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Qualitative Data Analysis in Cross-Cultural Projects

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Bob Jeffrey has been a Research Fellow at The Open University since 1992 and worked very closely with Professor Peter Woods researching the effects of the 1990s educational reforms on primary teacher's work and in particular their experience of creative teaching. They developed extensive characterisation of it and in later years they have turned their attention to creative learning - the student's perspectives. Alongside this research has been a collaboration with Geoff Troman focusing on the effects of performativity on primary teachers creativity and that of students and most recently parents. He has also published extensively on qualitative methodology, in particular ethnography and currently jointly organises an annual conference on this subject and is deputy editor of the journal Ethnography and Education.

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale research projects, conducted in a cross-Europe context, are increasingly attractive to educational researchers and policy makers. However, this form of comparative research across cultures brings problems concerning the standardisation of data collection and analysis, particularly where ethnographic research is concerned, as it priorities a full range of qualitative research strategies. This article outlines the use of a universal model and the approaches recently taken by two research teams and contrasts these with another recent nine partner comparative European study that used ethnographic methods.

We then describe the analytical procedures used in the project, which encouraged participant observation and individual researcher interpretation in order to generate grounded accounts and outline how they were culturally sensitive and meaningful to research teams who used varied analytical approaches. However, this raised difficult issues for the 'final' analysis and the production of a loosely coupled research report. Our pragmatic solution was a process of 'qualitative synthesis' whereby individual partner reports were collated by the Project Director and treated as data and a grounded theory approach was applied to generate tentative theory in respect of creative learning. The article concludes by arguing that data generated by a loosely-coupled approach to qualitative comparative research which uses a wide range of data collection methods can be effectively analysed with a qualitative synthesis.

Qualitative Data Analysis in Cross-Cultural Projects

Introduction

Large-scale research projects, conducted in a cross-Europe context, are increasingly attractive to educational researchers and policy makers. Some of these projects employ solely quantitative methods and aim at standardisation and comparability, while others use mixed methods. This article reports on the sole use of qualitative ethnographic methodology used in a research study *Creative Learning and Pupil Perspectives* (CLASP) conducted in nine European countries. In a previous article we focused on the use of the ethnographic method to develop a 'shared repertoire' in the international research team in which the adoption of ethnographic methodology was central to this process. Osborn (2004) indicates a number of studies adopting innovative methodologies in this tradition. Crossley and Vulliamy (1997) for example, argue that case-study or ethnographic method can play a vital role in comparative education research, particularly that exploring the relationship between policy and schooling. These forms of case study provide comparative insights which can lead to theories about the process of schooling. Webb and Vulliamy (1999) and Webb et al. (2004) have argued for and have used ethnographic methods in a number of cross-national studies. Crossley and Watson (2003) advocate the method in international comparative studies assessing the impact of globalization. However, Vulliamy (2004) has recently argued, though, that this 'new' form of comparative research, though still highly appropriate in the current context, may be under attack from globalising tendencies and competing research cultures itself. The development of culturally sensitive qualitative research methodologies is an urgent task identified by Broadfoot (2006) who has not only identified weaknesses in 'traditional' comparative educational research, but has also called for an increasing focus on 'learning' in cross-cultural development of comparative 'learnologies' – foreshadowing a new research paradigm.

Here, we consider issues in ethnographic analysis generally and relate these to issues surrounding the joint analysis of qualitative data by research teams. We outline some of the things we learned from working in what was a loosely-coupled (Weick, 1989) team and identify: differences in approach and practice; uses of qualitative methodology; the extent to which partners included a range of qualitative data; and focus on the relationship between comparative analysis and grounded theory. The article concludes by outlining the relevance of ethnography in large-scale international research projects.

Qualitative Data Analysis in Cross-Cultural Projects

One of the major issues for qualitative research across cultural boundaries is the extent to which researcher teams are able to use the full range of qualitative methods, such as that used in ethnography – the collection of relevant documents and materials, fieldwork observations, recorded interviews and conversations. Research projects with different cultural research traditions can result in much time being spent early in the projects devising a common methodology and the different languages involved entails exploring the different conceptual equivalences of the focus of the study (Osborn 2004). The geographical distances involved necessitates both electronic and face-to-face meetings and in both of these engagements the linguistic understandings between team partners have to be prioritised in all communications.

One universally popular methodology for carrying out the full range of qualitative research similar to ethnography is that outlined in the Miles and Huberman (1994) text book. The analysis of qualitative data involves three phases. *Data Reduction* refers to keeping the project manageable by limiting the amount of data – fieldnotes and interview transcripts – collected, to avoid being overwhelmed through making sampling decisions at the data collection stage. The 'decisions about what to select and what to summarize, and how this is then to be organized, are analytical choices' (Robson 2002). *Data Display* refers to the efficient means of organizing and displaying information involving the use of charts, graphs, matrices, networks but they also have a part to play in the data collection phase (Robson 2002). *Conclusion Drawing and Verification* begins from 'the start of data collection, noting

patterns and regularities, positing possible structures and mechanisms. Miles and Huberman (1994) stress that this should be accompanied throughout by a verification process: that is, testing validity and reliability, e.g.: Is an explanation plausible? Can you find evidence confirming it? Can a finding be replicated in another data set?

Miles and Huberman (1994) have developed a highly detailed and systematic approach to the qualitative research process and data analysis, which also includes consideration of large-scale case study projects involving multiple sites (though not cross-cultural in the sense of different national cultures) and a team of researchers, each one being responsible for a single case-study/site. In multiple case-study projects researchers begin the project with common research questions and develop shared data coding schemes from the outset. Throughout the research a key strategy for joint analysis is the case analysis meeting where main themes, impressions, summary statements about what is going on in the case are recorded alongside explanations, speculations and hypotheses. Alternative interpretations, explanations, disagreements are debated and the next steps for data collection, follow-up questions, specific actions and the general direction for future fieldwork are decided as are the implications for revision and updating of coding schemes. Thus, analysis feeds into further data collection, leading to further analysis, in a 'spiral of understanding' (Lacey 1976).

However, the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, although useful for the attention paid to joint analysis of differing perspectives of research sites, even across cultures, is not easily transferred to international cross-cultural projects due to the difficulties in organising frequent meetings and the time needed to iron out differing conceptual equivalences and interpretations across different languages. The sort of debates and discussions needed to maximise the Miles and Huberman operation are also not enacted easily via email (Somekh and Pearson, 2002).

Two recent European research projects, however, have developed their own qualitative methodologies to take into account international comparative research. We refer here to the

extensive European cross-cultural studies conducted by Webb et al. (1999; 2004) and Osborn (2001).

The Webb et al. (2004) comparative research project focused on the professionalism of English and Finnish primary teachers over a ten year period and included 24 English and 13 Finnish teachers. However, it appears that in order to sustain cross-cultural validity they limited the research to semi-structured interviews using a schedule based on three of the main research questions. All the interviews were transcribed and the Finnish transcripts were translated into English. The two sets of data were coded separately by English researchers but the Finish data was discussed in collaboration with Finnish colleagues in a week-long meeting held in Finland during the project. This meeting was similar to that advocated in the Miles and Huberman model, in that it clarified different case interpretations:

> This collaborative process enabled the kinds of language/cultural context/translation issues raised in earlier studies, whereby Finnish translation into English can produce terminology with different meanings from the English equivalent to be more fully explored (Webb et al., 2004, p.89).

Analysis was conducted by the English research team using the winMAX qualitative data analysis computer software package. The analysis involved category generation and saturation based on constant comparison as advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

The major advantage of using winMAX software was 'it enabled a single complete archive file to contain all texts, memos and categories/codings, thus providing an audit trail of the analysis process' and 'e-mail communication concerning the precise manner in which segments of interview transcripts have been coded and subsequently analysed' was possible (Webb et al., 2004, p.89).

However, the research appears to have prioritised standardisation of analysis over employing the full range of qualitative methods for they appeared to have carried out no observations over time and it also appears that the researchers who carried out the interviews did not carry

out the initial categorisation, but they kept the involvement of research personnel down to two thus easing problems of data analysis.

The Osborn (2001) 'Education and National Culture: A Comparative Study of Attitudes to Secondary Schooling' study (ENCOMPASS) of three European countries (England, France, Denmark) used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection to 'maximise breadth and depth of the insights generated' (p.2) including observations similar to an ethnographic and Miles and Huberman (1994) approach methodology.

Data collection took place at three levels:

(1) *National Policy Level*: policy documents were analysed in terms of national policy discourses present. Identifying goals and areas of tension.

(2) *School Level*: involving documentary analysis of prospectuses, policy documents, school development plans. Interviews with school personnel and pupils. Semi-structured interviews were focused on key research questions. Participating schools were chosen to be representative in terms of socio-economic mix. In England three Comprehensives were chosen. These English schools were matched with three in Denmark and three in France. A larger sample of schools was devised for the questionnaire survey.

(3) *Pupil Level*: great care was taken to standardise the questionnaire for its use in and across the three different national contexts. Eighteen pupils were chosen for a 'target group'. Study of this group involved individual and group interviews and classroom observation. One of the aims of repeating interviews with the 'target group' was to follow insights gained from the analysis of the questionnaires and the individual interviews.

Extensive piloting of all of the research instruments and the presence of the researchers in the classroom when questionnaires were being completed aimed to minimise many problems associated with cross-cultural research.

This study used a method developed by Judge et al. (1994) in a 3 country study in England, France and USA. And like Schratz (1992) the interest was on including and comparing insider and outsider perspectives in order to 'gain three-way cultural insights and to minimise the risks of ethnocentricity' (p.4). In the Judge et al. (1994) research 'the French research partner, who had extensive knowledge of the English and French systems, was asked to interpret the American experience in a way which made it intelligible to the English partner while retaining validity according to the American partner. 'Thus, in the ENCOMPASS study each researcher wrote up data from a country that was not their own in a way which emphasised an 'outsider' perspective. Cross-checking and validation of these accounts by the host country then took place' (Osborn 2004). They went beyond Webb et al. (2004) and carried out a form of reciprocal analysis in which each partner analysed each other's data.

As with the Webb et al. (2004) study, the Osborn (2001) research produced a common questionnaire, a tight set of analytical strategies, together with a close relationship between the main analysts to produce a clear standardised format for their methodology but they appeared to sacrifice extensive field observations over time. The main instrument, once again, was the questionnaire in which 'careful consideration was given to linguistic and conceptual cross-cultural differences……. and these were extensively piloted to and revised a number of times,' (Osborn 2001, pp. 269).

Across these studies, we see the establishment of common data coding schemes and the joint development of revised schemes as the fieldwork and analysis proceeds (Miles and Huberman 1994). We saw how one study (Webb et al., 2004) built 'standardisation' into the project by researchers using the same semi-structured interview schedule with all the teachers and the two (principal) researchers, who were English, controlling data production, analysis and interpretation. In the Osborn (2004) study comparability was enabled through the 'standardised' questionnaire, where coding, analytical schemes and the basis for comparison of data were built into the design even before the research instrument has been utilised.

There is a tension here, however, '(in fact a basic dilemma) in this kind of study between the qualitative need for idiographic intimacy and fine detail on the one hand, and that for commonality and standardisation on the other – a similar tension that lies between qualitative and quantitative research' (Peter Woods - personal communication, 06/10/2005).

The last two examples of comparative research carry legitimacy and validity due to its tightly framed data sets and analytical strategies but it was not easy for them to include researcher observations. In order for the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach to be successful across a number of international communities the sample would need to be selected for manageability and the extensive field notes and memos would require translation. These field notes and memos would, inevitably be open to conflict over common interpretations from analysts who had neither been at the site or understood the nuances of cultures in those sites. The studies discussed although using qualitative methods in a sometimes ethnographic approach have to some extent inherited positivistic assumptions derived from 'old' style comparative research. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the work of Miles and Huberman. This is not to be critical of these studies, rather it explains the need for standardisation in data collection and analysis exactly because the studies are *comparative* and, ultimately, their aim is, in the analytical stage, to compare like-with-like.

We are left with the problem, then, of how to operationalise comparative research with many cross-cultural partners, include the full range of qualitative research methods, and conduct data analysis during and at the end of the project while still maintaining cultural sensitivity in a nine-country study? We turn to the case of the CLASP research and how we dealt with some of these issues, in particular, the focus will be on data analysis in the final stages of the project, though, as will be discerned from the discussion, data-analysis in ethnography is an ongoing process.

The CLASP Research Project

The project, originally involving nine European partners, necessitated the construction of a comparative qualitative methodology suited to the situation as had the Webb et al. (2004) and

Osborn (2004) projects. All ethnography is comparative (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and therefore it was seen by us as an appropriate methodology for cross-cultural research in that it draws comparisons within a case, between cases and beyond cases - to other research and writing in the area - although it is often portrayed as a method which is unsuited to comparison as it is very often undertaken by individuals (Lofland, 1971).

We considered our project to be part of the 'new' tradition of comparative research, which aimed to adopt contextual sensitivity (Broadfoot, 2000) and ethnography appeared to be a suitable methodology for that approach. One account of the analytical process in ethnography we have found highly influential and useful in our own work is provided by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 205):

> In ethnography the analysis of data is not a distinct stage of the research. In many ways, it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles and books. Formally, it starts to take shape in analytical notes and memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches. And in these ways, to one degree or another, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection….This commitment to a dialectical interaction between data collection and data analysis is not easy to sustain in practice, however; and much ethnographic research suffers from a lack of reflexivity in this respect.

This approach prioritises the centrality of the researcher to select appropriate data and to interpret the situation in which the data have been collected. It also provides an alternative solution for a large cross-cultural research project in which a full range of qualitative approaches are prioritised. The problem it creates is how to operationalise such a project that emphasises that these complex processes of data collection, analysis and writing are to be conducted individually, by the 'lone ethnographer' (Lofland, 1971; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Wolcott 1995) who is also researching as part of a team.

In some ways the large set of partners pre-ordained the impossibility of devising a tight set of questionnaires or interview schedules in order to facilitate data collection and analysis. Each partner took full responsibility for their own data collection, analysis and representation. Analysis of data was also carried out by the partner researchers, for the data collection was recorded in the native language, interpreted in the native culture and represented in the national and local policy and educational context in which the research took place. We developed a loosely-coupled relationship framed within an ethnographic methodology and a specific fieldwork set of lenses or sensitising concepts (Troman and Jeffrey, 2005) for researching creative learning.

Project Details

The European Commission funded the project with nine partners for a total of nine months fieldwork over a twenty two month period from December 2003 until October 2005 to highlight the existence of an alternative common discourse to that of increasing global convergence of instrumental education policy and practice. The common factor between us was a set of values concerning education, a prevailing common discourse, with its roots in European educational literature concerning creative teaching and learning derived in the most part from pedagogies which have been part of European educational values since the 19th century, for example; Pestolozzi, and Froebel. The research also filled a large gap in comparative research for there has been a 'neglect of pedagogy in comparative education' and it is argued that future comparative studies of education should place much greater emphasis 'on the process of learning itself rather than at present, on the organisation and provision of education' (Broadfoot 2000, p. 368; also see Broadfoot 2006).

Our interest in 'creative learning', focused on how creative teaching was experienced, adapted, appropriated or rejected by students and what kinds of creative agency is released through creative teaching contexts in these countries. Its key characteristics are the same as applied to creative teaching—relevance, control, ownership and innovation.

- relevance. Learning that is meaningful to the immediate needs and interests of pupils and to the group as a whole

- ownership of knowledge. The pupil learns for herself - not the teacher's, examiner or society's knowledge. Creative learning is internalized and makes a difference to the pupil's self.

- control of learning processes. The pupil is self-motivated, not governed by extrinsic factors, or purely task-oriented exercises.

- innovation. Something new is created. A major change has taken place - a new skill mastered, new insight gained, new understanding realised, new, meaningful knowledge acquired. A radical shift is indicated, as opposed to more gradual, cumulative learning, with which it is complementary.

Considering the relationship among these criteria, Woods (2002) concludes that the higher the relevance of teaching to

children's lives, worlds, cultures and interests, the more likelihood there is that pupils will have control of their own learning processes. Relevance aids identification, motivation, excitement and enthusiasm. Control, in turn, leads to ownership of the knowledge that results. If relevance, control and ownership apply, the greater the chance of creative learning resulting—something new is created, there is significant change or 'transformation' in the pupil—i.e. innovation (p. 7)

The general objectives of the CLASP project were:

1. To identify and record teacher strategies for developing creative learning.

2. To identify and record examples of learner creativity.

3. To record the extent to which the incorporation of student perspectives into teaching and learning programmes promotes commitment to learning contexts.

4. To develop, with teachers, where appropriate, strategies that incorporate student perspectives into their pedagogies

Methodology

We aimed to ensure that the partners retained:

- A vision of their own aims related to their situations and circumstances

- An approach to fieldwork that was relevant and appropriate to their circumstances

- A form of data collection that suited their staffing levels and situations

- Contextualised approaches to research and respondent relations

- Relevant levels of data analysis and reproduction

- Different constituents to whom their research was targeted.

Following the Webb et al. (2004) and Osborn (2001) studies we concluded that the common adoption of a methodology for the study was the main means of establishing and maintaining a 'shared repertoire' (Somekh and Pearson 2002; Wenger, 1998) within an inter-national team but that it needed to be a lot looser than these previous strategies as we had significantly more partners and wished to include the breadth of ethnographic methodology including a great deal of fieldwork involving participant observation.

The nine partner research sites and foci varied from early years to post-graduate studies.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Partner data collection, analysis and reporting

Our loosely-coupled framework meant that we had no standardised data collection format in terms of questionnaires, interviews or conversation schedules. As noted above each partner devised these themselves but related them directly and continuously to their fieldwork observations just as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest but this was not discussed by the cross cultural partners as suggested by the latter and carried out by the Webb et al. (2004) and Osborn (2001) studies. The common framework was a fieldwork focus that reflected

ethnographic methodology employing sensitising concepts around creative learning— such as: the context; the situational interactions; the students' cognitive explorations; the students' subjective reactions; and their agency (Troman and Jeffrey, 2005). This enabled the researchers to construct 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of qualitative enquiry. This did not mean that data were merely gathered which in some way illuminated and reinforced our existing tentative framework arising from previous work. This theory, however, did provide our sensitising concepts for analysis and was, of course, just one of a number of points of comparison in that analytical process. A common text written by Peter Woods on researching the Art of Teaching (Woods, 1996) was used by all the researchers and comprised the second major component of this methodological framework.

One of the consequences of this loose-coupling was that data analysis and representation was a more diverse affair than that experienced in the Webb et al. (2004) and Osborn (2001) studies. Three major strategies for data collection, analysis and representation across the partners became apparent corresponding to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *data purists, accurate describers* and *theory builders*.

The *data purists* followed one tradition in qualitative research in that the researcher's task was, like a journalist, to gather the data and present it in such a manner that the informants speak for themselves and there was no overt attempt at any thematic/theoretical analysis (see for example, Geertz, 1973; Terkel, 2000). The aim here was to give an honest account with little or no interpretation of participants' accounts or of observations made by the researcher. This approach dominated reports from three partners.

Other researchers, the *accurate describers,* were also concerned with description when conducting analysis and presenting their findings, but because it was not possible to present all the raw data to readers, it was necessary to engage in data reduction which meant undertaking a great deal of selection and interpretation, as in the Miles and Huberman (1994) model. Researchers who adopted this approach typically interspersed their own interpretative comments around long descriptive passages and quotations from interview field notes. The

illustrative materials were intended to give a sense of the observed world; while the researcher's interpretations were meant to represent a more detached conceptualisation and abstraction of that reality (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Four partners took this approach and a third group consisting of two partners were the *theory builders,* who considered that the development of theoretically informed interpretations was the most powerful way to bring represent reality and who began their projects with specific theories in mind that they wished to further characterise and develop.

To summarise, the *data purists* reproduced raw unanalysed data, the *accurate describers* produced what they considered was an accurate description that involved interpretation and the use of abstract concepts to characterise their data and the *theory builders* began with theories and developed and challenged them.

On reflection this was not a surprising outcome. We had tried discussions via the e-mail of fieldnotes, memos, papers and characterisations but these were not very successful given the language differences and the fact that this is not a particularly good medium for analytical development as has been found in other cross-cultural studies (Somekh and Pearson, 2002). In the main, partners were working in-depth in their own cultures and heavily influenced by their previous experience of qualitative research. At our five research meetings we were facilitated by a methodological consultant and at least half the time was devoted to developing a model of innovative analytical characterisation and tentative theory development, the other half of each of these meetings were concerned with partner reports which opened up analytical categories and characterisations that were new to others and at the same time the different analytical methods used were exposed to debate and discussion.

Qualitative Data Synthesis

The CLASP study did not seek, at this stage, to compare differences in processes or events, as is the role of much comparative research, but sought to identify common features of a particular form of pedagogy. And from these features to create something that was 'more than

the sum of their parts' (Alexander 2001, p.511.) and 'to tease out the universal…..by the trading and migration of ideas and practices across national borders.' (ibid. p.513-514).

Ideally, we would have liked to have the time to discuss, in detail, these different approaches, the characterisations of the teaching and learning situations that were being invoked, the categories and concepts that were being developed and the tentative theories being developed or the theories being validated. There were reports at meetings and papers and memos were circulated but we adopted a loosely-coupled approach (Weik 1989) in which each partner carried out their own analysis. In quantitative research 'the aggregation of findings or data from multiple studies by means of statistical techniques is termed meta-analysis' (Martyn Hammersley - personal communication, 25/10/2005). We were attempting a kind of 'meta-ethnography' (Britten et al., 2002) in order to 'synthesise' (Noblit and Hare, 1988) a number of qualitative studies. We decided, in this qualitative synthesis, to treat all the partner reports as data to be coded, analysed, interpreted and categories were established which were then compared across the dataset for negative comparisons to sharpen and distil the analysis utilising a grounded theory approach. In effect we were treating the partner reports and papers as data with one of us (Project Director) carrying out the initial comparative analysis and passing back the analysis for validation by the individual partners.

We received nine partner reports and other papers from the partners and each of these was firstly combed for common characteristics of both teacher strategies to develop creative learning and students' experiences of it. These features were then categorised, for example the teacher strategies to stimulate creative learning were found to be the establishment of *real and critical events, the creative use of space*, *modelling creativity*, *encouraging participative strategies and learner inclusiveness* and *providing relevant pedagogies and discourses*. The student's common experiences of creative learning were categorised as *open adventures, intellectual analysis, engaged productivity* and *process and product reviews* (Jeffrey 2006b) This categorisation approach we called collective synthesis for it was in effect a list of common features.

A second and more interpretative approach was then used to select some partner conceptualisations that appeared to have some commonality across partner's reports, embellish them and interrogate them with the data from the other partners. The Project Director carrying out this form of analysis across the dataset, revising and reconstructing it as he searched back and forth amongst the reports for additional features and contradictory factors to devise categories that inclined towards a theorisation of creative learning across the partners. For example, one of the partners wrote about creative learning being a *meaningful experience*. The reports were then trawled to find examples of it. The young participants responded to creative learning by indicating the extent to which the experience was meaningful to them; the way they felt about the learning experience; the importance it had for their self-identity and their sense of inclusion. The relevance of the experience of creative learning to their 'self' was seen in their subjective reactions – their joy of engagement and the quality of the authentic relationships they developed towards their work. Their identities – the social character they inhabit – resulted in feeling more confident about their labour and more confident about their place in the class and school in terms of relationships and belonging through the experience of co-participation. They also expressed some satisfaction concerning the quality of the social relationships that developed during creative learning although their reactions were not always positive, particularly in situations where the top-down national policies were seen as ineffective and sometimes damaging. From this trawl we developed empirical categories of *self affirmation, social identity, social role* and *social relations* were significant areas of meaning for the young participants (Jeffrey 2006b)

This second analytical strategy – which we termed 'grafted synthesis' - takes one idea from the one or more of the partners and a search is done to develop its characteristics from the reports and papers provided by the other partners. They may not have actually mentioned the meaningful nature of creative learning but their data contained some examples of its existence and the Project Director developed the conceptualisation from their empirical data and analysis.

Researcher Validation

The whole final report was then returned to the partners for their validation. This respondent validation process strengthened the participants in their work as they shared in the criticality of the research, and tested the significance of higher order constructs (Woods, 1996). In this case the respondents were not those who were researched, as in some other well known research projects (see for example, Mac An Ghaill, 1988) but the loosely-coupled research team. Inaccuracies were identified, obsfucatory analysis was questioned, arguments over inclusions and interpretations took place and were resolved and the limitations of the loosely-coupled project were also discussed. The final result was an analytical research report that had been validated by the researchers of each project. On completion of this process and when the descriptions and categories were further interrogated we developed a report (Jeffrey 2005), which had been agreed by all the partners and was published and more detailed exemplifications were published in an edited collection (Jeffrey 2006a).

Conclusion

The commonality of method in the project eased analytical problems to some extent and allowed us to develop categories that were common to the various projects using the 'constant comparison' approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this way there was a synthesis of the partners' research analyses, which should be seen as laying a foundation for follow-up studies to build theory and devise and use tests of it, a kind of 'progressive focusing' writ large. The whole project analysis from the partner's reports and papers complied with a grounded theory approach in which theory is derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection - our methodological framework - and the analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. The latter, was in this case, the descriptive and analytical data provided in the partner reports. In this way data collection, analysis and theory stood in a reciprocal relationship with each other (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We began with an area of study and allowed what was relevant to that area to emerge through constant comparison and interrogation of analytical categories.

Ethnography is always under pressure to show how it can play a meaningful role interpreting and representing reality but at the same time there is pressure to validate analysis. Given the difficulties of cross-cultural qualitative research the temptation is to rely on those aspects of qualitative research that can be standardised at the outset and the easiest way to carry out fieldwork may be seen to apply some form of standardisation in questionnaire and interview design. Observational material, however, cannot be systematised so easily prior to the fieldwork but broad areas for observation can be identified. On the other hand the adoption of a loosely-coupled approach in which partners carry out all data collection and perform individual analysis and representation from within a shared repertoire can mean, as it did in the CLASP case, a range of analysis that needs further qualitative synthesis.

Ideally, cross cultural teams need time to develop a common analytical framework and to find some way of discussing their analysis in teams as Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend and as Webb et al. (2004) and Osborn (2004) demonstrated with a number of partners less than CLASP.

In the light of our experience we argue that the strategy of collective and grafted synthesis and researcher validation could be considered as legitimate in comparative research. It could be used as a stage in the research process or a methodology to be used alongside others such as standardised data collection procedures established prior to the fieldwork. Qualitative synthesis is similar to the Webb et al. (2004) and Osborn (2004) analytical process in that a small number of people carried out the main analysis, on which the project outcomes were based, although this was a secondary analysis of the partner reports and papers and a form of researcher respondent triangulation was used. However, we were able to carry out comparative analysis, able to include observational and interpretive material and also present relevant findings.

The desire to gain empirical realities across a number of research sites is a difficult challenge but providing the methodology is clear and open and the findings are valid in terms of their plausibility and credibility (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and the analytical procedures of

the CLASP project are adopted, we suggest, that research with a large number of national

partners with a commitment to include the full range of ethnographic materials is possible.

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TABLE 1

Partner and principal researcher and article author	Research Sites
University of Innsbruck, Austria	One secondary classroom and two primary classrooms in separate schools
University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark	One secondary school
The Open University, Milton Keynes, England	Two primary schools and two primary dance projects
St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland	Two primary classrooms and one special needs class
Academy of Humanities and Economics, Lodz, Poland	All classes of 18+students
University of Lisbon, Portugal	Three secondary classes
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland	One primary school with a specialist bi-lingual unit.
University of Cadiz, Spain	One Early years school, one primary class and one secondary class.
Göteborg University, Sweden	Two secondary schools and one adult learning centre