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Transnational policy discourses on ‘teacher quality’: An educational connoisseurship and criticism approach

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Abstract
In this article, we analyse key policy documents on teacher quality produced by the OECD and the EU during the period 2005 to 2017 using an educational connoisseurship and criticism approach. The purpose of this article is to explore how Eisner’s concepts of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism can be understood and used to analyse educational policy, especially how teacher quality is discursively constructed in transnational authoritative texts on education policy. Eisner’s three aspects of criticism, description, interpretation and evaluation can be utilised in a differentiated critical approach to the analysis of transnational policy documents on education. While the critical descriptive discourse can be viewed as ‘identifying a simple relationship’ between social development and educational needs, the interpretative critical discourse can be regarded as ‘recognising the complexity’ of teachers’ tasks in changing societies and the critical evaluative discourse as ‘recognising and problematising contradictory interests’ that affect teachers’ work. We argue that the philosophical concepts of connoisseurship and criticism contribute to policy research by demonstrating that a multifaceted concept of teacher quality is needed to capture the complex nature of education.

Keywords
Educational policy, Eisner, connoisseurship and criticism, discourse, teacher quality

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Introduction

During the last decade, teacher quality has emerged as a key policy area among transnational policy actors. The 2005 report *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was for example an important publication that set the policy agenda. Other transnational policy actors, such as the European Union (EU) and the World Bank, have also become influential co-producers of policy on teacher quality, highlighting the role of teachers in developing globally competitive knowledge-based economies (Wahlström, 2015; Nordin, 2016; Nordin and Sundberg, 2014; Alvunger, Sundberg and Wahlström 2017; Rinne and Ozga, 2013; Robertson, 2012, 2013). Historically, teachers have been significant actors in advancing civil society agendas and working on behalf of governments in nation-building projects; however, their role in today’s transnational policy context risks reduction to facilitating pathways for individual learners into the labour market (Seddon et al., 2013), as teachers are forced to navigate a market-driven educational discourse characterised by individualisation, standardisation and measurability. Discourses of teacher quality are deeply embedded in wider social, economic and political discursive frames. In order to understand the underlying values that the concept of teacher quality is based on, there is a need to focus on the interconnected discourses that, taken together, are shaping dominant policy approaches regarding the meaning of good teacher quality. Moreover, the discrimination between different approaches of complexity for discussing teacher quality in policy documents points at the problem of the character of policy discourses as one-sided and shallow. However, the present analysis also reveals signs of more nuanced policy discourses that might contribute to form conditions for actual discussions between policymakers and the professionals in schools and other stakeholders.

In accordance with Tesar (2016) we argue that educational philosophy might offer fruitful concepts for analysing contemporary policies on teacher quality that have been almost forgotten in this era of accountability that is preoccupied with measuring and comparing quantifiable performance data. In this text, we use US curriculum theorist Elliot Eisner’s (1979, 2002, 2005) concepts of *educational connoisseurship* and *criticism* to analyse transnational policy discourses on teacher quality.

The purpose of this article is to explore how Eisner’s concepts of educational connoisseurship and criticism can be understood and used to analyse educational policy, especially in terms of how teacher quality is discursively constructed in transnational authoritative texts on education policy.

Against this background, the following research question has been formulated to guide the analysis of teacher quality: how can Eisner’s concepts of educational connoisseurship and criticism contribute to an analysis of transnational education policy that transcends the dominant scientific efficiency approach to the teacher quality policy agenda?

Eisner’s work has hitherto been used for classroom studies and the cultivation of connoisseurship through teacher–student interaction in a variety of educational settings (e.g. Ingman, 2013; Simon, 2012). Others have used Eisner’s writing on learning outcomes to analyse the implications of state testing (e.g. Conn, 2013), to assess integrative studies (e.g. Vars, 2002) and, recently, to challenge neoliberal discourses that reduce learning outcomes to what can easily be predefined and measured (e.g. Prøitz, 2015). However, little attention has so far been directed at the use of Eisner’s connoisseurship and criticism approach to critically examine contemporary education policy texts. In doing so, this study therefore
contributes to the field of Eisner studies as well as to the wider field of educational policy studies by introducing alternative concepts for the philosophical analysis of contemporary policies and using them to deconstruct the discursive meanings of teacher quality in transnational policy.

After this introduction, the article evolves in three main sections. The first outlines the study’s theoretical and methodological approach, while the second presents the results of the analysis of transnational policy documents on teacher quality. The article ends with a concluding discussion on teacher quality in light of Eisner’s perspective of connoisseurship and criticism.

A connoisseurship and criticism approach

As Eisner (1992/2005) emphasises, there are many ways to value and evaluate education, and the risk is that these approaches tend to be too unilateral; instead, schools can be perceived as webs of related beliefs and actions based on the norms and aims of the activities that are unique to each school. These beliefs and actions shape how teachers understand their tasks and the meaning that students attribute to schooling. Unless school reforms can create an overall and attractive vision of shared values and community, they risk being both superficial and short-lived. Because schools are ‘living systems’, Eisner (1992/2005: 143) argues that one must think about school reforms in terms of ‘ecological’ or systemic changes instead of creating technical or uniform programmes for common standards. The main argument against the latter view of reforms is that they will never happen. The key to realising reform is ensuring teachers feel committed to the very idea of it; otherwise, they will not change their teaching. Eisner’s idea of schools as ecological systems of norms and values also requires a ‘new’ way of understanding evaluation. Here, Eisner turns to the arts to borrow the related terms ‘connoisseurship’ and ‘criticism’.

Eisner’s use of connoisseurship grew out of dissatisfaction with contemporary thinking on education as ‘scientific management’, characterised by attempts to formulate laws for learning to promote a more efficient school (see Au, 2011). Eisner (1976/2005) argues that in striving to standardise education, tests became instruments not only for controlling learning outcomes but also, increasingly, for defining the educational practice as a whole.

These tests, de facto, become the goals. When this happens, uniformity becomes an aspiration; effectiveness means in practice that all students will achieve the same ends. [...] In a technological orientation to educational practice, the cultivation of productive idiosyncrasy – one of the prime consequences in the arts – becomes a problem. (Eisner, 1976/2005: 39)

As an alternative to such a technological approach, Eisner introduces his idea of educational connoisseurship, according to which professional judgements, instead of laws, should determine the quality of schooling. A connoisseur ‘appreciates’ what he or she encounters; that is, a connoisseur is aware of and understands what is experienced and has a genuine curiosity around shared interests of a certain phenomenon (cf. Uhrmacher et al., 2017). As Hansen (2017: 9) points out, connoisseurship has nothing to do with the ‘elitist image of a moneyed collector of fine paintings or fine wine that perhaps first comes in mind’. Instead, Eisner ‘democratizes the concept in showing how it points to a human potentiality that can apply equally to plumbing, to building roads, to piloting an aircraft and to undertaking educational research’ (Hansen, 2017: 9). Thus, classrooms characterised by openness and
curiosity and where teachers are allowed to include contextual aspects always cultivate connoisseurship.

According to Uhrmacher et al. (2017), educational connoisseurship entails the following broad questions: What is going on here? And why is it important? Connoisseurship involves three aspects. The first is the ability to notice and distinguish between different sorts of qualities. The second is appreciation as a result of being well acquainted with the activity – that is, being able to recognise and understand the nuances of what one sees and experiences. The third aspect is evaluation. This is related to the second question about why a certain activity or discourse is important. This aspect refers to educational values and the connected concept of educational criticism.

A necessary complement to connoisseurship is criticism, Eisner claims. Eisner (1976/2005: 41) distinguishes between the two, stating, ‘If connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure.’ The language of criticism is a language in which metaphors, suggestions and implications are important analytical tools for helping critical scholars to disclose unspoken, or even hidden, messages within a specific discourse. However, in addition to this deconstructive endeavour, critical research also has a reconstructive aspect to it in searching for alternative interpretations. As Dewey points out in *Art as Experience* (1934), criticism ‘has as its end the re-education of perception’ (as cited in Eisner, 1976/2005: 41).

Unlike the critical tradition of post-World War II Europe, which was heavily influenced by Marxist theory, Eisner turns to the arts to find his ‘critical language’. However, despite differences in their theoretical underpinning and level of analyses, the two approaches of critique share a critical engagement in dismantling processes of reifying human relations and a frustration with the view that an instrumental rationality guides social interaction.

Following Eisner (1976/2005), educational criticism involves three interrelated aspects: description, interpretation and evaluation. The first entails the description of an educational phenomenon’s qualities, without engaging in deeper analysis. In displaying the subtle qualities of education, descriptive criticism invites people to participate in ‘exercising judgment of its educational value’ (Uhrmacher et al., 2017: 2). In making qualities visible, descriptive criticism opens up the educational discourse and invites readers to exercise their right to judge what they see. The interpretative aspect signifies an effort to understand the different meanings and consequences that various educational discourses have for those involved. This means that there is never one true interpretation. Different interpretations use different kinds of evidence for why they should be considered to be educationally valuable. Finally, the evaluative aspect has to do with critically evaluating the educational significance of the discourses described and interpreted in questioning what is taken for granted, drawing attention to the complexity of educational events and the possibility of alternative interpretations. In so doing, the critical task of educational criticism lies not only in the deconstruction of educational discourses but also in their reconstruction by offering alternative interpretations to guide future educational actions. The two concepts of connoisseurship and criticism complement each other. They are combined through the common aspect of evaluation, where the educational value of an activity is in focus. Thus, educational criticism directs attention to the qualitative, rather than quantitative, aspects of schooling, asking the question ‘What is the educational import or value of what is going on?’ (Eisner, 1976/2005: 44). As Hansen (2017) suggests, educational criticism can be viewed as an invitation to participate in communicative deliberation. Deliberation, then, becomes a way of re-educating those involved, referring to the school’s role in society as a whole.
The reconstructive aspiration inherent in the critical tradition is, for Eisner, embedded in his metaphor of the school as an ecological system. In a context of technical rationality, the vision of an ecology of schooling offers a rich language for thinking and acting out education in different educational settings. Following Eisner, the vocabulary of ecology does not do justice to the multifaceted field of critical social research; rather, it expresses the critical through the ‘attitude’ (Simons et al., 2009: vii) towards teacher quality as discursively constructed in contemporary transnational education policy and an educational concern for the way teachers and teaching are reduced to what can easily be standardised and measured in quantitative terms. Criticism is, thus, public in the way it invites participants to deliberate and makes the qualities of a certain phenomenon alive through the use of critical disclosure (Eisner, 2005).

**A holistic approach to education reforms: Ecology of schooling**

In this article, policy texts are understood as materialised forms of discursive interaction and, as such, reflexive social practice (among others) is continuously shaping and reshaping educational institutions. However, we argue that these policy texts are often misunderstood, among researchers, as well as practitioners, seen as expressions of a single coherent interpretation, rather than as compound documents containing a variety of values and interpretations, some more valuable to education than others. Adopting a holistic approach to educational reforms enables for a complex and multidimensional analysis of the discursive components embedded in transnational policy discourses on ‘teacher quality’ and their implications.

Eisner argues that the purpose of schooling is not primarily a question of educational technique but rather of educational values emanating from different conceptions of education. Drawing on Dewey’s ‘biological’ approach to life, where man is viewed as an organism living in and through an environment, students’ opportunities to transact with the environment become an important factor. The educational interest is directed towards enabling all students to realise their full potential by paying attention to each one’s talents and experiences (Eisner 1969/2005, 1979). Thus, Eisner argues that it is appropriate for teachers to plan their classroom activities without predefined objectives; instead, the purposes of schooling may be formulated in the very process of schooling. The variables ‘teacher’, ‘student’ and ‘subject’ require artful blending for that which is educationally valuable to occur (Eisner 1967/2005: 22). What is educationally valuable can in turn only be judged by the two approaches of connoisseurship and criticism, while taking the school context as a whole into account.

Eisner’s way of contextualising teachers’ work forms an ‘ecology of schooling’, where it is important to understand educational reforms and their impact on educational practices. The concept of ecology emphasises the significance of understanding policy and practice as interrelated, together making up the ecology of schooling; what happens to one affects the other. It is because of the reconstructive element in Eisner’s view of schools as ecological systems, in combination with Eisner’s focus on educational values in his educational connoisseurship/criticism approach, that makes his frameworks for evaluation specifically suited for analysis of educational policy documents. There are reasons to be very sceptical to policy reasoning with poor arguments for reconstruction and educational values, especially regarding teacher quality discussed in policy context.
To analyse the discursive constructions of teacher quality in transnational policy documents, Eisner’s terms of educational connoisseurship and criticism are used as overarching analytical concepts in the reading of the policy texts, focusing on values. Educational criticism contributes to disclosing stereotypes by identifying variations among similar cases (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). This aspect is especially relevant to policy texts, which are often interpreted as ‘being the same’ regardless of the type of document or organisation they represent. Since the messages in policy texts involve changes in terms of more or less comprehensive school reforms, Eisner’s concept of reform is of certain importance for this study.

To think comprehensively about school reform, Eisner (1992/2005) identifies five dimensions to take into account. The first is the intentional dimension, which refers to exploring the tension between conventional arguments for what a reform is intended to accomplish and the set of educational values the school, as a societal institution, rests on. Second, understanding a reform requires observing the consequences of its structural dimension – that is, how the school is organised and how the reform influences the priorities and structures within the school. The third dimension covers possible changes to curricular content. This dimension concerns school subjects, their mutual relationships and how they are valued. An interrelated dimension is pedagogy, which is indispensable for an intended curriculum to become operational. In order for a reform to give rise to changes, curriculum and teaching need to be considered. Finally, the fifth dimension is evaluation. The way in which students’ knowledge is assessed is of great importance for what counts as subject knowledge and how the subject is taught. Thus, the values that become visible in the discourse of evaluation correlate with the values attributed to the school. If the intention of a reform is to change teachers’ ways of teaching, the discourse of evaluation must harmonise with the desired changes in classroom activities.

In this analysis, Eisner’s mutually related aspects of connoisseurship and criticism are combined with the five dimensions of educational reforms distinguished by Eisner. While Eisner suggested the frameworks of connoisseurship and criticism as well as the identified dimensions of reforms for the evaluation of implemented school reforms, the frameworks in this study are used for analysis of policy texts suggesting reforms for increased teacher quality. Together, these aspects and dimensions form a structuring critical lens that enables the identification of the qualitative elements that constitute transnational policy discourses on teacher quality. Discourse is seen here as a reflexive social practice that continuously shapes and reshapes human institutions, and policy texts are understood as mediated expressions of discourse (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). As such, policy texts are part of a social interaction that facilitates certain ways of thinking and acting while limiting others. Adopting an educational connoisseurship and criticism approach to analyse the policy discourse on teacher quality, as mediated in transnational policy, therefore means analysing the limitations as well as the possibilities of the meaning of discourses on teaching and teachers in policy texts.

Bringing connoisseurship and criticism together, we argue, offers a qualitative alternative vocabulary that has been lost in much of today’s educational policies, which are characterised by individualisation, standardisation and measurability. However, we do not suggest that dominant contemporary policy discourses should be replaced by a connoisseur-critical discourse but, rather, that a discourse of standards and evidence needs to be complemented by a perspective that takes the intrinsic qualities of education seriously. Analysing policy discourses on teacher quality from a connoisseurship and criticism approach, thus, involves
proposing concepts that help to render what is taken for granted and create space for alternative and challenging interpretations of policy texts (cf. Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

This textual analysis is based on ten key policy documents produced by the OECD and the EU during the period 2005 to 2017. Each document is referred to in the following section reporting the results. The policy documents were selected due to the centrality of teacher quality discourse within each of them. In the first step of the analysis, the policy documents were read in relation to Eisner’s five qualitative dimensions, that is, the intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical and evaluative dimensions of the reform in order to pay attention to for what purpose, and with what arguments teacher quality is discussed in each of the documents. The intentional dimension referred in the analysis to the content and aim of a certain reform. The curricular and pedagogical implications were analysed when the documents took these two aspects into account. We also paid attention to discourses of evaluation in document texts where such discourses can be distinguished. In a second step, the documents were analysed and categorised in relation to the three aspects of educational criticism: descriptive, interpretative and evaluative. These three aspects structure the reporting of results of the study; at the same time, they represent an increased level of complexity in how the issue of teacher quality is addressed in the documents. Each of the sections structured by the three critical aspects includes one or more of Eisner’s five dimensions of a reform; these dimensions thus constitute subunits to the overall units of critical aspects where relevant in the reporting. In a third and final step, a few policy documents were identified for analysis from a connoisseurship aspect, based on the level of complexity of criticism and an awareness of educational values included in the policy text.

**Transnational teacher policy: Different degrees of criticism**

Transnational education policy documents are often viewed as having similar content and as part of a single genre. Reading authoritative policy documents through the lens of Eisner’s concepts of educational connoisseurship and criticism illustrates that there really is a dominating discourse that describes education policy in similar terms; however, some policy documents can be analysed in relation to other aspects of Eisner’s concept of criticism, beyond description.

The results of the analysis are structured below in accordance with Eisner’s descriptive, interpretative and evaluative aspects of criticism to illustrate the differences of complexity and nuances in the awareness of educational values in the different policy documents. We argue that the focus on educational values in Eisner’s framework is what makes it specifically suitable for policy analyses; by this structure of the result section, we highlight the different levels of ambition regarding educational thinking that lies behind the various documents.

**A first aspect of criticism: Description**

In this section, we present the main features of the descriptions of teacher quality in the analysed documents. What makes the characteristics of the OECD documents in this section ‘descriptive’ is their consistent adherence to ‘evidence’ in terms of (the selection of) ‘research’, benchmarking and the results of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys, without any real effort to understand teacher quality from alternative perspectives or to explore teacher quality in a more open-ended way.
Based on research evidence, the OECD (2015: 126) considers it necessary to have ‘a high-quality and well-motivated education workforce for improving student performance’. Therefore, the intention is to recruit well-qualified teacher–students. Another assumption is that the teaching profession should be a lifelong commitment, promoted by a well-structured professional development programme, attractive working conditions and sound payroll increases. These intentions appear to shape teacher quality policies in all the analysed documents that use a descriptive approach. The main issue is what competencies teachers need to meet the demands of the 21st century. Teaching quality is discussed as a central aspect for improving learning outcomes among students. The challenge of the 21st century, according to the OECD (2012), concerns rethinking national education, not in terms of systems but, rather, in terms of its function of facilitating personalised learning trajectories. Societal aspects and considerations, such as equity and equality are, thus, replaced by a stronger emphasis on the individual lifelong learner, teachers included.

**Structural dimensions of teacher quality**

The assumption in the analysed policy documents is that ‘high-quality teachers’ are indispensable when it comes to teaching students to ‘develop the competences they need in a global labour market based on ever higher skill levels’ (European Commission, 2012a: 10). EU member states are struggling with several structural problems. There are still too many students who leave school without basic skills or who drop out of school. Moreover, many European countries are experiencing a teacher shortage, in part, due to a large number of retirements (European Commission, 2012a). An ageing teacher population is another structural aspect. In the EU as a whole, 33% of teachers are below the age of 40 and 40% of lower secondary teachers will retire within the next 15 years (European Commission, 2015b).

Another structural aspect that raises problems is the gender imbalance in the teaching profession. For example, only one-third of teachers in lower secondary school in the EU are men. This has a close link to the ‘image of the teaching profession’ with regard to attracting the most qualified students to teacher education (European Commission, 2015b: 103). Furthermore, societal discourses and norms are important for how the teaching profession is perceived by citizens. The EU summarises the problem of the expectations of schooling and the role of teachers as follows.

Schools, however, face unprecedented challenges. Not only are they expected to deliver measurable results with reduced budgets, but also to be modern and forward-looking, offer an attractive curriculum, and prepare young people for as yet non-existent jobs. This renewed pressure on education systems impinges directly on the most important in-school factor affecting student attainment, namely the work of teachers. (European Commission, 2015b: 15)

For the EU, pedagogical issues are of great importance. There is a need to increase the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in teaching and learning, and there is a new multilingual context that teachers must master (European Commission, 2015a).

**Curriculum and pedagogy as aspects of teacher quality**

Within the EU, curricular and pedagogical aspects are prominent. An overall goal for the EU is that curricula at all levels of the school system should establish a stronger connection
to working life and foster closer collaboration with companies and entrepreneurs. The EU has also suggested sharpening the focus on assessing learning outcomes in classroom teaching based on the insight that what is to be assessed also largely determines what is to be taught (European Commission, 2012a); that is, the EU advocates reactive teaching that starts with the prescribed result.

A challenge to the curriculum is that information is digitalised and can be quickly found using search engines, such as Google. The OECD (2012) stressed that there are new rules today for schools and teachers: ‘The past was about delivered wisdom, the challenge now is to foster user-generated wisdom among teachers in the frontline’ (OECD, 2012: 11). The OECD’s argument is that the ideal of yesterday’s education was conformity, and that it was curriculum-centred, while the ideal of today’s teaching is to offer students personalised educational experiences and feedback, where the learner, not the curriculum, is at the centre of the school’s mission. The report suggests that the ideal learner can no longer be described in terms of specialist or generalist but as a ‘Versatilist’. According to the OECD (2012: 34), Versatilists are skilful not only at adapting but also in ‘constantly learning and growing, of positioning themselves and repositioning themselves’ in a changing world with rapidly changing needs.

The conclusion is that the teaching of tomorrow has to focus more on the complex knowledge that computers are unable to produce. The task of teachers has become to encourage students to think in complex and creative ways using the information they easily retrieve online, so that the students complement the computer’s ability, rather than try to imitate it (OECD, 2012). This idea of pedagogy promotes collaboration and inquiry-based approaches to teaching.

**A second aspect of criticism: Interpretation**

Only a few of the analysed policy documents adopt a more interpretive approach. The interpretative aspect signifies an effort to understand the potential meaning of the discourse of teacher quality for those involved. The point of departure for these policy texts is the assumption that the teaching profession is of great importance for students’ learning outcomes and the allocation of a large portion of national budgets to education (Barrera-Pedemonte, 2016; European Commission, 2012b). The reports argue, for example, for greater variety in the teaching repertoire. This could facilitate what Eisner terms ‘artful blending’ (Eisner 1967/2005: 22), but it turns out that the broader teaching repertoire suggested in the documents is largely predetermined by the policy actors. Consequently, the reports suggest general predefined solutions based on statistical data, which are aimed at minimising contextual differences.

**Curricular and pedagogical aspects**

Barrera-Pedemonte (2016) suggests that the strongest link between high-quality teacher professional development and what happens in the classroom exists when teacher professional development is focused on curriculum activities. Curriculum-focused professional development for teachers highlights both the subject content itself and ways of teaching this content to students. Barrera-Pedemonte (2016) also states that the pedagogical forms and methods used within teacher professional development fundamentally effect varied classroom practices and classroom discourses involving students. According to this
report, collaboration stands out as the most important factor for promoting more effective teaching in classroom practices. A general argument in this report is that when teachers receive high-quality professional development, they are more likely to have a successful professional repertoire.

In the analysed policy texts, teachers are supposed to manage a learning characterised by inclusion and diversity (European Commission, 2012b). For this reason, pedagogical knowledge and skills include insights into group processes, knowledge of learning theories and motivational issues, as well as the ability to use teaching materials and technology efficiently. Thus, it is suggested that a well-qualified teacher must acquire a wide range of assessment techniques.

Learner-oriented teaching methods and the ability to combine different learning methods are considered to generally increase students’ knowledge outcomes in relation to curricula (European Commission, 2012b). The implication of the policy aim of raising knowledge results is an emphasis on diversity in teaching repertoires and assessment practices (Barrera-Pedemonte, 2016; European Commission, 2012b).

**A third aspect of criticism: Evaluation**

In this section, we analyse two policy documents that incorporate a broader ‘evaluative’ perspective on education criticism, asking the question of what the educational value is of the teacher quality policy.

The main driver of focusing on high-quality education is expressed by the European Commission (2017) in terms of reaching national and regional social and economic goals of social cohesion and global competitiveness. The problem raised by the OECD (2005) is that many aspects of teacher quality are difficult to capture with the most common structural indicators, such as formal qualifications, length of professional experience and tests of academic ability. Thus, the emphasis is on promoting effective teaching and learning. In addition to the more quantitative aims, the OECD’s ‘The Teaching and Learning International Survey’ project (TALIS) includes interpretability and evaluation as explicit goals to help countries interpret the findings from the TALIS project in meaningful ways (OECD, 2013). The European Commission (2017) points to several structural challenges Europe faces in its quest to reach its economic and societal objectives. The first challenge is that competence development in schools is too weak. Second, schools are not contributing sufficiently to promoting equity and fairness in society. The third challenge concerns the overly slow pace of the use of new technologies and ICT in schools. The European Commission (2017) report, thus, acknowledges not only teaching content in terms of competencies and ICT but also the social and structural inequalities permeating European society that make it difficult to achieve the intended results in schools. Thus, in these documents, social values and norms are considered important structural aspects for schools to deal with.

**Problematising curricula and pedagogy**

The OECD (2005) acknowledges that there are numerous methodological difficulties when conducting research on the factors that influence student learning. Such research, for example, is mainly conducted in the USA, and there is no easy way to generalise the results from
one school system to another or, more broadly, across national borders. Nevertheless, the OECD (2005) concludes that there is solid evidence that the largest source of variation in students’ learning results can be attributed to the individual student’s ability, attitude, family and social background. These factors, however, do not really make a policy impact. Instead, the second broad conclusion drawn by the OECD (2005), and of greater importance to policy formation within the international organisation, is that factors relating to teachers and teaching are the most important policy variables influencing student achievement. Because teacher competence and teaching concerns the policy variable, it is potentially open to policy influence. Evidence of the importance of teacher quality is provided in quantitative calculations of a student’s likelihood of increasing his or her knowledge if he or she moves from being taught by a teacher with average qualifications to one who is amongst the most qualified teachers.

The OECD notes that all member countries have been engaged in major curricular reform programmes since the beginning of the 2000s, and the organisation sees no signs that interest in reform is slowing down. These curricular reforms usually concern the development of pedagogy and assessments by updating content and norms, while also incorporating new perspectives. An example of an emerging perspective is the incorporation of ICT in the curriculum. Other broad perspectives with curricular implications are gender equality, multicultural classrooms and greater integration of students with special needs within mainstream schooling. All these movements set more demands on certain aspects of teacher quality, such as creating effective learning environments for different groups of students and fostering productive and motivating relationships between teachers and students and among students.

For the EU (European Commission, 2017), diversity is acknowledged as a hallmark of European education; at the same time, the importance of a shared commitment to standardised and measurable learning outcomes is highlighted. Thus, one policy document from the European Commission (2017) expresses a somewhat contradictory attitude. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution; on the other hand, member states are supposed to share an interest in improving educational outcomes towards predefined standards (European Commission, 2017: 4). The EU stresses the need for teachers to teach with a broad perspective in relation to other subjects and to the needs of working life and society.

Linking learning with real life experience yields better results. Project- and problem-based learning, on-the-job experiences or community service learning increase young people’s motivation, put subject content into context, and offer opportunities for the development of social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences. (European Commission, 2017: 5)

In addition to this pedagogical advice, the European Commission (2017) promotes ‘a whole school approach’, which includes acknowledging value-oriented aspects of schooling, such as preventing bullying and encouraging inclusiveness and equity, alongside the development of competencies. Some passages in this EU policy document indicate a shift in discourse by giving aspects of values a more central role in educational reforms in order to enhance social cohesion in society. The crucial point for greater cohesion and prosperity in society, according to the European Commission (2017), is to pave the way for lifelong learning for all.
Dimensions of connoisseurship in the texts

The OECD (2005) appreciates the role of teachers in schools and covers several aspects beyond those that are easily measurable. The report, for example, notes a need for specific teacher attributes, such as enthusiasm, commitment and sensitivity to students’ needs (OECD, 2005: 164).

Teaching is increasingly seen as a professional activity requiring a careful analysis of each situation, choice of objectives, development and monitoring of suitable learning opportunities, evaluation of their impact on students’ achievement, responsiveness to students’ learning needs and a personal or collective reflection on the whole process. (OECD, 2005: 99)

The authors of the report strive to connect social and economic changes with new demands on teachers at school, and, thus, interpret the meaning of teacher quality against a backdrop of societal needs and rapid changes in society. However, the broader insights and suggestions are also based on the same basic argument that teachers need to equip individuals with skills and knowledge to maintain societal cohesion and respond to the requirements of the labour market. The content is evaluative in the sense that it defines certain aspects of teacher quality that are deemed desirable, but the text does not deepen arguments concerning different qualities of the teaching profession. It emphasises that teachers must have a sense of ownership of the reform if it is to be successfully carried through, but there are no clear suggestions in the document about how this can be done.

The OECD (2013) reports on extensive quantitative and qualitative research and a variety of indicators including teachers’ beliefs and feelings of self-efficacy. The OECD (2013) acknowledges that ‘effective education’ might also be found beyond what can be captured in surveys and measurements. The report’s reference to teacher quality can be said to include some aspects of connoisseurship in its recognition of the involvement of complexity and tacit and situated knowledge in teaching; that is, there is a certain insight that good teaching can be appreciated as a whole in actual situations, rather than being described in different elements. However, this insight does not constitute any prominent theme in the report.

In promoting economic growth, the European Commission (2017) indicates what might be seen as a ‘renewed recognition’ of social and value-oriented aspects. This is mainly expressed through the idea of ‘a whole school approach’. Because the overall aim of social inclusion is economic growth and prosperity, the European Commission (2017) identifies variations and reflects upon why certain approaches to teacher quality are important. This reasoning involves both interpretative and evaluative aspects of educational criticism. The approach communicated in the document, thus, allows for collaborative and value-oriented approaches to education that are more diverse than those expressed in the previous EU documents analysed in this research. However, the fundamental goal of economic growth in all the analysed policy documents prevents the inclusion of a concept like connoisseurship because such an approach requires a more open-ended point of department. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the connoisseurship of teaching quality is only thinly present in some of the documents, which are otherwise dominated by descriptive arguments based on ‘evidence’.
Transnational policy discourses on ‘teacher quality’

Most of the ten analysed documents are, in Eisner’s (1992/2005) terms, descriptive. Both the justification for teacher quality and the suggested policy solutions are described as ‘necessary’, without any effort made to provide actual explanations or problematisations of teacher quality. Raising teacher quality is suggested to be necessary due to rapid changes in society, including digital development and economic factors. Higher teacher quality is related to nationally structured initiatives to improve initial teacher education and teacher professional development, promoting skills in ICT, collaborative work and inquiry-based teaching tailored to the needs of each student. The critical descriptive discourse can be viewed as identifying a simple relationship between social development and educational needs.

A few of the analysed documents can be assessed as engaging in interpretative criticism, which signifies a deeper endeavour to understand the implications of recommended actions for those involved. The rhetoric of teacher quality includes a wide range of measures, extending from countering social inequality and adopting a broader view of citizenship to more concrete policies on teaching content and teaching approaches promoting social cohesion and a widening of students’ opportunities in the labour market. This perspective is more inclusive than the descriptive discourse, and teacher quality is recognised as a multi-layered concept. The characteristics of the critical interpretative discourse can be regarded as recognising the complexity of teachers’ tasks in changing societies.

A few of the analysed documents include the evaluative aspect of criticism. In these documents, the problems of measuring teacher quality receive greater attention. Moreover, the promotion of teacher quality is explicitly related to the need for social equality and cohesion, in addition to economic prosperity. The solutions and advice in these policy documents differ in how the questions and problems are addressed. Further, the policymakers address shortcomings in existing research and the state of knowledge relating to educational success factors that could provide everyone with a chance to succeed, regardless of gender, race or disability. The characteristics of the critical evaluative discourse can be understood as recognising and problematising contradictory interests in education that affect teachers in their work.

Using Eisner’s concept of educational criticism facilitates the differentiation of policy discourses on teacher quality and acknowledgement of efforts made to discuss the social and economic roles of school and education. A narrow, neoliberal discourse of teacher quality has a demonstrated lack of capacity to address broader social challenges, such as migration, unwanted aspects of cosmopolitanism and inequality – all examples of dimensions that influence teachers’ practices. A critical evaluative approach to the policy agenda has the potential to open a more nuanced discussion on alternative policy futures that meet contemporary societal challenges, including what problems the policy agenda addresses and what problems are excluded. Thus, policy research might have the potential to bring together a wider range of arguments and critical aspects when addressing educational policy documents and take advantage of broader research results than is often the case today. By combining connoisseurship concerning what characterises good teacher quality with a critical review of the scope and complexity of teacher quality in policy language, public deliberation on teacher quality will more adeptly handle complex issues with increased urgency.
Teacher quality in light of Eisner’s educational connoisseurship and criticism approach

In this article, we argue that the philosophical concepts of educational connoisseurship and criticism contribute to policy research by demonstrating the importance of a multidimensional understanding of teacher quality to capture the complex nature of education. The international policy arena is currently attempting to codify, simplify and instrumentalise the teaching profession as a form of ‘international standard’. Such standards are linked to the aim of creating global educational standards for a globally competitive knowledge-based society (e.g. Robertson, 2013). It is important for the OECD and EU to gain interpretative privilege over education policy to ensure their legitimacy as important intergovernmental organisations amongst individual member states. Thus, these organisations ‘know’ what is required of the different countries to reach the common standards and what models ‘work’. At the same time, it is important for each member state to recognise this logic to be able to recontextualise depoliticised discourse in the politics of its national education system. Thinking of school reform through Eisner’s concept of ecological systems of norms and values implicates each reform as simultaneously deeply embedded in broader societal processes where different social movements persuasively posit their meaning of education and a ‘good’ society. This is why Eisner claims that each reform needs to be anchored in teachers’ general perceptions of what constitutes a ‘good school’ in order to actually be implemented. It is not enough that the reform is formulated as a top-down directive from the governing body; it also needs to be conceived as urgent by the teachers. Another important aspect of the underlying logic of ‘international standards’ is that such standards are never meant to be reached. Their purpose is to induce improvement, not to act as achievable targets. As soon as member states can claim to have achieved certain standards, new standards need to be formulated.

Drawing on Eisner (1976/2005), analysing teacher quality from a connoisseurship and criticism approach involves language that joins appreciation, complexity, contradictions and valuation. Teaching cannot be viewed as a linear activity for delivering curricular knowledge to students. Teacher quality has been central for the policy texts analysed in this study. However, in the report Teachers Matter (OECD, 2005), the OECD makes an important distinction regarding the impact of teacher quality on students’ knowledge outcomes. It is only among the variables possible to affect by policy that teacher quality is identified as having most impact on student learning. Taking a broader social perspective, the largest source of variation in student learning is related to students’ family and community background. These kinds of nuances need to be incorporated into policy language in order to provide a credible basis for national reforms. In a similar vein, the EU’s desire to establish a stronger connection between school and working life through pedagogy and curriculum policy is too narrow and superficial to really address how these policies link to the current complexity of teachers’ handling of various partially opposed goals aimed at both the individual and society.

A critical approach, including different aspects of ‘the critical’, has the potential to open up space for alternative and opposing interpretations of the meaning of teacher quality. An important aspect of Eisner’s connoisseurship and criticism approach is its emphasis on appreciation and disclosure. While appreciation points to a close and deep understanding of the art of teaching, disclosure allows alternative ways for teachers to act and think. Following Eisner, we argue that a language that incorporates appreciation, combined
with a critical disclosure, needs to start from proximity of the conditions of teaching, however, simultaneously always also take on a critical perspective from a distance. Moreover, such an approach to policy research has to move its focus from what is argued to what is missing. This displacement makes space for other voices, for example, those of teachers and teacher educators, in the rhetoric of policy proposals and policy reports. The language of policy has the potential to move from one-dimensional to more multifaceted, where different and contradictory voices and perspectives can meet. To contribute to such development, Eisner’s concept of criticism could be used as an important dimension of critical policy research.

In sum, at a time where measurability has become highly prioritised in education, we see Eisner’s philosophical concepts not just as an approach to analysing policy but also as a way for the research community to take responsibility for the ecology of schooling. This approach offers a qualitative language that reminds us of Eisner’s insight that not everything that matters in education can be measured. The pedagogical value of borrowing concepts from educational philosophy in policy research is precisely the ability to challenge simplistic policy language by demonstrating why superficial policy rhetoric, when implemented, risks incalculable and unwanted consequences at the school level. The philosophical understanding of connoisseurship and criticism thus contributes to policy research by generating a rich concept of teacher quality that captures the complex nature of education in both policy and practice.

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