There are many opportunities for qualitative approaches to make a contribution to comparative research in education, and this is particularly the case with teaching. For example, understanding variations in the results of international surveys comparing student achievement such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study requires a qualitative analysis of classroom processes set in particular cultural contexts. But whilst many studies have explored similarities and variations in teaching qualitatively (for example, Alexander, 2000; Goodson and Lindblad, 2011; Osborn et al., 2003) few have focused in detail on comparing the processes underpinning teaching and learning. This is partly because engaging in qualitative comparative research in education brings challenges; not least, how can comparative analyses be made and inferences drawn with some confidence whilst accounting for cultural specificity and the richness and messiness of everyday life (Kelly, 2013). The articles in this special edition consider qualitative comparative research on teaching from a diversity of perspectives with papers on pre-school and school teaching, reports of empirical studies and a consideration of appropriate methods and methodological challenges.

Alexander argues for a comparative approach which, ‘maps the key elements in the act of teaching and links them with the processes of curriculum transformation from state to classroom’ (Alexander, 2001: 507). This includes exploring how social and political values translate via situational circumstances into acts of teaching. The prize for Alexander is ‘differentiating the universal in pedagogy from the culturally specific’ (Alexander, 2009: 20). But such comparisons can also bring improved understanding of the broad relations between teachers, practices and pupil experiences (the relation of the how and what of teaching to what is learnt) and the wider social, cultural and historical contexts in which they are embedded (including the process by which competing influences affect teaching and the student experience). A greater understanding of such relations can inform policy development in teacher education and development and support teachers and trainee teachers in enhancing their work with pupils in areas such as tackling pupil underachievement. And it can also inform an understanding of policy implementation and the policy cycle (Ball and Bowe, 1992). The papers in this special edition show how a number of researchers have attempted to meet some of these possibilities and challenges.

We begin with a focus on curriculum, but not within a static view of curriculum; rather this is considered a dynamic entity emerging from the various actors and activities within an education setting. Chapman provides an analysis of the geography curriculum and its realisation in classrooms in British international schools in Sri Lanka, a former British colony. In this she explores how knowledge about difference and similarity is constructed through interactions between the
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syllabus, teachers and students, and shows how issues of privilege and marginalisation are born out of these exchanges.

Turning next to pedagogy there are two papers which focus on mathematics. Pratt and Kelly examine the teaching of abstraction in two mathematics lessons in Denmark and England. In this a comparative pedagogy approach is used to focus on the detail of curriculum and teaching, of what exactly it is which makes a subject like mathematics difficult and of how this influences practice, varies between counties and benefits or hinders different student groups in each context. A little later, Kelly and Kotthoff explore the education of higher achieving students in Germany and England. Central to their analysis is a consideration of similarities and differences in the views teachers in each country have of the nature of mathematics itself, and how this affects the way they teach.

Remaining with teachers and considering classroom decision-making, Hohmann examines the form and extent discretion takes in teachers’ work and how they negotiate their way through sometimes contradictory policy imperatives. In this she draws on the work of Michael Lipsky to illuminate why linear models of policy enactment and, in consequence, notions of simple policy transfer are problematic.

Given that little has been published on challenges and benefits which may arise from using grounded theory in international comparative research projects, in the next article Rupp explores these by focusing on the emergent process of developing a grounded theory and analysing data in a foreign language. She does this by referring to her own research with teachers in schools in England and Germany.

Krantz considers how the experiences of learners in performance subjects such as dance can be explored and compared through the phenomenology of artistic practice. He discusses the contribution various perspectives on the nature of experience make to such comparisons including those of Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Vygotsky. On the basis of his study with dance performance students, he argues that the phenomenology of artistic practice is a method suitable for exploring and comparing teaching.

Finally, moving from school to pre-school education, Gabriel applies the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Norbert Elias to understand the underlying learning processes of young children in different contexts. In particular, he explores the playful mockery that young children display within their peer groups to challenge teaching authority. In so doing he identifies a qualitative focus on humour as illuminating the different ways that young children in different cultures can resist adult authority.

In War and Peace (1869), Tolstoy shows us that one cannot understand the winning of battles by examining leadership and strategy alone; indeed, such top-down accounts are often constructed in hindsight with knowledge about the outcome serving to increase the significance of some actions whilst ensuring others are forgotten. It is on events and the complexity and messiness of the fray that things turn. This is the focus here, and the articles which follow illustrate how the complexity and messiness of everyday classroom life can be analysed in ways which also allow comparisons to be made and lessons learnt.

References


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