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Discourse and higher order thinking in Icelandic Social studies classrooms

**Abstract** *The focus of this paper is to investigate discourse as an instructional tool in Icelandic social science classes, drawing on comparative video data from lower secondary classrooms.*

Over the last decades several large-scale classroom studies have aimed to identify how instructional quality promotes better student outcomes using observational data. (Kane et al., 2013). Instructional quality can be described as “..those features of teachers’ instructional practices well known to be positively related to student outcomes, both cognitive and affective ones” (Nilsen, Gustafsson & Blömeke, 2016, p. 5). Reviews of teaching quality research (ibid) highlight 4 integral dimensions of high-quality teaching practices: 1) Discourse features, 2) Cognitive activation, 3) Instructional clarity and 4) Supportive climate.

The key ambition of social science education is to prepare young people for responsible participation in an increasingly composite democratic society. The skills needed to reach those goals, emphasized by policy makers and experts, are rooted in critical thinking skills and attitudes. Such as actively listening and engaging with others point of view, as well as one’s own, in a manner based on knowledge and mutual respect (Christensen, 2013; Mathé & Elstad, 2020). Achieving this requires specific instructional support from knowledgeable teachers.

Drawing on classroom video data, this study investigates how the sampled Icelandic social science teachers support these learning goals and measure up to their Nordic counterparts. The data is a part of a larger QUINT database, gathered from all five Nordic countries and thus making cross country comparison feasible. Additional data includes teacher interviews and student questionnaires. The data is gathered from 10 Icelandic lower secondary social science classrooms, four lessons from each classroom (n=40) and coded using the PLATO observational protocol (Grossman et al, 2015; K-12 Education, 2010). The analysis will focus on the development of higher order thinking skills and classroom discussion, captured by the PLATO elements ‘Intellectual Challenge’ and ‘Classroom Discourse’.

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**Extended summary** (1000 words, excluding reference list) introduction, theoretical background, methods, preliminary findings/findings, results, reference list.

As a secondary school subject, Icelandic Social studies is a blend of discipline categories traditionally known as Social science and the Humanities. Social studies thus include a broad range of subjects, such as Sociology, History, Geography and Philosophy to name a few. The idea behind teaching this diverse range of subjects under one hat, is that they will complement each other and become more than the sum of their parts. This arrangement is not unique to Iceland and draws its inspiration from liberal views on education as a tool for developing critical thinking, democratic values and active citizenship (Edelstein, 2013, p. 56-63). The prime instigator for the Icelandic social studies model was Dr. Wolfgang Edelstein (1929-2020) who was a lifelong advocate for the cultivation of democratic citizenship through education. Being an Icelandic immigrant of Jewish descent, Edelstein had firsthand knowledge of the danger authoritarianism poses to democratic principles (Edelstein, 2010). Social studies aim to promote student self-governance and reflection as preparation for the role of a free citizen in a democratic society that requires each member to respond to increasingly complex social challenges in a globalized world. This “postmodern identity” promoted by social studies could be seen as a defense against the antagonists of democracy by emphasizing individual choice and inductive reasoning rather than deductive (Christensen, T. 2011).

The opponents of the new Social studies curriculum were mainly concerned about the diminishing role of Iceland’s national history, which they saw as important building blocks for the social fabric of a newly independent micro-nation. The criticism was mainly focused on the content material, or what content should be covered, rather than specific learning outcomes (Loftur Guttormsson, 2013, p. 111-121). It would be safe to assume that the opposition was of conservative nature, where the school system is meant to promote a sense of loyalty and pride in one’s heritage and nationality. This was contrasted by the Social studies emphasis on students independent thinking and development of reasoning skills by examining diverse resource materials (Edelstein, 2013).

The first sentence in the Icelandic national curriculum on the teaching methods in Social studies reads:

The role of the Social studies teacher is to enable students to develop their abilities, to have content-rich interactions with others, provide guidance for democratic methods and provide the tools for deepening students understanding of themselves, other people and the environment and society they inhabit.

(Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla, 2013, p. 203)

The curriculum then specifies classroom discourse as a mode of teaching that is best suited to achieve these democratic and critical thinking goals. There is little doubt that the liberal and democratic values and methods emphasized by Dr. Edelstein make up the backbone of today’s

Icelandic Social studies national curricula. The skills needed to reach those goals, emphasized by policy makers and experts, are rooted in critical thinking skills and attitudes. Such as actively listening and engaging with others point of view, as well as one's own, in a manner based on knowledge and mutual respect (Christensen, 2013; Mathé & Elstad, 2020). Achieving this requires specific instructional support from knowledgeable teachers. For the purposes of this research paper, it would therefore be interesting to see what empirical evidence of these democratic and critical discourse ideas is present within our videos and to what extent teachers have embraced the idea of Social studies. How do the sampled social studies teachers facilitate classroom discourse to achieve the goals of the integrated Social studies?

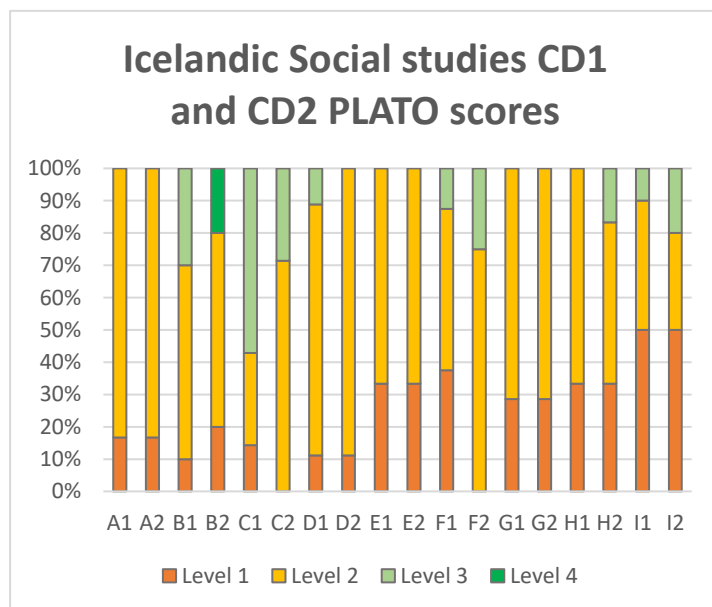
This article is part of the larger LISA study into Quality in Nordic Teaching (QUINT). QUINT researchers have gathered and analyzed classroom video data from all five Nordic countries. The video data was recorded in lower secondary classrooms from three subjects: Math, Language Arts and Social Studies. Ten schools were selected for participation from each country, making the total number of participating schools 50 (10 in Iceland). The research design required 3-4 consecutive lessons to be recorded from each subject, bringing the total of lessons recorded to 600, 120 from each country. The Icelandic Social studies lessons are 36 from 9 participating schools, as one school had to withdraw. The lessons were recorded using two cameras and two microphones, capturing the teachers' actions as well as the classroom. The lessons were recorded the spring of 2019 from schools selected for their heterogeneous properties.

### **Data analysis**

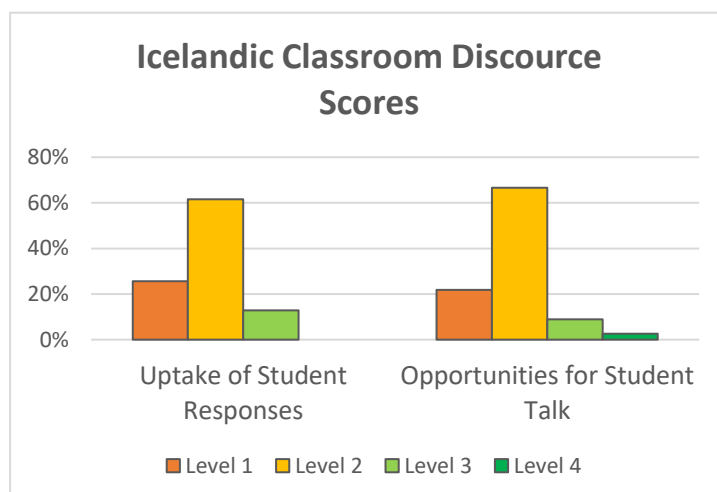
The Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observations (PLATO) was originally developed by Pam Grossman and associates at Stanford University in California. Although created with Language Arts in mind, the current PLATO 5.0 is one of the most widely recognized tools for classroom video analyzes across subjects in the western world. The main benefit of using PLATO is that it gives different researchers from the five Nordic countries a baseline, ensuring that everyone is using the same yardstick by which to measure. Lessons are divided into 15-minute segments, bringing the total number of Icelandic Social studies segments to  $n=78$ . Each segment is scored on a four-point scale on 12 different elements that capture teaching quality according to PLATO. Of the 12 elements featured in the PLATO rubric, this article will focus on the element of Classroom Discourse as a way of grounding the video discourse analyzes. To increase the reliability of the PLATO scores each rater must meet common standards and be certified by PLATO trainers. Raters also participate in double-coding sessions for every participating teacher to strengthen the reliability of the scores further.

Abbreviated	Classroom Discourse	
	<i>Uptake of Student Responses (CD1)</i>	<i>Opportunities for student talk (CD2)</i>
<b>Level 1</b>	Teacher or students rarely/never respond to student ideas about content.	Few to no opportunities for content related student talk. (<5 min)
<b>Level 2</b>	Brief responses to student ideas that do not elaborate or help develop the ideas.	Talk is tightly teacher-directed, but occasional opportunities for student talk. (<5 min)
<b>Level 3</b>	Balance btw brief responses and higher-level uptake of student ideas. Multiple instances.	Teacher provides opportunities for at least 5 min content related conversation. T directed and limited student participation.
<b>Level 4</b>	Consistent high-level uptake. Responding in ways that expand (or specify) student ideas.	(>5 min) Majority student participation and student respond to each other. Open-ended questions and clear focus.

**Prelim Findings**



This chart shows how each school (A, B, C etc.) scored for Uptake (1) and Opportunities (2) on the Classroom Discourse PLATO rubric. Four of the schools (A, E, G, and H) never go beyond level 2 for uptake despite having at least some opportunities to do so. The other schools (B, C, D, F and I) all manage to reach level 3 for uptake although schools B and C stand out in terms of proportion of segments recorded.



With such a small sample size, the relatively low percentage of segments scoring on the 3 and 4 level is not that concerning in itself. The more challenging question posed by these results is why so many segments score on the 2 level, indicating that while there is plenty of discourse, it is not being utilized to its full potential. Lacks democratic and critical thinking values.

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