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Qualitative Approaches to Teaching Research and Development in International Discourse: Disconcertment and Convergence

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Qualitative Approaches to Teaching Research and Development in International Discourse: Disconcertment and Convergence

Conveners

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Themes and Objectives

Internationally and in particular in African countries, research on teaching is increasingly based on different approaches of qualitative research. Qualitative methods seem to be particularly suitable to examine globally challenging didactic issues such as addressing the individual within heterogeneous classes. Simultaneously and in connection to the same objectives, approaches of teaching development such as Lesson Study have gained importance. General epistemological, methodological and practical challenges of qualitative teaching research are thus interwoven with questions of linking teaching research and lesson development. These challenges can be even more complicated when teaching research and development takes place in and/or focuses on different cultural contexts. Though the importance of reflexive examinations of researchers' cultural and academic background and preconceptions is emphasized in the methodological discussions, they are mostly conducted in a culturally rather homogeneous context of the global north. This constraint might be based on the anglo-american or European provenance of research traditions and methods as well as on the cultural self-concept of researchers. Mutual discussions on research methods and methodology in the field of teaching research and development, although necessary for the reflection of often hidden normative and cultural implications of these methods, rarely take place. This is problematic since a historically grown power asymmetry can be reproduced in the scientific discourse concerning methodological issues, leading to the mechanical adoption of methods without adjusting them to the different context. The specific potential of qualitative research methods in terms of their appropriateness to the subject of research can therefore not be used to full capacity. At the same time teaching development on the basis of quantitative evidence can hardly consider cultural settings. Here, qualitative methods and research insights might be helpful to mediate between local understandings and requests of involved teachers and a reflective researcher, who is sensitive to power asymmetries. Lesson study as an approach to teaching development is promising in that sense, since an interprofessional team is called to reconsider and adapt teaching strategies mutually.

The international conference “Qualitative Approaches to Teaching Research and Development in International Discourse: Disconcertment and Convergence” in Maputo opened up a broad field for dealing with the tensions and potentials described. Researchers from countries in Africa (Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia), Europe (Germany) and Asia (Japan) gathered to not only discuss their particular approaches to teaching research and development but rather experience mutual disconcertment and convergence. Here, a variety of workshops opened the floor for presentations, examinations and discussions on research methods to bring diverse educational phenomena, research objectives and general as well as case-specific challenges together. Scientists from the contributing countries have presented ethnographic, videografic-reconstructive approaches and methods of lesson study as well as their research findings. In relation to the presented approaches and results, they discussed the role of the researcher in the field, the influence of theoretical and cultural understandings, the significance of normativity in pedagogical research and the impact of historically grown power asymmetries in the scientific discourse - general challenges for qualitative teaching research and development that are most relevant against the background of regional particularities and in international contexts. By opening up various perspectives on qualitative research and development of teaching during the conference we broke up ideas which have been taken for granted in this regard. Contributions on scientific historical developments and also statements from participants not only but especially from the global south sensitised others for implicit power relations and helped to reflect upon them.

Methodology and Results

Program, format, and activities outside the conference venue

The conference program included different formats of presentations (short key presentations, research presentations, and evening lectures) as well as different formats for discussion such as workshops, roundtable-conversations and a World Café.

The first conference day started with three short key presentations given by representatives of the three organizing universities. The key presentations by Prof. Maria Hallitzky (Leipzig, Germany), Ass.Prof. Nanakira Yoshida (Hiroshima, Japan) and Prof. Jaime da Costa Alipio (Maputo, Mozambique) introduced general challenges of qualitative research in the field of teaching and lesson development, such as the role of normativity and researchers’ pre-understandings, and questions of finding methods of data collection that are appropriate to specific local educational contexts. This was followed by a presentation by Prof. Carolyn McKinney and Xolisa Guzula (Cape Town, South Africa) on challenges in researching language ideologies and children’s multilingual literacies in and outside classrooms in South Africa. The participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences related to the presented challenges during a World Café, which served as a great opportunity to get to know each other, and to explore various perspectives on teaching research and development. The day was completed with an evening lecture: Dr. Joyce Kinyanjui (Nairobi, Kenya) discussed (methodological) challenges of research on girls’ education in Kenya.

Each of the second, third and fourth day of the conference were dedicated to specific research phases and approaches: data collection in ethnographic research on the second, data interpretation in different reconstructive approaches on the third and Lesson Study as a developmental approach connected to teaching research on the fourth day. These three days followed a common structure: Each day started with presentations that gave an introduction on the specific methodologies as well as to research processes, challenges and findings in different local contexts. In the afternoon, participants had the opportunity to work together on

data in workshops, following the specific approaches for that particular day. Furthermore, each day focused on a question or challenge, that is especially prevalent in the specific approach and research phase, but at the same time relevant for qualitative teaching research and development in general. These questions and challenges were discussed in roundtable-conversations at the end of each day. Furthermore, evening lectures offered insights besides the methodological focus and enriched the ongoing conversation with perspectives on girls education (Prof. Saar, Maputo, Mozambique) and the validation of instruments (Prof. Jaime Alipio, Maputo, Mozambique).

The second day started off with ethnographic research and raised questions concerning the researcher in the field (Prof. Karin Bräu, Mainz, Germany). Two researchers – namely Prof. Felix Mulhanga (Maputo, Mozambique) and Lara Krause (Leipzig, Germany) – shared their field experiences during their data collection in Mozambique and South Africa. The participants were also given the opportunity to learn more about data interpretation in an ethnographic sense during a workshop provided by Prof. Karin Bräu (Mainz, Germany) and Prof. Felix Mulhanga (Maputo, Mozambique). During the roundtable-discussion in the evening, the question of the researchers' role in the field was discussed and the respective results were summarized.

On September 11th we discussed several methods for reconstructive data analysis and started with an overview on different interpretation methods given by Prof. Bräu. The following two presentations by Prof. Maria Hallitzky and Karla Spendrin (Leipzig, Germany), as well as Prof. Carla Schelle (Mainz, Germany) and Dr. Mamadou Mbaye (Leipzig, Germany) which used different methodological approaches (reconstructive video analysis and objective hermeneutics), introduced findings concerning the construction of the subject of teaching in different countries. Especially, the influences of cultural presumptions and theoretical pre-understandings on data interpretation were reflected in these presentations, following the general focus of that day. Again, the participants had the chance to interpret data material themselves during two workshops (Reconstructive Analysis of videotaped lessons: Xolisa Guzula (Cape Town, South Africa) and Johanna Leicht (Leipzig, Germany); Documentary Analysis: Prof. Matthias Martens (Köln, Germany) and Dr. Emi Kinoshita (Leipzig, Germany)). The question of how to deal with (inevitable) cultural and theoretical pre-understandings was further discussed during the roundtable-conversation.

The following day – September 12th – we focused on the development of teaching and learning with the concept of Lesson Study. After an introduction to the characteristics in Japan by Ass. Prof. Nanakira Yoshida and Yuichi Miyamoto (Hiroshima, Japan), Benson Banda (Lusaka, Zambia) gave insights on how lesson study is adapted in Zambia. In the afternoon we had a try on the Lesson Study-Approach by watching and discussing a video scene from a Japanese classroom. In the roundtable-conversation on that evening, we discussed the significance of normativity in teaching research and development and the tension that emerges when the pedagogical field that requires practical solutions meets the (hidden) normative claim of descriptive science.

The morning of last day of the main conference on September 13th, started with a two-hour guided city tour. Finally, the international discourse on educational research was critically examined both from a local point of view (Prof. José Flores, Maputo, Mozambique) and from a historical and sociological perspective (Dr. Emi Kinoshita, Leipzig, Germany). The discussion reflected on post-colonial relationships not only in research and schooling but also within the conference itself. In the afternoon, we collected ideas and planned joint activities in

order to continue the international discourse on teaching research and development in the international context (see point 4 for the results).

On September 16th and 17th, we held a post-conference for master and doctoral students from Maputo to introduce them to principles and methods of qualitative research.

Most interesting and important outcomes regarding the treated questions on objectives

Broadening horizons and Experience of Inclusion

- “I liked the discussions in different languages”
- “In this conference we managed to do post-coloniality without necessarily having to say it. We have listened to each other”
- “I liked the way the program was organized in an inclusive way giving many people the opportunity to present and to chair”

These statements from the conference feedback show the challenges that have been associated with the preparation, organization and execution of this international conference. The established and commonly accepted way of dealing with these challenges can be considered as a benefit (valuable quality) of this scientific meeting. Thanks to the inclusive form of organization, the participants from different countries, language and research areas could learn from each other, get to know other approaches and research methods and reflect on their own research approaches and “Standortgebundenheit (the researchers’ dependency on location)”.

Reflection of the Researchers’ Role in the Field

Concerning the general question of the researchers’ role in the field, it got clear that every research that gets into interaction with the field is influenced by addressations and expectations by the field: How people in the field (like teachers or students) understand the researchers role and how they interpret his/her expectations on them, will inevitably influence their behavior towards the researcher (e.g., what is explicitly shown or hidden in lessons or who is sent to talk to the researcher). Furthermore, the way people in the field see the researcher as a person (e.g. as ‘somebody very strange’ or as ‘someone familiar with the field’) will guide the way the researcher is addressed and what he/she gets to see and hear. As these processes and phenomenons are not ‘evitable’ – which means, that no completely ‘objective’ research in the field is possible – teaching research can anyhow use these phenomenons as data. The prerequisite for this is that they are documented and reflected upon. Ethnographic research methods provide strategies for such documentation and reflection, that have to be adjusted to each specific research context and researchers requirements.

Dealing with the limiting and enabling power of theoretical and cultural preconceptions

For the role of theoretical pre-understandings, the presentations showed how they guide researchers’ interpretations. Yet, instead of regarding that only as an inhibition of other possible empirical insights, it also enables further understanding. The theoretical understanding thus sets a specific frame for possible results, which is at the same time enabling and limiting, and has to be explicitly stated in the presentation of research findings. Cultural preconceptions are evidently fundamental. However, they are bound to experiences in daily life that are rather less explicitly reflected. That is why they might take influence on our interpretations rather unconsciously, while at the same time enabling us to understand something ‘at all’ in teaching situations in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Yet, making these

presumptions explicit is important for the ‘validation’ of interpretations in qualitative teaching research. A special effort is thus needed trying to reflect these implicit assumptions by finding ways that provide two things:

- (a) the highest possible probability for challenging and questioning our pre-understandings, and
- (b) the highest possible sensitivity for our own interpretational routines.

Analyzing lessons from different cultural contexts and discuss interpretations in diverse groups of researchers can be strategies to provide different perspectives and challenge pre-understandings. Furthermore, the sensitivity for interpretational routines could be fostered by systematic reflection, for example by using recordings and transcripts of interpretation discussions as empirical material.

Reflection on the role of normativity and of tensions in the (necessary) connection of research and development

The topic of lesson development was discussed in contrast to the idiographic oriented qualitative approach from the first day on. The Lesson Study approach awakened questions about normative perspectives on lessons, legitimacy of researchers’ intervention to school practice and possible cooperation between school teachers and university lecturers. Although lesson study has internationally widespread as “Japanese trademark” since the 1990s, it is practiced in other countries or school traditions such as in Zambia in different, adjusted ways. This insight into the phenomenon of changing reforms’ character when they are adopted to other contexts led participants to be critically aware of possible and necessary variations of the “same” qualitative methods in different scientific communities concerning normative frameworks in processes of lending and borrowing educational problem solving strategies globally. With respect to the productive cooperation between schools and universities tensions between different normative implications of the particular field were discussed similarly.

Awareness of post-colonial discourse in school research and development

Since today’s scientific discourses have been established in the modernisation process in and from the West, historical and post-colonial examination is inevitable. The conference brought together researchers who deal with or are at least involved in postcolonial structured fields of education and science. The discussion was therefore organised to reflect own standpoints in the wider perspectives and to see specific educational phenomena and methodological challenges in the global and historical context. After all, different structures of scientific discourses and latent tensions in the research experiences were openly discussed and constructive cooperation was suggested. Supported by the translators during the conference days, such reflection could be realized also with respect to the languages. This discussion became the fundament of the future lab (see in the next section) and our ongoing publication.

Sustainability of the Event

On the last conference day, a future lab took place to seek for further productive exchanges and cooperation. In the first round, the structured workshop method of the future lab helped us to gather some “utopian” ideas to work on methodological and thematic challenges and potentials in the intercultural, post-colonial and multilingualistic research setting. Based on the equitable discussion atmosphere created along the conference days not only by the organizers but also by the participants, ideas were concretized to continue working together with strategic perspectives besides individual exchanges: Building a digital forum to exchange research material, experiences and results, publication of the conference results, and

organising a follow-up conference. The digital forum has been already established with the help of the moodle-course of Leipzig University, where the conference materials are available for the participants. To exchange “raw” data such as videotaped lessons we are going to discuss further technical solutions concerning data security and privacy rights. An international online archive for qualitative teaching research will be initiated to facilitate regular exchange with an intended plan for a joint research project.

We will apply for a follow-up conference in 2021 to deepen our discussions about links between educational research and development of qualitative teaching research in the intercultural context, to meet also local needs and interests. This also refers to the awoken problematiques about languages in the (local) field and in the (local, intercultural, global) research community. The conference will be conceptualized as a bi- or triennial event. Parallel to these follow-ups, we are working on a publication to provide our discussion results of the conference in the discourse of qualitative educational and teaching research. We started the planning process with the publisher Julius Klinkhardt (paperback and online). To ensure the quality of the anthology, we conceptualize the table of contents based on our reflexion on the conference and adopt a joint mutual review procedure among the authors

Participants

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