This perspective is thoroughly accounted for in the article *A Curricular Approach to Inclusive Education* in this book (Johnsen, 2014) and the description in this article is therefore limited to repeating the didactic-curricular main aspects through displaying the model that demonstrates the eight aspects and their interrelationship.

These didactic-curricular concepts (Johnsen, 2007; WB 04/06) are used in the classroom studies as topical sub-questions, directing focus towards joint main categories of classroom activities. The eight aspects are seen as the educator's professional tool in planning, implementing and evaluating the teaching-learning situation and process from the perspective of the development of inclusive practices. Within this common denominator – the Curriculum Relation Model – each of the participating research groups has the flexibility of selecting their centre of attention in their study related to:

- number of pupil/s in focus
- kind of special need/disability/vulnerability in focus
- which of the eight topics to study in depth (in the foreground of attention), and which ones as background aspects

Methodological flexibility within common denominators

The question of validity, in the sense of whether reported findings represent the experienced phenomena to which they refer, is a key factor in all research (Hammersley, 1990 in Silverman, 2006). Moreover, an important argument related to validity is that a strict regime of obligatory or standard procedures applied to different cultural contexts as well as within various research-methodological traditions and conceptual interpretations may dissociate reported findings from the experienced phenomena. This is a crucial problem in international comparative research where findings from different cultures are presented in a joint report. In other words, it may give a local reader of a concluding comparative report the impression that the presented findings are theoretical constructions, having little or no connection with his or her perception of reality.

As mentioned, the chosen solution to this challenge is to design a joint research plan with a high degree of flexibility also when it comes to methodological choices. Thus, case study methodology, preferably with qualitative or a

combination of qualitative and quantitative approach, is recommended, but not obligatory for all the single studies (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; 2006). Data collection methods may consist of combinations of interviews of key informants and/or focus groups, observations and gathering documents and material related to the topics of the Curriculum Relation Model. Document analysis and systematic use of field notes is expected to create a basis for triangulation of information (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2000; Stake, 1995; 2006). The words 'expected' and 'recommended' are used here to signalise that each research group is assumed to select design, methods, instruments and ways of analysing relevant to their operationalised research questions within the frames of the joint project. The common main focus of research is placed on schools' internal activities, on teachers, special needs educators and other professional staff's interaction with single pupils and the class. However, other aspects of the development towards inclusion are also treated.

When it comes to choice of methodology or research design and methods, the following list indicates similarities as well as diversity among the seven studies in these joint international comparative classroom studies towards inclusion:

Methodological approaches

- Case study: 5
 - ▶ Single-case study: 3
 - ▶ Multiple-case study: 1
- Longitudinal study: 2
- Pilot study: 1
- Action research: 3
- Qualitative approach: 3
- Quantitative approach:
- Mixed methods approach: 3

Methods

- Interview: 5
- Observations: 6
 - ▶ Non-participative observation: 1
 - ▶ Participative observation: 3
- Document analysis: 3
- Analysis of school documents, teaching materiel and pupil work: 3

The following seven articles from each of the participating universities give more detailed and nuanced accounts of their methodological considerations and choices.

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