

# Seven Independent Studies in a Unified Comparative Project

*Research Plans within the Joint International Research  
Project: Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion*

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## Introduction

Part Four consists of seven independent research plans and a joint plan for research cooperation. The independent plans have been developed and written by researchers and research groups from the Universities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tuzla, Zagreb and Oslo. They have all been developed on the basis of a joint research plan, *Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion*, which is also presented in this part (Johnsen, 2013). Some of these plans were developed before the start of the WB 04/06 project and revised in view of the joint comparative project, while other plans were initiated by the joint cooperation project.

The start-up for the seven universities' research plans took place at the first joint project seminar in Sarajevo with a collective brainstorming session based on the joint project plan. Revised drafts were presented and discussed at the next project seminar in Belgrade. Topics from the research process have also been discussed at subsequent seminars. Moreover, all the universities' research plans went through a process of peer reviews and revisions. Accordingly, Tone

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In this book the presentation of each project plan concludes with a brief account of plan-related changes which may have occurred during the research process.

## **International comparative study within different cultural contexts – diversities, challenges and expanded knowledge generation**

As discussed in both the general project description (WB 04/06) and joint research plan, 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).

Seven universities in six countries have participated in this comparative research project. These countries are located on the north-western and south-eastern outskirts of Europe and 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 as a prosperous oil and export industrial nation, the Western Balkan countries have experienced rapid major changes in their political systems, national fragmentations, large-scale industrial downturn and war. The new countries have been left facing both economic and social-structural setbacks from which they are attempting to recover. However, they are doing so at different speeds, each emphasizing its unique political and legislative perspectives. This also involves taking different steps in order to meet international standards regarding educational rights and development towards inclusion (UN, 1991; 1994; 2006; UNESCO, 1991; 1994; 2000). It is therefore reasonable to assume that there is contextual diversity among the seven participating universities. A fundamental question in this cooperative research project therefore concerns how to construct valid comparisons, which reflect contextually rooted similarities, distinctions and differences. The challenge lies in these two opposing questions:

- How many aspects of the seven research plans should be obligatory or similar for all participating universities?
- How large differences can there be between the seven studies without losing the possibility to compare?

These two questions are considered in relation to the above mentioned contextual diversity. Variation in predominant research discourses between the participating universities is another important contextual factor since these universities possess expertise within different methodologies. The question of validity, in the sense of whether a reported finding represents the experienced phenomenon to which it refers, is another key factor (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 and within various research-methodological traditions and conceptual interpretations, may dissociate reported findings from the experienced phenomena. In other words, it may give a local reader of the concluding comparative report the impression that the presented findings are theoretical constructions having little or no connection with his or her perception of reality.

The chosen solution to this challenge is therefore to design a joint research plan with a high degree of flexibility.

The joint main research question is the following: 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 placed on schools' internal activities, on teachers, special needs educators and other professional staff as well as on their interaction with both the individual pupil and all the pupils in the class, also called *the master-apprentice relationship* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Eight didactical-curricular main aspects (Johnsen, 2007; 2013) have been selected as joint topics for information gathering in order to describe, analyse and discuss research findings. They are:

The Pupil/s – Assessment – Educational Intentions – Educational Content – Class Organization and Teaching Methods – Communication – Care – Frame Factors/Context

These collective main aspects construct a joint framework for comparative analysis and discussion regarding the seven classroom studies. Within this framework there is flexibility concerning the different research groups' choice of focal points for the study of teachers' activities related to:

- Number of pupil(s) in focus
- Kind of special need/disability/vulnerability in focus
- Which of the eight main aspects to study in depth and which aspects to remain in the background

The seven universities' research plans show a number of similarities and differences related to 1) the research topic they have chosen to further develop 2) the eight basic didactic-curricular topics and 3) application of methodology and analysis. Key concepts such as "inclusion" have been further interpreted, offering a deeper, broader and more nuanced understanding than in the joint research plan.

Methodological similarities and variations as well as the introduction of new methodological approaches in some of the participating universities are accounted for in more detail in the project's second anthology, while the resulting comparative study and additional articles from each university are reported in the project's third and final book.

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