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TITLE: Comparative didactics – the case of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education in Language arts

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Comparative didactics – the case of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education in Language arts

Abstract (300 words)

Referring to previous studies on comparative didactics and based on a constructivist understanding of teaching and learning as described by the German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, this paper provides a status of comparative didactics and suggests a dynamic-systemic didactic model for comparing teaching across contexts, differentiating between specific and delimited social contexts (e.g. a class or course), and more generalized contexts such as specific educational traditions nationally or specific school subjects. The paper illustrates the value of the model through an example of comparison of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education in Language arts across the nordic countries. Data is collected as part of the QUALE project. The paper shows how perceptions, notions, conceptions of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education differ across different educational contexts and discuss how these differences may refer to different theory histories understood as specific understandings, approaches, developments.

Extended summary (1000 words, excluding reference list).

Introduction

There is broad agreement on the need for comparative didactics, where comparative didactics is understood as the comparative study of didactic core elements (educational form, content and function) in different countries and cultures. The rationale is that “[c]omparing countries, cultures, civilizations, school and educational reforms as well as between different target groups [...] serves a more in-depth understanding of general phenomena than that achieved by looking at them separately” (Winther-Jensen 2004: 18). The focus on comparing specifically didactic core elements is nurtured by the generally growing interest in international comparisons, where often endogenous factors' effect on educational results comes to the fore (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2011; Scheerens & Marks, 2017; Timmermans, 2012; Detterman, 2016). Although the Nordic countries - the Scandinavian trio Sweden, Denmark and Norway plus Finland and Iceland - undeniably have many things in common regarding values and focus points in education, it is complicated and challenging to do comparative didactic studies within such otherwise comparable countries. As argued by a number of comparativists, day-to-day practice is embedded in its context, underpinned by expectations and norms which reflect the complex workings of culture, and when didactic intentions meet these contextual conditions, they are reframed (Hufton & Elliott, 2000; Rappleye & Komatsu, 2017; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Early comparativists (e.g. Hans [1958] 2014 and Kandel 1959) conceptualised contexts shaping education as a broad set of ‘factors and forces’. Comparative analysis of education across contexts used these a priori categories to understand how they created differences and similarities between systems. One of the more controversial (but very intriguing) of these was ‘national character’: a collective national disposition borne out of the unique historical and political conditions under which nations and their education systems evolve. Some of these categories inevitably shape the ‘pedagogical nexus’, but its interconnectedness makes it difficult to comprehend them as a collection of discrete variables and calls more on King's perception of context as ‘organic’ (1965). Referring to previous models for comparing generic or subject specific didactic core elements and studies newer studies in comparative didactics (Winther-Jensen, 2004; O'Dowd, Winther-Jensen, & Wikander, 2015; Sensevy,

Gruson & Forest, 2015; Ligozat & Almqvist, 2018; Charambolous & Prætorius, 2020), this paper provides a status of comparative didactics and suggests a dynamic-systemic didactic model for comparing teaching across contexts, differentiating between specific and delimited social contexts (e.g. a class or course), and more generalized contexts such as specific educational traditions nationally or specific school subjects (Qvortrup & Lykkegaard, in review).

Theoretical background

The paper is based in the systems theory as described by the German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann. According to Luhmann (1995, 2002a), teaching and learning can be described as self-referential and functionally closed processes, which take place in what he describes as, respectively, social and psychic systems. Social systems are described as systems based on communication, and psychic systems as systems based on consciousness (thoughts, sensations and imaginations). The idea of self-reference does not exclude the possibility that systems can affect each other. Social and psychic systems are mutually closed at the level of operation, but open at the level of observation and cognition, and they may disturb each other, as both of them operate in meaning (Luhmann, 1997). Language plays a fundamental role in the structural coupling, as it can be used as a medium for both thinking and communication and, accordingly, it allows the two types of systems to deal with the same topic, each in their specific way (Luhmann, 2002b). A linguistic inquiry by one system may be reflected in another systems if it contributes to producing meaning in the system, with 'meaning' referring to both sense and nonsense, e.g. that it makes no sense. This leads to a distinct constructivist understanding of education, teaching and learning.

Aims

The aim is to suggest a dynamic-systemic model for comparative didactics and to illustrate the value of the model through an example of comparison of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education in Language arts across the nordic countries. Furthermore, the aim is to strengthen the general awareness of strengths and weaknesses by doing comparative didactics. The paper addresses the following research question:

How to conduct comparative didactic research across countries?

Methods

Data

The paper refers to data from the QUALE project and these data are discussed against previous models for comparing generic or subject specific didactic core elements and newer studies in comparative didactics.

Analysis

Based on Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) I suggest approaching comparative didactics in an open and exploratory way referring to four empirical constructs: perceptions, notions, conceptions and theories. I exemplify how to use exploratory content analysis to investigate these constructs in a comparative didactic analysis of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education in Language arts across the nordic countries based on data from QUALE.

Preliminary findings

At the time of writing this abstract, the analysis is not conducted yet. The results will be presented at the conference. I expect to find differences in perceptions, notions, conceptions of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education across educational contexts and to discuss how these differences may refer to different theory histories understood as specific understandings, approaches,

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developments. I discuss the results of the analyses, focusing on how they relate to national and school subject traditions.

Theoretical and education significance

The paper contributes with knowledge about contextual differences related to different countries and school subjects, when it comes to didactic core elements of inquiry-oriented teaching of literature education. Furthermore, the paper contributes with methodological perspectives to the discussion of how we can meet the effort to do comparative didactics.

Relevance to the QUINT ambition

The paper will produce new insights into how to investigate teaching quality in Nordic classrooms, focusing on didactic core elements. In addition, it provides theory- and method-developing perspectives for future research and development work on comparative didactics, which consider the changing landscape of Nordic schools.

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Author: Ane Qvortrup

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