

A Single Case Classroom Study of Inclusive Practices

Methodological Considerations in the Oslo Contribution

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Introduction

How does the 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? The two research questions of this study are identical with the main research questions in the joint *International Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion* (Johnsen, 2013a; 2014; WB 04/06). As may be seen in the other six studies comprising this project, there are several ways of answering these questions (Igrić & Cvitković, 2013; Jachova, 2013; Kogovšek, Košir & Ozbič, 2013; Rapačić et al., 2013; Salihović, Dizdarević & Smajić, 2013; Zečić et al., 2013). In this study the questions have been attempted to be answered using a longitudinal qualitative single case study of a purposefully selected class in a Norwegian regular school. This article is about methodology.

Methodological considerations and choices

As the research questions indicate, the phenomenon that is the focus of this single case study is 'inclusive practices'. Attention has been paid to the school's – teachers', special needs educator' and assistants'- activities and interaction with single pupils and the whole class. The research questions or issue directs the attention to the complexity of this phenomenon. In order to provide direction to data gathering and structure of description, analysis and discussion, the eight

didactic-curricular main areas forming a basis for the joint research project (Johnsen, 2014) are applied. These are: The pupil/s – assessment – educational intentions – educational content – class organisation and teaching methods – communication – care – context.

The site of study has been carefully selected through choosing an approximate prototypical Norwegian municipality and asking the local educational office to select one school, class and class teacher for participation as well as secure the consent of the school to participate. I asked specifically for “a good case”, in the sense that the selected school was considered to create positive learning contexts for all pupils. In this manner the study relates to other “good case studies” highlighting a selected example of a school demonstrating good practices (Travis, 2014). In other words, the study intends to explore the nature and extent to which educational practices have a constructive impact on single pupils as well as the whole class.

This is a longitudinal qualitative case study. What characterises this kind of study? Literature review reveals extensive longitudinal qualitative research within social sciences, whereof some are case studies within education (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006). How long does a longitudinal study have to be? Farrall (1996:2–3) states:

There is currently no definition – nor will there ever be I suspect – of how long studies should last, nor is there any guidance in the literature as to how long the time intervals between interviews ought to be. It is clear that, depending on the subject matter at hand, these sorts of decisions will need to be left to researchers and guided by their preferences and the nature of their studies.

I have found longitudinal research reports of studies lasting from one semester up to several years. This study takes place over the course of approximately four and a half years, from spring semester of second grade with seven- year-old pupils, until the end of spring semester of seventh grade, before these pupils move up to lower secondary school.

What kind of case study is this? It is obvious a single case study, since the site of study is one school class. In Stake’s terminology (1995) the case study is ‘instrumental’ because of the implicit assumption to generate understanding beyond this particular case to inclusive practices in other Norwegian schools, the participating project countries and in a wider context. Triangulation or the multi-method approach is typical for case studies (Brantlinger et. al., 2005; Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). In this study two main data collection methods supplement each other; a combination of non-participatory and participatory

classroom observations and open interviews with pre-informed themes. Additionally, gathering of information in texts, documents and teaching- and learning material is important, as well as oral and written statements from pupils, teacher colleagues, principal and other officials.

The selected class consists of 21 pupils at the start of the study and 27 pupils in grade seven, when the school has merged with another school and moved to brand-new buildings. There have been three contact teachers having primary responsibility for the class during the research period. They are the main informants in this study⁶⁶.

The classroom study contains 25 all day school visits over the study period. Each visit consists of classroom observations in three to five lessons, a two-hour open interview with the class teacher and other interviews and information gathering.

Traditional qualitative information-gathering means are used, including on the spot note-taking combined with non-participatory observation and post-observation note-taking the same day after participatory observation. Thus, all information is written down. No electronic devices are used except for photographing activities in the classroom and schoolyard. The main reason for this “old-fashioned anthropological style” is to create optimal conditions for what Silverman (2006) calls contextual sensitivity through blending naturally into the daily school work, participating as educational assistant during individual- and group work and having conversations with pupils, teachers and other staff during breaks. Another reason is that filming the classroom activities would not be accepted by all of the parents nor pupils; some of whom also reject being photographed. The fact that this is a low-cost study is thus only a minor reason for using very few electronic devices.

At the end of each school day, the class teacher and I have set aside two hours for an open interview or dialogue, consisting of information about one or a combination of the didactic-curricular main topics described above, of activities during the preceding school day as well as earlier visits. This is an opportunity for me to ask questions that have arisen during my observations and check whether my interpretation of observed events is consistent with the class

66. Contact teachers or class teachers, as they were traditionally called, teach almost all subjects during the first school years, whereas the number of subject teachers use to increase over the years. This class has had subject teachers in gymnastics, arts and crafts and English. Other teachers and staff related to the class are special needs- and other cooperating teachers, assistants and after-school programme staff members.

teacher's. I also raise issues of convergence between previously stated intentions and observed events, which also serves to check whether my recorded notes from observations and interviews corroborate with the teacher's understanding, as well as to "dig deeper" into topics of specific relevance for the main issue of study. In this way the interviews serve as information gathering as well as validation. Thus, validation is an ongoing process from the very beginning of the study applying information- and method-triangulation (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2006; Stake, 1995).

The process of analysis

There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. (...) Analysis and interpretation are the making sense of all this. How is this part related to that part? Analysis goes on and on (Stake, 1995:71).

As Stake points out, the process of analysis has long begun when the main information gathering is concluded. The further process of data or information analysis in this study consists of 1) transferring the information from handwritten logbooks to the computer in accordance with every study visit, and 2) systematising the "raw material" of information in accordance with the eight predetermined didactic-curricular aspects or topics of this study – as well as upcoming supplementary categories. At this point, a great deal of work remains when it comes to gathering and clustering cohesive information – or aggregating, as Stake (1995) calls it. This process of interpretation leads to a final compilation answering the two research questions; 1) whether and how the school teaches in accordance with pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process and 2) revealing findings concerning barriers, recourses and dilemmas in the school's development of inclusive practices.

Emic and etic dimensions. One of the challenges of this study concerns whose voice is given space, or the problem of emic and etic dimensions of meaning-making and the grey zone between them. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) point out that case studies characteristically strive to present the researcher's etic, external perspectives as well as the emic, internal perspectives of the case and its informants. Stake (1995) gives examples of how the planning process, including the development of research questions and issues, tends to have the researcher's etic perspective, while questions from emic perspectives may appear during the field study. Even though many research reports attempt to distinguish between the

two in presenting the findings as emic and discussions as etic, in “real research life” the two perspectives are more or less merged into one another throughout the research process. Olive (2014) points out that a solely emic perspective is impossible to achieve due to the inescapable subjectivity the researcher has acquired through past experience, ideas and perspectives. This case study is based on an etic perspective with the intention of being an instrumental contribution to a comparative study with a joint pre-determined basis of research questions and main aspects or categories. Concurrently, the emic perspectives of the participants’ information along with the observed activities and materials represent the ‘real-school-life’ sources needed in order to answer the research questions trustworthy.

Trustworthiness. The following three questions concern validity or trustworthiness: 1) Does the reported study make sense to the participants? 2) Is it meaningful to all participants in the international comparative study? 3) Is it meaningful to readers across cultures? Underlying these are the basic questions: Has the study managed to answer the research issues it set out to investigate? Is it dependable and consistent? Qualitative case study methodology has developed tools to decrease the danger of bias and ensure trustworthiness. The three most applied are a) triangulation of methods, b) inquiry audit through systematic documentation of all aspects of the study and c) member checking where the participants examine the findings at different stages of the research process in order to check the consistency between the researcher’s texts and their perception of the phenomenon in focus. Member checking is likewise a technique used to accentuate the abovementioned emic perspective. As indicated in this article, the study makes use of triangulation, step-by-step construction of answers to the complex issues are documented, and – in spite of as well as because of “the old-fashioned” anthropological information gathering – the informants read and comment on the researcher’s texts at different “checkpoints” in the research process (Borg, Borg & Gall, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Golafshani, 2003; Olive, 2014; Stake, 1995).

A number of ethical considerations are connected to this research, being a single case study of inclusive practices, as discussed in more detail in Johnsen (2013b). In focusing on a school’s ability to teach in accordance with the educational needs of all pupils in the class, particular sensitivity must be exercised in descriptions of educational differentiation to ensure the anonymity of all individual pupils and their families. A number of measures are being taken to solve

this dilemma, and further precautions will be taken and discussed in further reports and articles on this very interesting and informative study.

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