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EDUCATION INQUIRY

Volume 2, No. 3, September 2011

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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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OPEN
SECTION

What is discerned in teachers' expressions about planning? Similarities and differences between teachers from Sweden and Hong Kong

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out what teachers say their primary focus is when planning to teach an object of learning. The study is carried out in two different cultural contexts, Sweden and Hong Kong, and based on the framework of variation theory, which has a two-fold focus, namely both what teachers do and what students learn at school.

Fifteen semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with nine Swedish and six Hong Kong teachers in grades 1 to 6. The analysis generated categories inspired from a phenomenographic research approach, where attention is directed towards respondents' apprehensions of a phenomenon.

The results showed some clear differences in the way teachers from the two countries talked about how they organise and think about planning, which in turn reveals whether their focus is on students' understanding or on teacher action. The Swedish teachers' experienced focus is on activities/methods, and they separate activities and methods from the content, while the Hong Kong teachers have the content in the foreground and do not separate content and act.

There can be several different explanations of the differences identified; such as that a too general theoretical and surface awareness of concepts of learning makes it difficult to reach a detailed level of the object of learning, i.e. what it actually takes for students to learn exactly this phenomenon or ability. The Swedish teachers seem to underestimate what it takes to learn due to a theoretical framework. Another explanation of this difference in focus might be that teachers need support from each other to deepen the reflections about the subject, thus achieving knowledge of what it takes to understand the intended object of learning. The Hong Kong teachers report frequent opportunities to discuss and reflect over subject-related matters.

Keywords: variation theory, planning, content, discern, phenomenography

Introduction

The study aims to describe what teachers in Sweden and Hong Kong say they primarily focus on while planning to teach a lesson in literacy. It is reasonable to assume that what is planned and how it is planned tells us something about teachers' priorities about teaching, however what actually takes place during lessons must also be studied in classrooms to gain a more complete overview (Fishman et al., 2003; Nuthall, 2004).

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Phenomenography has previously mainly been used to map *students'* conceptions of a learning object (Thompson, 2010), even if several other fields have been studied by the phenomenographic research approach (Marton & Booth, 1997). In this article, we want to map *teachers'* conceptions of planning, to better understand what assumptions they make when planning lessons. Previous research of teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning shows that they can be sorted into different categories, moving from being teacher-oriented to student-oriented (Trigwell, Prosser & Taylor, 1994) or from reproducing to constructing knowledge (Koballa et al., 2010). Research from Sweden (Gustavsson, 2008) has indicated that when planning teachers do not commonly reflect upon content in terms of different ways of understanding, which decreases students' opportunities to experience the chosen content. Another finding (Holmqvist, 2010) shows that the problem with poor instruction is not related to a focus on either content or method, rather on the degree of specification of the learning objectives and in what way the teachers move from a general to a more specific level. Teachers' teaching has connections with students' outcomes (Nuthall, 2004; Nye et al., 2004) and there is thereby a need to build an empirical knowledge base linking professional development to both teacher and student learning outcomes (Fishman et al., 2003). It is also essential to know more about what precedes the actual teaching; what is focused on when planning. Another perspective is presented by variation theory (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008) which emphasises that teachers need to clarify what the object of learning is about – what does it take to understand the chosen object of learning? Variation theory has been developed from the phenomenographic research approach (Marton & Booth, 1997; Runesson, 1999). Teachers need to understand the object of learning from the pupils' point of view (Fishman et al., 2003), without taking it for granted they have the same perspective as the teacher. However, this is one of the paradoxes a teacher has to deal with, knowing what it takes to learn when you have already learned. This is a reflective way of thinking about what is going to be learnt, and it has nothing to do with checking national objectives, a teaching method that McKernan (2010) has criticised. Rather, the object of learning and the national objectives should be allowed to enrich each other as the static national objectives are made alive as objects of learning in a learning situation by teachers and students (Wernberg, 2009). If, on the other hand, teachers do not consider what it takes to learn the specific object of learning and what perspective the pupils hold, there is a risk that they will focus merely on organising activities and on which methods to use. By using a combination of phenomenography and variation theory, the strong focus on what the learner experiences combines the learner's and the teacher's views of the object of learning when designing learning situations. According to variation theory, an excessive focus on organising activities and methods reduces teachers' possibilities to succeed in presenting the object of learning (Wernberg, 2009; Kullberg, 2010).

This study seeks to build on results concerning teachers' concepts of teaching and to further investigate the question of what the content means when planning. In so

doing, we combine the phenomenographic-inspired approach to collecting data with variation theory when analysing patterns of what teachers actually discern. By posing the research question *what do teachers say they first focus on when planning to teach a literacy lesson* and investigating if *there are differences in focus between Swedish teachers and teachers from Hong Kong*, we hope to achieve a more detailed result than the general concepts concerning learning and teaching as well as contrast the two groups of teachers' assumptions about teaching. Through a still ongoing project concerning reading comprehension in Hong Kong and Sweden (Holmqvist, 2008) some differences between teaching cultures in Sweden and Hong Kong have been noted (Holmqvist, Holmqvist & Cheung, 2010). Another reason to choose Hong Kong and Sweden as settings is that the Hong Kong students in the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* have improved from 14th place in 2001 to second best in 2006, while the Swedish students fell from first to 10th place in reading comprehension (Skolverket, 2007; Holmqvist et al., 2010). A third reason is indicated by Nuthall (2004), who claims that, to be generalisable, case studies of teachers need to be replicated in different curriculum contexts.

Background

As a background, a few words on school conditions in Hong Kong (HK) and Sweden could be useful. Children start school at age six in HK (primary school) and stay there until age 12. There are both public and private schools. Teachers teach one or two subjects, and a common concept is that they teach their subject in a grade for one year. Teachers often work long hours, sometimes from eight in the morning to seven in the evening. Co-planning is more or less mandatory. Teachers are expected to plan together with their colleagues teaching the same subject and at the same level. There are also panel discussions two to three times each semester where all teachers in e.g. English meet and discuss issues concerning students' academic results, students' weaknesses and how to deal with them. It is common to have for a teacher to have their own desk in a staff room.

The HK school system differs from the Swedish school system with regard to some of the above points. Swedish children start school at the age of seven. Swedish teachers often teach many subjects and the same group of children for several years. Co-planning can occur, but is mostly voluntary. Most Swedish teachers have a workweek of 35 hours at school and some additional hours at home. Many Swedish teachers use their classroom as their workplace when students have left school. In Sweden the curriculum being applied when the interviews were conducted had an overall direction of which objectives to reach (Skolverket, 2000), with the concretisation and details being delegated to each school and the teachers working there. The curriculum in Hong Kong is more elaborated. When describing which capabilities in the Chinese language students are hoped to develop, at the same time it is mentioned what teachers shall do to help students achieve them (Curriculum Development Council, 2002).

In addition, reflective questions are posed to the teacher in the curriculum, such as “Are there both space and time for teachers to enhance their professional development (e.g. collaborative lesson preparation time)?” (p. 70, Curriculum Development Council, 2002). Another interesting difference is found in the emphasis on “reading to learn” in Hong Kong and teaching students to love to read (Curriculum Development Council, 2002), whilst there in the Swedish curriculum learning to read is a tool to develop other abilities, such as communicating or using one’s imagination. What it actually takes to develop such reading is not focused on as such.

This is just a glimpse of HK and Swedish schools highlighting the fact that the phenomenon under consideration differs between the cultures. We have separated the phenomenographic analysis and conducted one for the Swedish teachers and another for the HK teachers. Otherwise, we will not have an impact on the results due to qualitative differences in the *same* phenomenon since the cultural differences could be seen as two different phenomena.

Theoretical assumptions

Let us first establish what we mean by content and focusing on content. It is not about knowing what the textbook says, or the curriculum, even if teachers have to know that too. For every learning situation, teachers ought to know what they intend the learners to learn and what it takes for the learners to understand the chosen object of learning. What is needed to discern the parts of an object of learning? In what context is it to be understood? It is hard, if not impossible, for a student to be sure if they see the right parts that form the whole, especially if the whole is unknown.

A huge body of research seeks to establish a connection between teaching and student outcomes; Nye et al. (2004) found that teacher impact is essential and that teacher competence influences pupils’ results. Prior research points to a weakness among Swedish teachers concerning the ability to discuss the content of their teaching (Carlgren & Marton, 2000). Research projects carried out at Kristianstad University, Sweden, where the Learning Study Model (Marton, 2003; Holmqvist & Nilsson, 2005) has been used, point in the same direction concerning teachers’ difficulties in focussing on the content of teaching. The results also show a difference in students’ increased learning outcomes *when* teachers focus in detail on the content (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2007). In other words, when teachers are given space and support to attend to the content and conduct discussions about the content in their teaching, students’ results are improved (Gustavsson, 2008).

Concerning variation theory, learning is analysed on the basis of the concepts *discernment*, *simultaneity* and *variation* (Marton & Booth, 1997; Runesson, 1999; Marton & Tsui, 2004; Holmqvist & Mattisson, 2008; Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2007; Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008). All three components are required to make learning possible. To *discern* means to be able to see the critical aspects of the object of learning. If the object of learning is to write an argumentative

text, students must be able to discern what makes a text argumentative – it should contain a hypothesis or a strong view, it should present statements that support the hypothesis and have facts that support the argumentation. *Variation* here means that not all texts are argumentative and, hopefully, students have experienced variation in representations of other texts, like novels, poems, expository texts and instructions, to mention a few. Contrasting some of them with the argumentative texts helps students see the variation in how to compose texts and discern the critical aspects of the intended object of learning, here the design of an argumentative text. The student has to be aware of all this information at the same time, hence the *simultaneity*. Why an argumentative text is written, for whom and from what point of view are also parts of the whole, to be experienced simultaneously.

Reasoning about the content and what it is that should be understood, and how the planned learning should take place, is facilitated by theoretical assumptions about what learning is and how learning is obtained. As a consequence, studies using variation theory in Hong Kong and Sweden (Zhang, Funnemark & Hansson, 2008), Brunei (Andrew, 2008; Wood, 2008) and Switzerland (Galland & Pasquini, 2008) have shown good learning outcomes for students at different levels.

To conclude, the framework of variation theory “focuses equally on what teachers do and what students learn at school” (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008, p. 111), which means that what teachers offer students to experience in a teaching situation gives students different ways to discern the object of learning (content). The different ways that students discern the object of learning depend partly on what they are offered to discern simultaneously, as well as which dimensions of variation the teacher establishes together with the students. Teachers' awareness of how content treatment affects student learning is critical for what students can experience.

Method

Fifteen interviews were conducted during 2009 with teachers from Sweden ($n=9$) and Hong Kong ($n=6$). They were questioned about their planning and what they focus on before, during and after teaching a literacy lesson in Swedish (the Swedish teachers) or English/Chinese (the Hong Kong teachers) The questions were:

- What is the first thing you focus on when you start planning a Literacy lesson?
- What is the next thing you are thinking about?
- What do you do when you plan and with whom do you discuss the planning?
- Think back to the last Literacy lesson you had, what did you plan for then?
- When you conducted the lesson, what came in focus?
- How did you process your lesson afterwards?
- What did you think afterwards?

These questions correspond with the intended, enacted and lived object of learning used in variation theory (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008). The questions were designed as open-ended questions so as to gather as much information as possible (Kvale, 1996) and “encourage respondents to reflect on their own experience” (Entwistle, 1997, p. 129). The answers were qualitatively analysed and distributed into categories inspired by the phenomenographic approach (Marton & Booth, 1997) in which the researcher’s attention is directed towards how the interviewees express their experiences of a certain phenomenon (Entwistle, 1997). This is called the second order perspective (Uljens, 1989) and is characteristic of phenomenography. The first order perspective concerns what the phenomenon actually is. In this study, the first order perspective is that teachers plan lessons, while the second order perspective is what teachers themselves think about this (Marton, 1981). The interest in a phenomenographic study is to unveil differentiated apprehensions of the phenomenon chosen by the researcher (Uljens, 1989). We are inspired by the phenomenographic approach as it can be questioned if a “lesson on literacy” can be defined as a single phenomenon. As we cannot be sure there is a common understanding of what such a lesson is, we assume there might be many different phenomena. Instead, we have followed the phenomenographic approach by defining qualitative different categories which are depersonalised. If we had undertaken a strict phenomenographic analysis, it would have been more correct to ask the teachers to respond to the same videotaped lesson. However, we would thereby have forced them to pay attention to a specified lesson which might be very different from their own. This would have limited their possibility to give their own view of what such a lesson could be. In phenomenography, hierarchically, linear and branched relationships are all used to describe the qualitative differences between the categories, and we found branched and linear relationships in this study (Åkerlind, 2005).

The interviews were conducted in Swedish with the Swedish teachers and in English with the teachers from Hong Kong. All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and later transcribed verbatim. Parts of the Swedish interviews have been translated into English for this article. First, the transcripts were read several times to achieve an overall picture of the interviews, and then qualitative different expressions about focus and planning were grouped into categories. The two authors of this paper separately read the excerpts and sorted them into categories, with a high degree of consensus. The use of two researchers analysing the excerpts separately and then jointly assisted with clarification when discerning the categories.

Respondents

The respondents were teaching grades 3 to 6 (in Sweden) and grades 1 to 6 (in Hong Kong) and had teaching experience ranging from one and a half years to 38 years. The respondents were male ($n=2$) and female ($n=13$).

Some of the Swedish respondents ($n=3$) were found via earlier contacts. The other Swedish respondents ($n=6$) were found via a questionnaire sent out through a database of teachers collaborating with a teacher education programme. All Swedish interviews were conducted by telephone, in order to facilitate the possibility of finding a mutually convenient time for the interviews. Eight of the Swedish teachers worked at government schools, and one at a private school. All schools were situated in small cities or in the countryside and had a relatively small number of students.

The Hong Kong teachers were found via contacts with the International Office at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The respondents were either English or Chinese teachers, with some of them teaching one other subject as well. All of the Hong Kong interviews were conducted face-to-face. Two schools were visited, and the interviews (three at each school) took place in staff rooms. Both schools were government public primary schools and medium size according to the number of students.

Table 1 presents facts concerning the respondents such as age, gender, nationality, teaching experience counted in years and the length of the interviews. All names are pseudonyms. Some of the respondents were uneasy about mentioning their age; their age was then estimated by the researcher and described as e.g. "around 40".

Name	Nationality	Age	Sex	Teaching experience	Length of interview
Monique	Sweden	Around 60	Female	38 years	15 min 47 sec
Sue	Sweden	Around 40	Female	6 years	24 min 36 sec
Elaine	Sweden	48 years	Female	1 1/2 year	33 min 14 sec
Christine	Sweden	59 years	Female	37 years	21 min 07 sec
Liz	Sweden	46 years	Female	3 1/2 years	26 min 28 sec
Rachel	Sweden	49 years	Female	26 years	31 min 06 sec
Cathy	Sweden	50 years	Female	2 years	25 min 16 sec
Ann	Sweden	27 years	Female	3 years	20 min 49 sec
Beth	Sweden	51 years	Female	14 years	27 min 44 sec
Julie	Hong Kong	49 years	Female	26 years	18 min 10 sec
Ellie	Hong Kong	31 years	Female	8 years	19 min 36 sec
John	Hong Kong	Around 35	Male	15 years	24 min 44 sec
Sarah	Hong Kong	Around 35	Female	10 years	29 min 57 sec
Priscilla	Hong Kong	Around 40	Female	22 years	23 min 07 sec
Tom	Hong Kong	29 years	Male	5 years	16 min 46 sec

Table 1. Data concerning the interview respondents

Females dominated among the respondents, which reflects the actual gender distribution among teachers. The teachers from Hong Kong were a more homogenous group than the Swedish group, the age range was 20 years in Hong Kong compared to 33 years in Sweden and the teaching experience in Hong Kong extended from five years to 26 years, whilst the Swedish teachers' teaching experience stretched from one and a half years to 38 years. It can be observed that the two male respondents were both found in Hong Kong.

Method discussion

A major difference between the conditions of the interviews was the interviewing language. Conducting interviews in English, a second language for both the researcher and the interviewee, was demanding and challenging. There was an obvious risk of misinterpreting parts of the interview due to accent or unfamiliar words. When transcribing the Hong Kong interviews, some words were very hard to identify. Another difference was the procedure for conducting the interviews, namely, the face-to-face situation in Hong Kong and by telephone in Sweden. In some ways the language challenge compensated for this difference. It would have been worse for the validity if the Swedish interviews had been made face-to-face and the Hong Kong interviews over the phone. It might have been preferable to do the interviews face-to-face even in Sweden, but the respondents were geographically spread, thus obstructing a personal meeting and there were no grants available for this research. On the other hand, in these days when Internet and social networks are growing we were given a new insight that people are sometimes more willingly to open up through a digital medium. It is impossible to say what would have been the best way; it is possible to say that there were differences between the interview conditions in the two countries. However, the differences are all in between the cultural groups and not within each group. As the results are separated, they do not affect the analysis within each group. When meeting in real life, body language and cultural contexts can be a barrier as well as a way of connecting people, such as in Hong Kong when one of the respondents wore a protective mask during the whole interview. For the interviewer this felt strange and distant, but it was made out of courtesy since the respondent had a cold. Perhaps this also influenced the interview; it was not easy to read the facial expressions when only the eyes were visible.

There are also cultural differences in the school system, which sometimes blurred the exchange of ideas. Conversely, when the interviewer is unfamiliar with the prevailing conditions, less is taken for granted (Uljens, 1989), and they have to ask for more details.

Results

The categories found in the results will be presented separately for each country.

Swedish results

The research questions were a) what teachers say they first focus on when planning to teach a literacy lesson; and b) whether there were differences in focus between the Swedish teachers and the teachers in Hong Kong.

The answers from the nine Swedish teachers to the question “What is the first thing you focus on when planning a Swedish literacy lesson?” are grouped into four categories, based on the expressions from the teachers’ replies.

The categories are: A. Guiding for joy; B. Guiding for hands-on; C. Guiding for peace and quietness; and D. Guiding towards external goals. All categories are based

on an assumption that learning is relatively unproblematic and will occur if the students have fun, do things or are active, are quiet or if the teacher has clearly defined the national goals.

A. Guiding for joy

Some of the answers reveal a clear opinion that planning should be designed in such a way that students can enjoy themselves during lessons, no matter what the lesson is about. One expressed opinion is that to have fun implies learning: "I like the children to enjoy themselves, to have fun, because I believe they then learn better" (Ann, Swe). To have fun does not necessarily imply laughing and joking. Ann starts off with the verb to enjoy oneself, which is more of an inner feeling, and expands with "to have fun". Some of the answers indicate the reasoning that, if students are interested, they are probably enjoying themselves and thereby the planning is successful. Cathy (Swe) says, "The first thing I focus on is that it should be interesting for the children; you have to catch their interest". To catch someone's interest seems to be disconnected from the planned content of the lesson, since the Swedish teachers do not express any connection between interest and content. It is more of a general "trick" a teacher can perform – to catch the students' interest, make them enjoy themselves, and then learning will take place, almost like magic.

B. Guiding for hands-on

Another focus is planning for activities, planning for "learning-by-doing". These answers represent an apprehension that the most important in a learning situation is to start to plan for things students can do. To be active seems to be more important than the content since students, as Ann (Swe) says, "learn by doing, do and learn". If this is teachers' understanding of the phenomenon of planning and what purpose planning serves, the teacher will plan for activities hoping that learning will follow automatically. Another teacher reasons about how the planning revolves around the activities: "it depends if the purpose of the lesson is that we shall write, or if we shall talk about a book, or if it is about reading or..." (Elaine, Swe). These expressions do not include the chosen content of the lesson, or what is going to be learnt, how learning can take place and what it takes to make learning happen. The teachers' expressions exclude that part and directly aim at activities and doing, assuming that learning in those situations will be self-regulated.

C. Guiding for peace and quietness

The third category that evolved from the data was how some teachers primarily focus on organisation when they are planning a lesson. In this category, teachers say it is essential that students know what to do, and in which order assignments are to be fulfilled. Much time is spent on planning how to implement routines in the classroom. Peace and silence are key concepts to success. Some follow a lesson pattern, like Sue

(Swe), who says: “We always follow a certain structure in this, we always start with presentations, and then it is time to start to work and that too follows an order”. Sue (Swe) highlights the benefits of this pattern: “They know what will happen and I know what will happen and we seldom change that, it gives peace for work”. Peace is expressed as if it is equivalent to silence. It also seems to be expressed as being similar to discipline, as Monique (Swe) says: “There must be a certain discipline, which is peace and quietness, work peace”. She starts off with discipline and then clarifies by using other words, like peace and quiet.

D. Guiding towards external goals

In Sweden, as in most other countries, there are stated goals for each subject and class. These goals seem to be very present in many teachers’ expressed focus when planning. They mention them in different ways, such as when Liz (Swe) says “...what the students need, since that is different if you are from the Netherlands or Iran or Sweden ... what they need right now, according to our goals”. In this utterance it is the student’s background that determines how to plan for achieving the goal, not the content of the goal that determines how to plan for achieving it.

Another way to speak about goals is also represented in the interview data. The teachers were well aware that all students are expected to be skilled readers, fluent writers with good spelling, and articulate speakers. These are central goals of the subject Swedish Literacy, spanning several smaller and more defined goals. However, the answers to the question “What is the first thing you focus on when planning a Swedish Literacy lesson?” clearly display an apprehension that it is enough to practice these abovementioned skills. Rachel (Swe) says, “Yes, when it comes to Swedish, there are four topics which are reading, writing, speaking and listening, they are the starting points I have when I think about content and how to work”. Yet, more exactly, what it is that students should learn is not mentioned, nor what it takes to achieve that. To read is a final product, preceded by many learning moments which need be planned for carefully, or chosen and reflected over. Let us end this with Beth’s (Swe) expression about planning and her main goal, which is speaking: “It is a feeling, a gut feeling, how far have we reached now, to get it where I want it to be when we speak”.

Conclusion of the Swedish results

The results in three categories indicate that the teachers seem to have an underlying assumption regarding what it takes to learn. But this assumption seldom seems to have anything to do with the content, rather it focuses on generic capabilities needed to learn in general. The categories *joy*, *hands-on* and *peace and quietness* seem to be simplified ways which teachers believe guarantee learning, which in turn signals what the teachers think it takes to learn from a general perspective. Learning is never discussed and is not connected to the specific object of learning. As Holmqvist (2010)

established, results pointing out that teachers keep focusing on method instead of content might rather be a problem with the degree of specification of the object of learning and in what way teachers move from a general to a more specific level. If the teachers have an underlying assumption about what it takes to learn in general – i.e. it has to be fun – then the content is in the background and the learning activity is in the foreground. The assumption seems to be that as long as the children have fun, they will learn whatever you want them to learn. Nuthall (2004) also describes the discrepancy between what teachers think students have achieved and what they really did achieve. Students who seem to be active are more likely to be judged to have achieved the learning content by the teachers, but the results show there is no such relationship. This misconception is not necessarily due to a lack of theoretical awareness; instead, it seems as though their theoretical awareness guides them to a general perspective on learning as such, which makes it hard for them to capture what it takes to learn each object of learning at the micro-level (Holmqvist, 2010). The fourth category (D) – guiding towards external goals – seems to be less developed as there are no general assumptions about what it takes to learn. The categories A–C can thereby seem to be at a higher level in a branched relationship, where category D is at a lower level. The teachers seem to be aware of some parts of how learning could be understood. Mainly their expressions show how they have captured one way to develop learning, but do not discern in what way this has to be related to the content or if there are other possible ways to understand learning. If they see learning as activity, they assume that the more active a student is the more that student learns. The content is in the background all the time, while activities or external static goals are in the foreground.

Hong Kong results

As in the analysis of the Swedish data, a phenomenographic inspired perspective was used to find the qualitative different categories constituted by the different ways the teachers expressed their apprehension of their primary focus when planning a lesson. The Hong Kong group of teachers all started to talk about the objectives, and what was going to be taught in a specific lesson. In one way, they all shared the same apprehension of the primary focus when planning, but when they elaborated their answers it was possible to identify nuances in them. The analysis of the Hong Kong teachers' answers therefore rendered three categories; E) Guiding for interest in content; F) Guiding content-based activities; and G) Guiding content-based learning.

E. Guiding for interest in content

Some of the Hong Kong teachers' answers expressed the importance of planning for interesting lessons about the content or the skill to be developed. Interest is mentioned here in relation to planning for activities, as in this utterance: "...and then I would

ask the question, how to make activities more interesting for the students, how can they acquire that skill in an easier way” (John, HK). The existing link between activity and content is distinct; there is *something* that shall be learnt and the activity stems from that content. They do not separate the activity from the content as the Swedish respondents did. The expressions show it is not about having fun as such, it is about having fun in relation to the content and e.g. feel that learning Maths is really fun. If the content is presented in an interesting and amusing way it is presumed to facilitate the learning of a certain skill. The intention is to create a positive atmosphere so “they leave with a very good impression in mind – English is fun” (Tom, HK), thereby stimulating a learning environment.

F. Guiding for content-based activities

Activities are present when the HK teachers speak about planning but, as mentioned above, always in connection with the content: “I would think about, how, what kind of teaching or learning strategies or activities I’m going to use, so that my students can learn the objectives through participating in various activities” (Ellie, HK). Again, the teacher puts forward the relationship with the content. It is as if the HK teachers do not see the activities and objectives as separate parts. What is expressed here is that what is going to be learnt is known beforehand, and activities are chosen based on what it takes to learn a certain object of learning. This can also be phrased as “what games or what activities in the lesson I have a need for” (Sarah, HK). “Need” here means that the activities are serving a cause more than being mere activities; the activities’ aim is to ensure students learn a chosen content – in what way the assumed activity will help the students learn more about the specified objectives. An activity is, in other words, talked about as something that has been consciously chosen, depending on the lesson objectives. The teacher’s activities are also closely tied to the content, as when Priscilla (HK) says, “I think about how to deliver that teaching material and whether I can achieve the goal in that way.” What she does during the lesson is crucial for obtaining the desired learning.

G. Guiding for content-based learning

This seems like a relatively obvious category; nevertheless, it is central for the HK teachers. They express an understanding of planning as a tool for designing a precise learning experience. In this category, the teachers express what it takes to learn a specified object of learning. Planning is made in favour of the students, since “a well organised lesson can help students learn” (John, HK). Priscilla (HK) states that “first I would think about what I want them to learn after this lesson”. It is not a general learning skill that is reached for, like reading; it is a much smaller object of learning, something that can be evaluated after one lesson.

“I need to teach students something” (John, HK), that is, something specific is chosen as the object of learning for that lesson. But it is not enough to merely choose

content; “then I think about it” and “I will go to my colleagues. I will ask the other teachers for their opinion” (John, HK). In the process of planning the teachers themselves learn by discussing their planning with colleagues. They also discuss the learning, asking themselves questions like “why should they (students) learn this and why should I teach them this” (Julie, HK) or if it is “useful to my students” (Julie, HK). The students’ perspective is in focus; is the chosen content useful, are they interested in it, what do they already know about it, what is their level and understanding about it and can they understand it? Their interest is accordingly not defined at a general level, rather at a very specified level.

In this category, *Guiding for content-based learning*, the focus is on what the students shall learn, but not learning at a general level. The HK teachers tend to take one objective or content at a time, and emphasise it. The content is in the foreground and the activity in the background, but they do not seem to separate them from each other.

Conclusions of the Hong Kong results

The six Hong Kong teachers were relatively homogenous as a group concerning their age and teaching experience, and their answers were also in agreement. They talked about the content as almost the first thing they did, and the three categories show an awareness of “knowing what I shall teach”. The teachers express that the responsibility for students to learn something is the teachers’, as well as the readiness to choose activities that can enlighten the content for the students, thus creating a concurrence with variation theory, that “focuses equally on what teachers do and what students learn at school” (Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008, p. 111). The qualitative different categories are at a higher level than the Swedish teachers’ expressions, such as their strong commitment to keep the specified object of learning in the foreground without separating the content from the act.

Co-operation was very present in the Hong Kong group. They had many opportunities to discuss the subject and teaching matters reflect upon and with other colleagues. Teachers had co-planning, scheduled planning lessons, panel meetings and were placed together in staff rooms. In this environment, there were good conditions for the teachers to develop their thinking about their teaching.

Conclusions and discussion

The questions we initially set out were: a) what teachers say they first focus on when planning to teach a literacy lesson; and b) if there are differences in expressed focus between the Swedish teachers and the teachers from Hong Kong. Do they tend to decide on the method without considering the content, or do they start by reflecting on what the chosen object of learning is about and how to organise the content? Which, if any, differences are there between the Swedish teachers’ focus and the Hong Kong teachers’ focus when planning? The answers are that there are some

clear differences and that the way the teachers talk about how they organise and think about planning reveals whether their focus is on students' understanding or on teacher action. The Swedish teachers' experienced focus is on activities/methods, and they separate activities and methods from the content, while the HK teachers have the content in the foreground but do not separate content and act. Even if the activities in both groups seem similar, they have different points of departure. The Swedish teachers seldom reflect upon the content, while the HK teachers always have the content in the foreground. When the Swedish teachers talk about having fun, they refer e.g. to games, while the HK teachers refer to having fun when learning Maths, providing a deeper interest in the content. In this way, they do not design learning situations randomly without deciding which parts should be included and why. Our analysis ends with a branched relationship between the categories, as shown below in Table 2:

Level 1 - HK	G. Guiding for content-based learning		
Level 2 - HK	E. Guiding for interest in content	F. Guiding for content-based activities	
Level 3 - Swe	A. Guiding for joy	B. Guiding for hands-on	C. Guiding for peace and quietness
Level 4 - Swe	D. Guiding towards external goals		

Table 2. The branched organisation of the categories

Imagine a man who wants to have Béarnaise sauce with his meat for supper and decides to cook it. He knows perfectly well what it looks like, how it should taste and smell and what colour it should have. He knows the end product, but how to reach it? He has a vague idea of the ingredients, takes a look in the fridge and then starts to experiment. Why should he fail? He most certainly knows what Béarnaise sauce is! A recipe seems to be a detour to the result. Well, anyone who has tried to make a Béarnaise sauce knows that he will probably fail in his attempt. The Swedish teachers also seem to try to reach goals without reflecting on the process and the parts which have to be included to reach a specified goal. They know the end products – the stated goals for the subject and the grade. To identify the ability and think about what it takes to learn it seems further away than to plan for activities around it. This is expressed in category *D. Guiding towards external goals*, where the Swedish teachers had a picture in their minds of the core abilities of the subject. The Swedish teachers did not go into detail about how these goals could be accomplished; it was more like, if they had it in mind, it would happen. In the HK category *G. Guiding for content-based learning*, thoughts like “first I would think about what I want them to learn from this lesson” are predominant. The HK teachers plan for defined objects of learning, something that can be evaluated after one lesson, each lesson is a link in a bigger learning process.

There can be several different explanations of the differences we found. One assumption is that a too general theoretical and surface awareness of concepts of learning makes it difficult to reach a detailed level of the object of learning, i.e. what it actually takes for the students to learn exactly this phenomenon or ability. The Swedish teachers have ideas of what promotes learning, but do not seem to fully understand how to use the theories. They seem to underestimate what it takes to learn due to a theoretical framework as if they let the students discuss and work in groups they will learn due to a socio-cultural perspective, or understand learning-by-doing as if the students automatically learn if they participate in hands-on activities. Additional assumptions are that catching interest, having silence, keeping order or practicing will lead the students to learning. Another explanation of this difference in focus could be that teachers need support from each other to deepen the reflections about the subject, thus achieving knowledge about what it takes to understand the intended object of learning. Schools where teachers and headmasters discuss content instead of practical matters show a better performance (Ärlestig, 2008) and therefore this could be essential. In Sweden, students' results at the international screening PIRLS 2006 have declined. One explanation offered in a research review by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) is that teachers in Sweden focus too much on practical matters, an assertion that this study supports. According to the interviews, it was obvious that the Hong Kong teachers more frequently discussed content matters as well as shared ideas, thoughts and problems concerning teaching and what it takes for students to learn. This culture of sharing could be one key to the Hong Kong students' prosperity, which we have not questioned due to the values of what is tested. In HK a model for teacher development, learning study, is implemented (Lo, Pong & Pakey, 2005). Iterative processes, no matter what kind of model, seem to have an impact on school quality (Butler et al., 2004).

Yet another explanation of this difference (focus on content) could be that the knowledge of what it takes to learn something is tacit (Polanyi, 1967). Due to this, the Swedish teachers might have this knowledge but cannot express it. Besides that, the results of PIRLS (Skolverket, 2007) show that Swedish students' results are decreasing, which contradicts the idea that Swedish teachers have tacit knowledge about what it takes to learn something. In any case, such knowledge is too important knowledge not to be expressed. What is not expressed cannot be talked about. Since teachers in every learning situation should know what they intend to teach and what it takes to understand that chosen something, this needs verbalisation. If teachers cannot talk about what it takes to learn and in which ways the features of the content should be organised, they will instead talk about simplified things like which book is better or whether they should work in groups or in pairs. We suggest that it is a matter of focus, and that it is of the utmost importance for our children that teachers focus on content on a more detailed level in order for them to be able to speak and express thoughts

on the content in their lessons and what it takes for the students to understand. The teacher education programme seems to have a challenge developing future teachers with more advanced theoretical awareness than the more general perspective used by Swedish teachers today.

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