Conducting an International Systematic Review on Inclusive Didactics: Methodological Reflections and Translational Challenges

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Abstract

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to methodologically reflect upon the process of conducting a systematic review in the field of inclusive education. I illustrate this process by discussing the project "Inclusive Didactics in Empirical Research – an International Systematic Review" (IDER), while exemplarily drawing on other reviews in the field. The reflections are based on the notion of translatability so as to register and critically analyze how a review process can take shape.
METHODS: I approach this objective by first reflecting on possible (mis)translations between the terms *Didaktik* and *didactics* as well as between different meanings of *inclusive education*. I then introduce the purposes, challenges and potentials of systematic reviews in educational research, defining them as a reinterpretation of – qualitative and quantitative – data in the sense of a conceptual translation. On this basis, I present the individual steps I took in conducting the systematic review IDER according to the PRISMA guidelines, discussing the difficulties in translating the research question into a conceptual framework as well as criteria for study selection. Following, I will lay out my search strategy and give insights into reflections on coding and synthesizing results.
RESULTS: Main categories from inductive coding can be divided into 'approaches to inclusive didactics', 'barriers to inclusive didactics' and 'fields of tensions in inclusive didactics'. The results of my methodological reflections further point at translational challenges between cultural contexts and geographical regions, between different methodological registers, and between original studies and review results. The analysis also shows that international reviewing must acknowledge inequalities in representation and academic knowledge production across the globe, calling for a reflective approach to seemingly objective results.
CONCLUSION: Finally, I emphasize the need to critically reflect on one's own role in systematic reviewing and on the translational processes involved, arguing in favour of a transparent presentation of the process that still leaves room for individual or seemingly unconventional approaches.

Points of interest

- Systematic reviews promise to summarize and synthesize findings from a broad range of individual studies on a certain topic in order to identify more universally applicable results.
- While their use in educational research – especially on inclusion – is debatable due to limitations in measurability, systematic reviews have gained major importance over the last decades.
- Systematic reviews often disclose their working process, but still mostly focus on the results rather than on possible obstacles and difficulties in conducting the study.
- To critically analyze limitations and pitfalls in international systematic reviewing, this study is to make structural and processual challenges visible and offer possible solutions.
- For illustration purposes, the systematic review "Inclusive Didactics in Empirical Research – an International Systematic Review" (IDER) is presented to exemplify methodological reflections.

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1. Introduction

When reflecting upon the aim of the project at hands,[2] namely to conduct an international systematic review on inclusive didactics in empirical research, two major challenges became apparent. Firstly, the term *inclusive didactics* can be considered "an empty signifier open to a variety of definitions" (Gidlund & Boström, 2017, 90), mostly due to the various connotations both terms imply: neither *inclusion* (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Piezunka et al., 2017; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018) nor *didactics* (Arnold, 2012; Westbury et al., 2000) follow a clear definition in educational settings, let alone international ones. Quite contrary, especially the term *didactics* carries almost opposing definitory logics in different parts of the world, juxtaposing a teacher-centred instructive paradigm (Serpil & Aktan, 2018) with a decidedly normative approach to foster students' autonomy and solidarity (Klafki, 2007). When using the latter definition, the second challenge lies in trying to systematically review inclusive didactics as reflected through empirical research, bridging discourses that typically do not share many similarities.

However, these obstacles did not outweigh the added value I expected from the project "Inclusive Didactics in Empirical Research – an International Systematic Review" (hereafter: IDER). While current systematic reviews on inclusive education mostly focus on inclusive classroom-practices (Finkelstein et al., 2021; van Mieghem et al., 2020), attitudes towards inclusive education (Lindner et al., 2023), or (non-)participation of SEN-students in classrooms (Garrote et al., 2017), they do not address didactic questions regarding "the relations and the interactions between the teacher, the students, and the content" (Zierer, 2015, 789). Yet, these factors seem elementary in researching and implementing inclusive education. Hence, the goal of the review project IDER is to generate dimensions of inclusive didactics which are *both* based on current empirical findings *and* on traditional aims of didactics "such as autonomy, responsibility, reason, and interdependence" (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020, 60) in an inclusive society.

The method of a systematic review was chosen in order to gather as many fitting impulses as possible while also methodologically examining the procedure. Historically, less attention was put on the methods used for reviewing existing studies compared to those used for primary research (Newman & Gough, 2020). However, there is a growing methodological interest in the promises and pitfalls of systematic reviews in educational settings, leading to different viewpoints on what they can and cannot achieve (see Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). To contribute to these works, I will methodologically reflect upon the process of conducting the systematic review IDER, using the construct of *translation* as a tool for reflection due to its fitting nature to the cause. For one, the *goal* of systematic reviews is often described as "to 'translate' research findings" (Hammersley 2020, 23) so that "the results from the individual studies are translated into and across each other" (Newman & Gough, 2020, 14f.), but also to an audience other than the scientific community (see Dowd & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, the *process* of systematic reviewing calls for numerous acts of translation in the broader sense of the term, applying to concepts, structures, and processes. On the surface, systematizing a variety of single studies into compact units of deliverable information can be disparaged as what Latour (2013) criticizes as "Double Click", arriving from one state to another without reflecting upon the necessary intermediate steps: "Double Click completely denies that information needs to pass through any hiatus, any discontinuity, any *translation* whatsoever" (Latour 2013, 137, highlighted by the author). Therefore, in this paper, the necessary *translational processes* involved in conducting systematic reviews are focused in order to foreground the complex methodological challenges.

First, I will frame this study by introducing my interpretation of inclusive didactics in the face of terminological and conceptual (mis)translations, determining this paper's context. Then, current perspectives on systematic reviews in educational research are being discussed, laying the foundation

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for the following methodological analysis. In the main part, I will present the successive steps I took in conducting the systematic review IDER, discussing the many individual – and certainly disputable – choices and decisions involved, sharing observations and findings from the process and mirroring them with choices made in other systematic reviews in the field. Finally, I will give exemplary insights into the results of the IDER study, using them as impulses for final methodological reflections on conducting international systematic reviews in educational settings.

2. Inclusive Didactics (not) Lost in Translation

As a researcher based in Germany, my understanding of *didactics* follows the German tradition of *Didaktik* based on educational theory as – most prominently – shaped by Wolfgang Klafki (2007). In this context, "teaching is not restricted to guidance to knowledge, but rather is charged with enabling the development of a multi-dimensioned ability to self-determination under the claim of morality" (Rucker, 2020, 56). *Didaktik* in the described sense positions normativity in its very roots (Rothland, 2024), leaning heavily on the concept of *Bildung*, a construct described as "rich and complex. Generally, it consists of two elements: an ideal picture of desirable knowledge and skills, and free learning processes […], as the ability to recognize and follow one's own interests in society and to behave within society as a responsible citizen" (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020, 56). It is important to stress that *Bildung* still relies on a "'dedication to an objective task'" (Rucker, 2020, 56) – rather than teaching this task instructionally, however, *Didaktik* seeks to teach understanding the task, supporting students' independence of thought while at the same time relating that independence to contemporary – and sometimes contradictory – values and responsibilities towards oneself and one's surroundings (Rucker, 2020). It can be argued that it is this very focus on *what* is to be learned in accordance with goals of autonomy-oriented *Bildung* in the school context that distinguishes *Didaktik* from pedagogy. Pedagogy, as a broader and more open term – often putting stronger focus on methodological questions and not always specifically leaning on the concept of Bildung –, can be concretized through *Didaktik* "to more precisely determine the school as a radical institution for pedagogical work promoting Bildung" (Uljens 2023, 131). In this sense, *Didaktik* "provides ways of thinking that highlight some very important, and universal, educational questions that are not well defined in the English-language curriculum tradition" (Westbury, 2000, 15). This missing definition could be due to the different connotations of the terms *Didaktik* (German) and *didactics* (English), the latter being "often used negatively in the literature of education research" (Serpil & Aktan, 2018, 112) due to its techno-scientific, teacher-oriented, non-participative implications in the English language. Therefore, since around the turn of the century, international educational research has partially promoted the concept of *Didaktik* (e. g. Deng, 2013; Miyamoto, 2022; Westbury et al., 2000), also calling for the field to "accept the anglicized version of it (using 'didactics' or 'subject-matter/disciplinary didactics' as quasi-English cover terms), open to them and make peace with them" (Vollmer, 2022, pp. 49). Hence, although partially reducing the complexity of the matter, *didactics* as a legitimate translation of *Didaktik* was chosen to be used contentiously throughout this study, rooting in the described paradigm.

Exploring these questions of translatability becomes even more complex when combining educational concepts. For the IDER project, notions of didactics are applied to the field of educational inclusion, opening yet another translational field, albeit not necessarily between languages but also across disciplines and academic publications: As Nilholm and Göransson (2017) point out, "it seems extraordinary that the definition of inclusion varies so much between articles and at times also within the same article" (p. 447). Indeed, there is an ongoing debate on what is implied by educational inclusion, ranging across various disciplinary traditions and defining different goals and potential actions of educational inclusion (for an analysis of researchers' definitory approaches see Piezunka et al. 2017; for an exemplary systematic review on the topic see Nilholm & Göransson 2017). One strong definition can be found in General comment No. 4 on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), according to which

> "Inclusion seeks to enable communities, systems and structures to combat discrimination,
> including harmful stereotypes, recognize diversity, promote participation and overcome

> barriers to learning and participation for all by focusing on the well-being and success of students with disabilities" (OHCHR 2016).

This definition stresses the implication of education for all, while still following a narrower paradigm of inclusive education that mostly focuses on students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Going beyond this orientation, inclusive didactics, as exemplified in German-speaking research over the last decade (Frohn et al., 2019; Markowetz, 2012; Porsch & Korff, 2023; Textor et al., 2014; Wocken, 2016), often opt for a 'broader' view. Many of these works are based on German didactics, mostly on Wolfgang Klafki's (2007) "critical-constructive didactics", but also on Wolfgang Schulz's (1981) works, since they bear explicit anti-discriminatory fundaments while addressing educational opportunities for *all*. From there on, the individual works focus on different aspects, but are still often united in their definition of *inclusion*, declaring it as a human right that is to be respected by all participants in school and classroom settings, preventing marginalization and promoting variety and heterogeneity as an asset rather than a hinderance: "In this sense teachers do not concentrate on the supposed special needs of special children, but rather on fundamental questions relating to teaching/learning processes with the focus on recognizing the essential diversity of learners" (Rödel & Simon, 2022, n.p.). While these general connotations accord to internationally well received definitions of inclusive teaching (Florian, 2015), the specificity of *inclusive didactics* lies within its focus on the traditional figure of the *didactic triangle*, often used to analytically discuss principles and processes of teaching and learning (Porsch & Korff, 2023). This triangle consists of learner(s), teacher(s), and content(s), interrelating these determinants in order to examine notions and practices of classroom learning. Therefore, in contrast to many existing works and reviews on inclusive (school) education, using inclusive didactics as a theoretical framework puts a distinctive focus on the content and might therefore bear specific approaches to inclusive education, supporting "the crucial need to inquire how subjects are selected and constructed by its disciplinary structure that promotes the Bildung process" (Miyamoto, 2022, 12).

3. Systematic Reviews in Educational Research

Over the last decades, systematic reviews and meta-analyses have been on the rise, following the growing interest in empirically validated data on successful teaching and learning (Nordström et al., 2024). However, educational research as a field – unlike, for example, health care and medicine – has not always appeared well fitted to the methods and aims of systematic reviewing. While often systematic reviews aim at summarizing 'what works' in a quasi-objective and evidence-based manner, education in terms of *Bildung* is defined by processes, interactions and determinants beyond measures. Nind (2020) summarizes the contradictory relationship of the concepts in a mock course description for educational researchers

> "seeking skills in contextualising, carrying out, and applying systematic reviews appropriately in education settings where there is considerable scepticism about such methods. Core modules will introduce the students to doing systematic review when the idea of evidence-based education is hugely controversial." (Nind, 2020, 62)

In principle, systematic reviews aim to inform readers on existing research in a particular field, identifying, summarizing and synthesizing empirical studies on a concrete topic in order to generate implications for further research, politics or practical setting. Thereby, they serve as a translation between individual research as well as generalizable results, being used in different settings and/or for different audiences. Often combined with meta-analytical approaches, systematic reviews "are still predominantly rooted in quantitative or mixed methods paradigms" (Wilson & Anagnostopoulos, 2021, 652), having the advantage of "gathering evidence that can inform researchers and stakeholders about the effectiveness of different interventions" (Nordström et al., 2024, 4). Other approaches of gathering information across studies include, among others, scoping reviews, narrative reviews or rapid reviews. Grant and Booth (2009) identify and analyze as many as 14 review types, pointing out individual goals and potentials of the various approaches. For example, they define a scoping review as "preliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available research literature" (ibid., 95) in the sense of an exploratory approach that does not necessarily include a formal quality assessment. However,

definitions of review types vary greatly between different publications on the topic (Cristou et al. 2024) and certain types of reviews overlap in various areas, making it harder to concretely shape a review approach. In addition, by using seemingly synonymous terms such as 'reviewing literature systematically', the application of terms – within and across disciplines – becomes even more fluid. In contrast, the term *systematic review* refers to a rather fixed, formalized process, following a concrete set of rules, which only marginally differ between the individual guidelines. One prominent example is the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA, Page, Moher, et al., 2021; for a summary of other guidelines see Nordström et al., 2024; Siddaway et al., 2019), which suggests individual steps to be followed from beginning to end (Page, McKenzie, et al., 2021). It is rooted in a quantitative paradigm, but also allows for qualitative approaches.

Still, followers of a rather positivist understanding of empirical research argue that qualitative research is not suitable for systematisation in the sense of a review due to being marked as "resistant to formalisation" (for the debate see Hammersley, 2020, 31). In addition, systematically reviewing qualitative research is criticized because of the vast variety of possible methodical approaches: "Each established methodology has its own assumptions about reality, social life, and knowledge; each has a history of exemplars; each uses particular methods of data collection, analysis, and reporting" (Wilson & Anagnostopoulos, 2021, 653), making it harder to systematize and generalize results from a variety or combination of these works.

And yet, while still being largely underrepresented, reviews of qualitative research in the field of education are becoming more valuable, since their purpose is not limited to meta-analyses or statistical syntheses of existing data. Instead, they can "pursue interpretive aims that *develop a conceptual translation*, reinterpret data, or develop new theory by deriving key concepts and themes to reveal implicit meanings across primary studies" (Wilson & Anagnostopoulos, 2021, 655, highlighted by the author). In order to do so, systematic reviews of qualitative research also need to follow criteria to ensure their quality, ranging from 18 appraisal questions as a "framework for assessing research evidence" (Spencer et al., 2003) to four principles securing a systematic, reliable approach: "(a) a well-focused research question; (b) an appropriate research design; (c) a well-described and appropriate sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis method; and (d) a clear description of the research findings" (Kyndt et al., 2016, 1119).

In sum, the key criteria for conducting – quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods – systematic reviews can be defined through *reflexibility* and *transparency* (Harsh, 2020). Hence, this paper is to serve as a critical reflection of my own review process in IDER, making its steps and decisions transparent by following a combination of appraisal strategies as suggested by Newman & Gough (2020):

Figure 1: *The Systematic Review Process (as illustrated in Newman & Gough, 2020, 6)*
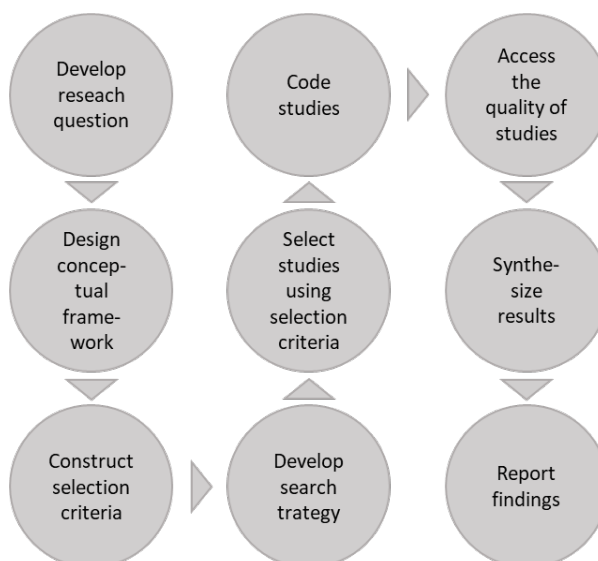
4. Reflections on "Inclusive Didactics in Empirical Research – an International Systematic Review" (IDER)

In this main section, I will outline the process of conducting the systematic review IDER, following the presented steps (see fig. 1). While these steps serve as a useful orientation when first beginning the review process, they can become a hinderance in analyzing the results when being applied too strictly. Newman and Gough (2020) themselves describe the procedure by means of "distinct but interconnected stages" (ibid., 5), also pointing out that "the protocol may be more flexible and/or developmental in nature" (ibid., 6). Hence, in the following, the individual steps are being merged where necessary and reflected upon accordingly. Putting a special focus on questions of (conceptual) translatability, I will discuss methodological and conceptual challenges in each step and introduce my way of trying to overcome them, uncovering potentially unseen struggles and presenting possible solutions.

4.1 Developing a Research Question and the Conceptual Framework

Originally, the research question in IDER aimed at identifying empirically validated dimensions of inclusive didactics that would address both school's societal responsibilities as well as students' content learning in the described sense. However, having immersed in the presented discourse on (inclusive) *Didaktik*/*didactics* and having met the described translational and theoretical discrepancies, as well as having realized that the question was too result-orientated to unpack possible unnoticed implications for further theory, I decided to reframe the project.

In asking

"(How) Are inclusive didactics represented and approached in international empirical research?"[3],

there seemed to be both room for a) *not* finding fitting studies through the bracketed 'how' (which would also be a telling result), as well as b) discovering a broader range of studies and approaches in the described sense.

The final research question shaped the conceptual framework, since I now aimed at examining questions asked and methods used in individual empirical studies on the topic, searching for unexpected impulses and results to enrich the current discourse. Furthermore, the conceptual framework was also shaped by the translational premise that it was closely set around the understanding of didactics according to Klafki (2007) without having to directly involve the term *Didaktik* or *didactics*. In the same sense, to cover questions of inclusive education, the term *inclusion* was not necessarily to be used, as long as the studies addressed questions of teaching, learning and participation in heterogeneous classrooms.

4.2 Constructing Selection Criteria

As the conceptual framework took shape, selection criteria – also referred to as inclusion and exclusion criteria (Page, Moher, et al., 2021) – became more tangible. Still, while there is a consensus that "selection criteria are shaped by the review question and conceptual framework" (Newman & Gough, 2020, 8), the translational process between the research question and fitting criteria often remains opaque. Tools proposed for this step, such as the PICO-framework[4] (Page, Moher, et al., 2021), may be helpful for setting a frame to the scope, but still do not elaborate on criteria development as derived from the question, especially when geared towards a broader research aim. For IDER, studies were to fulfill the following criteria, leaning on the theoretical foundation of inclusive didactics combined with the aim of contextualizing them in empirical research: The included studies

- must contain empirical research of appropriate quality;
- must take place in a k12 setting;

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[3] Other sub-questions were derived from this main question, such as "Which classroom practices are addressed in studies on inclusive didactics?", "Which barriers towards inclusive didactics exist?" (see Frohn, under review).

[4] The PICO-framework distinguishes between problem – intervention – comparison – outcome (quantitative) and problem – interest – context (qualitative).

- must focus on class processes, meaning that the class setting must be centered in the article and questions of teaching and learning must be addressed;
- must focus on inclusive education in the sense of dealing with heterogeneous learnings groups;
- must address the interrelation of the three variables depicted in the didactic triangle: learner(s), teacher(s), and content(s);
- must be published in English between January 2009 and May 2023.

The time span seemed necessary for the process to remain manageable. I chose the year of the German ratification of the 'UN Convention on the Rights of People With Disabilities' that took place in 2009 because – while its definition of inclusion was explicitly not made the focus of this study – the convention marked a scientific turn towards educational inclusion. In May 2023, the last search was conducted, putting an end to the search process.

4.3 Developing a Search Strategy

The search strategy was to aim at a wide range of potential studies as well as to allow for systematizing the sheer amount of data. Therefore, the strategy was shaped by the described theoretical premises of the concept of didactics, calling for *Bildung* as educational theory but still focusing on the reciprocal interrelation of content, teaching and learning. After formulating potential research terms in German, I proposed my ideas of (conceptual) translations to a colleague and expert of didactics, and made final changes to the search terms according to the suggestions made. Our discussions led, for example, to not including the search term pedagogy in the prompt due to its potential differences to didactics as illustrated above. Finally, I prompted searches in the databases of *ERIC* as well as *Taylor & Francis* as follows, accepting that many more conceptual translations would also address fitting studies (search terms such as differentiation, language learning, participation, individual support etc.), which I had to leave out in order to still be able to manage the results. Additionally, I used the Boolean operator "AND" to connect the two fields of interest (for more information on the use of Boolean operators in systematic reviews on educational inclusion see Dell'Anna et al. 2021). The decision against other Boolean operators was made due to possible restraints operators – such as "NOT" – can evoke as well as the aspect of manageability with operators like "OR".

Table 1: *Overview on the search process on ERIC (Filter: Peer reviewed + Full text available)*

didactic AND inclusion	*n* = 50
theory of education AND inclusion	*n* = 239
teaching and learning AND inclusion	*n* = 160
	N = 449

Table 2: *Overview on the search process on Taylor & Francis: (Filter: Full access through account "Humboldt-Universtät zu Berlin"; subject: education)*

didactic AND inclusion	*n* = 4.438
theory of education AND inclusion	*n* = 43.399
teaching and learning AND inclusion	*n* = 23.120
	N = 70.957

Since the amount of almost 80.000 studies exceeded all potential selection resources by far, additional restrictions were to be made – in this case, by choosing high profile journals to also ensure quality through peer-review processes. I limited the search to the journals *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (due to its expertise in publishing educational works in the field of inclusion)*, Innovations in Education and Teaching International* (due to inclusion's innovative potential and the aim for international works), and *Teachers and Teaching* (due to its long standing tradition and aim to draw

"together robust qualitative and quantitative research from different countries and cultures"),[5] still leaving $n = 3.578$ articles for the selection. This way, besides the bias I created through only searching for English articles, the search became even more biased towards the aims of the respective journals. While "[s]ystematic reviewers must carefully consider common forms of search biases, such as database bias, citation bias, availability bias, language bias, country bias, familiarity bias and multiple publication bias" (Harsh 2020, 47f.), there are also natural limits to how to minimize these biases, ranging from language skills to knowledge on journal landscapes. This journal bias, for example, was partially limited through the parallel search on ERIC ($N = 449$), aiming at another variety of potential sources. In sum, $N = 4027$ potential studies were identified.

4.4 Select Studies Using Selection Criteria

After deleting duplicates ($n = 1361$), the PRISMA-approach (Page, Moher, et al., 2021) defines study selection as "a multi-stage process in which potentially eligible studies are first identified from screening titles and abstracts, then assessed through full text review" (ibid., n.p.; for defining selection criteria in the field of educational inclusion see, for example, de Boer at el. 2011; Lindner & Schwab 2020). This step can be done with or without technological support. Since the IDER project initially started in 2021, machine learning had not yet conquered educational sciences as thoroughly, which is why I decided against automated selection. The decision, albeit questionable from today's perspective, was to be kept due to the necessary consistency in the design. Instead, I opted for cooperative selection based on PRISMA, where three researchers "independently reviewed titles and abstracts of the first 100 records and discussed inconsistencies until consensus was obtained" (ibid., n.p.). The remaining $n = 2666$ titles and abstracts were screened independently by two researchers, the third acting as sparring partner in difficult decisions. Here, the next translational issue in this step occurred, since "consensus" suggests a possible solution agreeable to everyone involved, achievable through cooperative participation of equal partners. In reality, however, *structural* hierarchies between the researchers (in this case between the group head and two undergraduate assistants) need to be acknowledged in order to not directly transfer them into *processual* working modes. Therefore, we attempted to translate implicit meanings of these academic hierarchies – for example expertise vs. open-mindedness – into participatory processes allowing for individual perspectives.

Another translational issue in study selection arose from quasi-algorithmic processes of scanning titles, abstracts and keywords: "the main focus of a review often differs significantly from the questions asked in the primary research it contains; this means that issues of significance to the review may not be referred to in the titles and abstracts of the primary studies, even though the primary studies actually do enable reviewers to answer the question they are addressing" (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2014, 50). Therefore, by *re*translating the task from the algorithmic rigidity to a reflective researcher's handling, we provisionally included reports that were (maybe) to be excluded at a later stage.

Additionally, since the selection criteria in IDER were not self-explanatory, we designed a selection handbook specifying them. For example, "must contain empirical research of appropriate quality" called for a definition of both "empirical" as well as "quality", especially when applied to qualitative research: "[a]ssessing the quality of qualitative research has attracted much debate and there is little consensus regarding how quality should be assessed, who should assess quality, and, indeed, whether quality can or should be assessed in relation to 'qualitative' research at all" (Thomas & Harden, 2008, 4; see also Hammersley, 2020). Due to the different logics of quality in different methodological paradigms – on the one hand validity, reliability and generalizability, on the other, for example, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) – the selection handbook still aimed at flexibility in the process:

- Criterion "must contain empirical research of appropriate quality":
  - the article must contain original empirical data; systematic reviews are excluded;
  - the research must be conducted through qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods;

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[5] https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctat20/about-this-journal#aims-and-scope

- o the article must contain a detailed description of the study's design, including the context, research aim, process of data collection and the data analysis;
- o the article must present results from the empirical research; texts introducing designs without presenting data/results are excluded;
- o key terms for exclusion: editorial, systematic review, theoretical paper, book review, essay.

In the final stage of full text screening, we once again applied the full range of selection criteria (see 4.2) to further eliminate non-fitting texts, since sometimes the information could not be obtained from the title or abstract. Additionally, in the stage of screening full texts, we applied the final filter "must address the interrelation of the three variables depicted in the didactic triangle", raising yet another issue of translation due to the potentially manifold connotations of the respective terms. Hence, we started to discuss these struggles in regular team meetings and a final researchers' workshop. All in all, after deciding upon individual texts discursively, we were left with 36 studies for coding.

Figure 2: *Flow-Diagram as suggested by PRISMA (Page et al. 2021)*
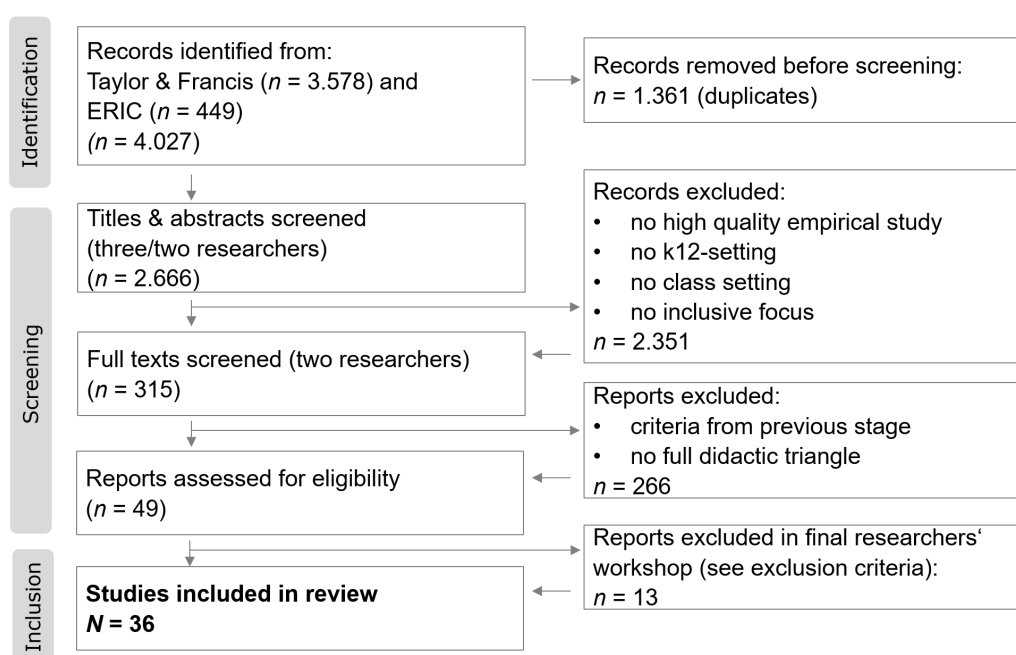
4.5 Approaching Results: Code Studies, Synthesize Results and Report Findings

Results of systematic reviews can be presented in a variety of ways. Depending on the number of studies, reviews often present the studies included in tabular form, supplying additional information (such as year, country of origin, research approach, school type etc.; see, for example Gollub et al. 2021; van Miegheim et al. 2020). [6] Regardless of whether all included studies are shown, most reviews present the extracted overarching themes and topics and discuss them in more depth (e.g. Ralston et al. 2019), sometimes adding specific focal points such as language or development over time (e.g. Amor et al. 2019), always depending on the original review question. In this sense, the goal of coding is to "systematically identify and record the information from the study that will be used to answer the review question. This information includes the characteristics of the studies, including details of the participants and contexts […] [and] details of the studies to enable mapping of what research has been undertaken" (Newman & Gogh, 2020, 12). Therefore, coding can be described as a process of translating information through – sometimes literal – mapping, a systematization especially relevant for international studies

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[6] Due to the limited length of this format, such an overview cannot be presented in the article but will be provided upon request.

aiming at illustrating the geographical dispersions between individual approaches (see fig. 3). Furthermore, inductively creating categories from data can be considered translating concepts across studies, as well as individual examples into more general units of meaning, making it harder – and somewhat arguable – to differentiate between the individual steps of systematic reviewing. As Thomas and Harden (2008) put it:

> "The use of line-by-line coding enabled us to undertake what has been described as one of the key tasks in the synthesis of qualitative research: the *translation* of concepts from one study to another […]. However, this process may not be regarded as a simple one of translation. As we coded each new study we added to our 'bank' of codes and developed new ones when necessary. As well as translating concepts between studies, we had already begun the process of synthesis" (ibid., 5).

In the following, reflections on coding and synthesizing are therefore not presented successively, but instead along thematic units representing the results of the systematic review IDER.

4.5.1 Origins of the Studies

On first glance, the studies included in IDER have been conducted all over the world, taking place in all transnational regions and therefore supporting the thesis that inclusive didactics are an educational phenomenon researched worldwide:

Figure 3: *Origin of the 36 studies.*
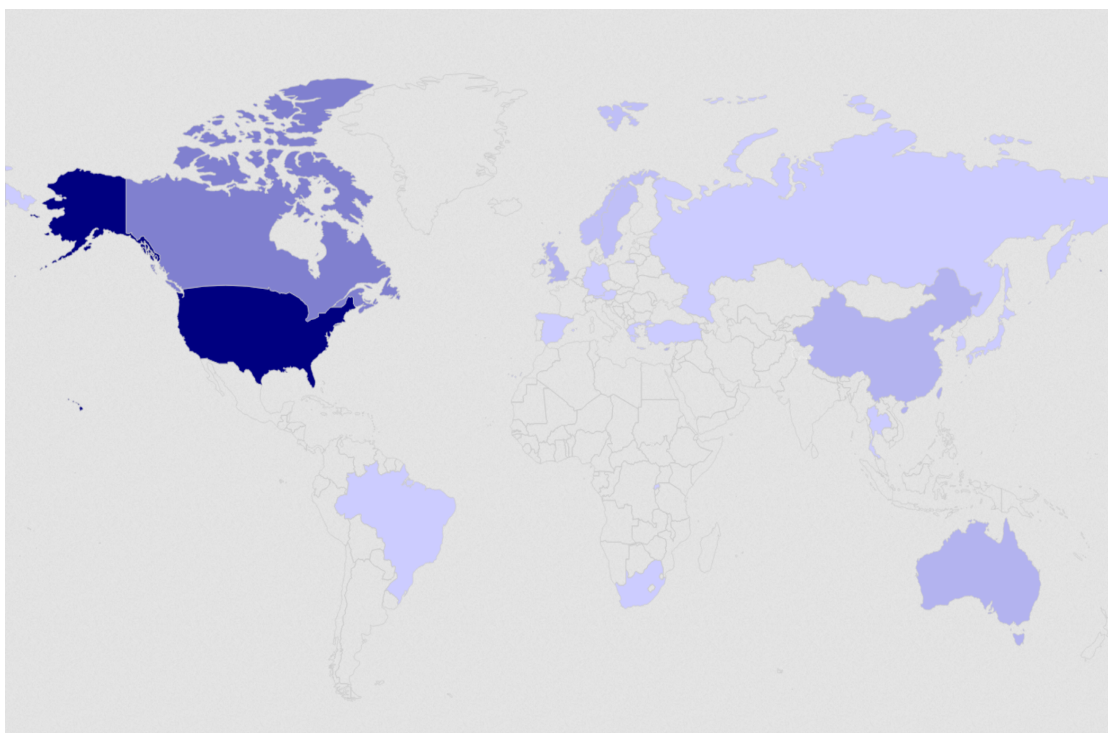
Colour shade = amount of studies per country from light (1) to dark (9); Asia: Japan (1), China/Hong Kong (2), Thailand (1), Turkey (1), South Korea (1); Africa and the Middle East: South Africa (1), Rwanda (1); Europe: Austria (1), Cyprus (2), England (2), Germany (1), Greece (1), Norway (1.5), Russia (1), Spain (1), Sweden (1.5); North America: Canada (4), USA (9); Latin America: Brazil (1); Oceania: Australia (2).

On closer inspection, however, there is a clear imbalance in favour of research from Western Europe and North America, mirroring the problematic geographical bias in international academic publishing which is "dominated by [...] the Global North, leading to a disparity in representation and access to

research from other regions, particularly low-income and middle-income countries or the Global South"[7] (Bol et al., 2023, 1; see also Csomós, 2024). In addition to the systematic inequality in academic knowledge production, the bias in IDER is further fuelled by having applied English as a selection criterion and having chosen databases deeply rooted in the anglosphere. It seems all the more important to reflect upon these biases to avoid the potential translational mistake assuming that no more research on inclusive didactics is taking place in other parts of the world. This bias might be limitable through international cooperation in systematic reviewing or multilanguage searches, which this project could not provide due to limited resources. Still, even if these obstacles were to be overcome, translational issues could still not be fully resolved. As one study puts it: "[A]ll participants completed their PHE teacher education within Canada, thereby their understandings of the concept of inclusion might be different from PHE teachers who completed their teacher education in other countries" (Patey et al., 2021, 1675).

4.5.2 Methodological approaches to Inclusive Didactics

The final sample of IDER shows a clear leaning towards qualitative research, even though the selection process aimed at studies conducted through qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approaches. Four studies were conducted quantitatively, six through a mixed-methods approach and 26 studies were exclusively designed from a qualitative perspective. Here, it is important to stress the great variety between the qualitative approaches, concerning the data acquisition as well as analytical approaches. The data collected in the 26 qualitative studies range from interview- and journal-data to ethnographic (field) notes, single- and multi-case data, (video) observations, passive observations and collaborative reflections. Additionally, these data were analyzed through a variety of approaches, including content analysis, hermeneutics, documentary method, discourse analysis and self-reflection, leading to limitations in both generalizability and potential translatability. Among others, difficulties arose from the different *methodological* languages – in terms of registers – connected to the different approaches, carrying explicit and implicit meanings hardly translatable without accepting to lose nuances in the process.

Yet, despite these difficulties, first assumptions can be made from the categorisation: Based on the vast majority of qualitative (partially single case) studies with correspondingly low sample sizes, it can be assumed that inclusive didactics are difficult to quantify. This could be due to the high normative standards implied in (inclusive) didactics, which are likely to be observed and interpreted but impractical to be operationalized or researched as a measurable construct. Furthermore, studies combining content(s), learner(s) and teacher(s) in a heterogeneous and participatory classroom that allow for generalisation require a multi-dimensional, most likely interdisciplinary and costly approach.

Also, trying to categorize through common descriptors – such as qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods – can obscure other findings across primary studies. In this case, mere deductive coding would have concealed that many of the studies apply a cautious researchers' reflexibility and/or action research. Therefore, as a translation from individual approaches towards general necessities when researching inclusive didactics, it seems beneficial to create "a safe non-judgmental space where participants [are] positioned as experts of their own experiences" (Kim & Hodge, 2021, 881).

4.5.3 Inductive Coding

In addition to descriptive coding – in this case *year of publication*, *grade level*, *country*, *underlying theory*, *data acquisition*, *analysis* and *sample* – inductive coding took place.

Here, challenges arose from the different focal approaches of the original articles, which often do not explicitly focus on the review's research question. Some studies focus on a variety of inclusive practices (e.g. Kaya & Kaya, 2022), some on a distinctive practice, such as self-assessment (Florian & Beaton, 2018) or teacher collaboration (Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014). Some studies do not explicitly address

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[7] The terms "Global North" and "Global South" are a simplification of geopolitical interrelations, here used to only sketch out a much more complex phenomenon.

inclusive education but still bear close thematic ties to the research question. For example, a study on "individualization through student choice of books and writing genres and differentiation through flexible grouping" (Porath, 2016, 880) does not once refer to educational inclusion but produced more inductive codes than many other texts explicitly focusing on the topic. Also, the ways in which studies address heterogeneity differ widely, many focusing on a whole-class-approach, while others focus on very specific groups in specific contexts. About one third of the studies explicitly focus on students with SEN, but other dimensions of heterogeneity, such as female students in PE class (Kim & Hodge, 2021) or mathematically gifted students (Basister & Kawai, 2018), are also foregrounded.

This broad diversion led to a variety of inductive categories, the main categories being

I)   *approaches to inclusive didactics* (containing the categories "goals and framework conditions of inclusive didactics" and "classroom practices", both bearing many more sub-categories),
II)   *barriers to inclusive didactics* (with sub-categories such as "systematic barriers", "habitual barriers", or "classroom barriers"), and
III)   *fields of tensions* (sub-categories being, among others, "group focus vs. individual focus", "social participation vs. content participation", "teachers' voice vs. students' voice" or "intention vs. realisation").

One theme that reoccurred across all three main categories is the topic of curricula, apparently being a primary focus when researching and discussing inclusive didactics. Hence, respective sub-categories were formed within the main categories, leading to overlapping concepts and therefore to the necessity of clarifying conceptual decisions in the coding process. Cooperatively translating these conceptual decisions into a code book and continually customizing it as coding progressed, helped making these decisions, although constant reflection remained mandatory: "Through informed subjectivity and reflexivity, systematic reviewers must ethically consider how their own contextual positioning is influencing the connected understandings they are constructing from the distilled evidence" (Suri, 2020, 49; for detailed discussions on IDER's "approaches to inclusive didactics" and "fields of tensions" see Frohn, under review).

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The idea of identifying dimensions of inclusive didactics in empirical research through a systematic review seems partially contradictive, since systematic reviewing can be "criticised for helping to promote a misconceived form of education, or indeed as anti-educational" (Hammersley, 2020, 26). *Didactics*, on the other hand, often stand in the tradition of a theoretical and critical perspective aiming at fostering the capacity for self-determination, co-determination, and solidarity (Klafki, 2007), therefore mirroring the archetypical 'pro-educational' concept of *Bildung*. However, as Wilson and Anagnostopoulos (2021) point out in their methodological reflection on conducting reviews, "coloring outside the lines" (ibid., 666) of systematic reviewing and thereby "exploring contradictions and contrasts" (ibid., 664) can lead to valuable insights into a topic otherwise inaccessible.

In IDER, bridging the apparent contradiction was attempted through approaching systematic reviewing not as a means for illustrating 'what works' but rather as an interpretative framework allowing for conceptual translations. In addition to offering possible translations on (*inclusive*) *didactics*, this methodological reflection illustrated that translational difficulties can be encountered in every part of the review process, ranging from translating a research question to selection criteria to translating individual study findings to categories during coding.

Exploring these kinds of translational challenges rather than merely presenting a review's results seems to allow for an even deeper understanding of the matter, "which includes the acknowledgement of disruptions, rejections, misunderstandings, and conflicts that can occur – and, most importantly, the ideological (and perilous) *role of the translator*" (Bachmann-Medick & Buden, 2008, n.p.). By reflecting

my role and my decisions during the review process, I have come across three translational areas that seem especially relevant for conducting international systematic reviews:

Firstly, conducting an international review calls for repeated translations between cultural contexts and their respective roles and power relations in academic publishing as well as for reflective interpretation. The study suggests that *inclusive didactics* seem to be a travelling concept that – while sharing main themes and approaches – "articulates differently" in different parts of the world. In the case of IDER, 36 articles were identified that address questions of inclusive didactics by analyzing the interrelations of student(s), teacher(s) and content(s) in heterogenous learning groups, setting different focal points while allowing for common approaches of systematization. Yet, due to the presented bias, the geographical mapping must be considered with caution.

Secondly, reviewing empirical research relies on continuously translating among and across methodological registers. IDER has shown that *inclusive didactics* are in some cases addressed through quantitative and mixed-methods studies, but mostly researched through qualitative approaches, additionally calling for participatory or action research. This led to the challenge that "[q]ualitative research is made up of multiple disciplinary language communities […]. Review-authors […] must thus be 'multilingual.' They must find ways to synthesize qualitative research without using reductive strategies that abandon contexts and particulars while maximizing the cumulative knowledge that might be built by looking across different kinds of research" (Wilson & Anagnostopoulos 2021, 666). In sum, when combining different methodical means, it seems vital to reflect which insights can be gained from which approaches, calling for methodical and interpretative openness.

Thirdly, translating original results into categories for generalization must be based on comprehensible rules, ideally disclosed through a codebook developed and reflected through cooperative processes. In IDER, similarities across studies were found that describe approaches and barriers to inclusive didactics as well as possible fields of tensions. Among many others, one major focus stressed across primary studies can be put on the role of curricula in inclusive didactics (see Frohn, under review, for further information on the results).

As an outlook for systematically reviewing educational research, a general thought is to be kept in mind, concerning both original studies as well as reviews: "originals are not simply givens or precursors; they too are created through translation in the first place. This destabilizes all notions of origin as well as concepts based on authenticity" (Bachmann-Medick & Buden, 2008, n. p.). Methodological reflections can help stabilize these notions, while also leaving room for the necessary translational freedom.

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