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How to study quality in teaching: Comparing designs and implicit assumptions in three QUINT subprojects

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Abstract

Broadly, the QUINT ambition is to investigate quality in teaching through a 'systemic and differential framework' which involves several subprojects. This presentation attempts to offer a comparative analysis of what this might mean in practice, focusing on commonalities and differences in the research designs of three empirical QUINT subprojects: *Linking Instruction and Student Achievement* (LISA), the *Connected Classroom* (CC) and the *Quality Literature Education* project (QUALE). In particular, I am interested in analyzing implicit theoretical and methodological assumptions in the three projects, and how these assumptions may co-shape how quality is studied, understood and used for further research in the QUINT project involving professional learning and teacher training.

Theoretically, my point of departure is the socio-culturally inspired claim that quality in education is related to 'what counts as meanings and the legitimate form of their realization in relevant contexts' (Bernstein, 1990, p. 127; see also Deng & Luke, 2008). This claim strips off some of the easy-going normativity of 'quality teaching' often found in policy discourse. Instead, it inspires us to explore quality in theoretically informed and empirically grounded ways, based on questions such as: *whose* quality, in which *context*, seen from what *perspective*? These questions, I argue, are relevant not only for policy makers and teaching practitioners, but also for researchers engaged in studying and theorizing quality in teaching, as in the case of QUINT.

(226 words)

Extended summary

As a co-leader of the QUINT project's Theme 1 on 'Studying teaching quality', which involves comparative design and data collection collaboration as well as developing a shared understanding of analysis and theory development across QUINT projects, this presentation aims at introducing, analyzing and discussing main research design characteristics of the three empirical projects within the QUINT project, *Linking Instruction and Student Achievement* (LISA), the *Connected Classroom* (CC) and the *Quality Literature Education* (QUALE) project. Whilst still work in progress projects, all three projects are based on prior research, including publications (Asplund, Olin-Scheller, & Tanner, 2018; Hansen, Elf, Gissel, & Steffensen, submitted; Klette et al., 2018) as well as elaborated research descriptions for Nordic comparative QUINT research. Based on this material and the sociocultural point of departure (see abstract), I ask:

What are the commonalities and differences when comparing the LISA, CC and QUALE projects' theoretical and methodological approaches to investigating teaching quality in Nordic classrooms?

Focusing on commonalities first, the analyses suggest that one obvious similarity across the three projects is to insist on exploring quality in teaching from an *empirical* classroom perspective closely related to 'everyday teaching practices', as the term goes in the LISA project. Although the empirical focus may seem obvious, this is in fact often not the case in discourse on quality research in education and other domains (Harvey & Green, 1993), and something we should endorse. However, reflecting on the empirical focus, a challenging question is whether there are any commonalities in the way the three projects approach quality empirically in classrooms. On a superficial level, it seems as if analytical tools are quite different – for example comparing the *PLATO protocol* applied in LISA to the ethnographically inspired focus on *literacy events* in the CC project. However, I argue that it might be possible, and productive, to apply a *communicative* analytical framework developed in Nordic didactics (e.g. Christensen, Elf, Hobel, & Qvortrup, 2018; Ongstad, 2006) in order to be able to observe commonalities in the analytical framework across the three projects. A communicative framework is focused on identifying how classroom utterances and practices within a teaching context constitute a subject's *contents*, *forms*, and *functions/purposes*. Based on this analytical framework, the three projects seem to share the assumption that quality in teaching could be identified, and empirically inferred from video and other data, by focusing on whether teachers and students engage communicatively and interactively with content, form and function/purpose.

What differentiates the three projects, on the other hand, are other aspects of the research designs. Two projects are predominantly *explorative* in kind (LISA and CC) as they highlight quality teaching in a relatively generic, cross-curricular/non-subject specific sense. On the other hand, they differ substantially in the way they explore teaching as a situated practice. The third project, QUALE, on the other hand is an *intervention* project based on explicit assumptions on teaching quality within a specific subject, Language arts, and, even more specifically, within a specific knowledge domain within that subject, literature education, making strong claims on the subject- and domain specific nature of quality teaching. In other words, the value-driven normativity of the QUALE project and how it understands quality, and even how it wants to promote a particular version of quality in practice, is explicit.

An interesting question is whether LISA and CC are also informed by assumptions and norms on quality in teaching. I believe this is the case, however more implicitly. For example, I note a methodological difference as to whether video observations and other methods are used *within or beyond* classroom walls. It seems evident that the varying use of video observation and other methods co-constructs different versions of 'the classroom' and different notions of 'everyday classroom teaching' across the three projects. This observation is linked to the fact that different criteria inform the selection of classrooms used for empirical research. For example, in the CC project, "digitally rich" classrooms are selected, which is not the case in the two other projects. It follows that what is assumed to be 'everyday teaching practices' in one subproject is not 'the practice' put to the fore in the other subprojects. Rather, different research interests in the three projects privileges and at the same time excludes different teaching practices in the data sets. Unavoidably, all three subprojects offer a limited set of data that leads to a selective perspective on Nordic education's complex 'architecture of practices' (Kemmis et al., 2014; Schatzki, 2017) and what quality in education might be in those contexts.

The comparative analyses of the three projects' research design lead to the conclusion that the QUINT project clearly frames three different perspectives of quality teaching in practice. Like any other study on quality in teaching, they allow (for) different epistemological takes on teaching quality and, in doing so, inevitably co-construe an ontology of (quality) teaching. Inspired by Danish educational researcher Cathrine Hasse, who learned from Bateson, I would like to rethink QUINT's 'differential-and-systemic-approach' in more pragmatic ways as three different 'onto-epistemologies' of quality in teaching (Hasse, 2012; Hasse &

Andersen, 2012, p. 31). The aim is to investigate quality in situated contexts with the purpose of producing knowledge that could lead to change in those or similar contexts.

This finding raises several questions for further research within and beyond the QUINT project. As QUINT researchers, we could ask ourselves questions such as: What are the gains and losses of the three different designs? What are the potentials and limitations of taking more generic as compared to more subject-specific points of departures when investigating teaching quality in Nordic classrooms? Looking ahead to QUINT's planned research in Theme 3 and Theme 4's, which focuses on *Video-based learning arenas for professional learning* and *Video-based teacher training* respectively, we should discuss the potentials and pitfall of using video data from the three subprojects. More broadly, beyond the QUINT ambition, we should discuss what the underlying values and norm embedded in research on quality in teaching are, and to what extent could this research be generalized and inform practice.

(1000 words)

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