

Assessing Teachers' Performance in Pre-Primary and Primary Schools in Estonia

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Introduction

The evaluation of teachers' performance is difficult and is one of the most unpopular aspects of educational reform and practice. In Estonia, while the Law of Education sets the rules of teacher accreditation, the national system does not seem to provide sufficient information for guidelines for the development of teachers' performance. By focusing on formal criteria, the data does not give much feedback either to teachers, schools or parents on what spheres need further development.

Though the development of learner-centred programs has been a widespread issue in Estonia, we haven't had much discussion on indicators or criteria for it. This presentation introduces the results of the criteria-based assessment for the pre- and primary school teachers, which was piloted in Estonia last spring. The *Step by Step Teachers'* standards were used as a framework. In spite of the remarkable history of pre-schools in Estonia, it was probably the very first attempt to describe quality indicators, evaluate teachers' performance and give them meaningful feedback. The purpose of the presentation is to review the very basic aspects of evaluation we had to deal with, while attempting to change the process of evaluation from a boring obligation to an effective means of development.

Background

The system of professional evaluation is going through rapid change today in Estonia. Professions Chamber, a non-profit association, was established in 2001 with the task of developing the professional qualifications system and of according skill categories. The latter are developed by professional associations, e.g., as by Unions of Nurses or Welders. As a rule, though not obligatorily, all requirements are described by criteria based, measurable standards. As the teachers have not yet managed to establish a nationally accepted union, the Ministry of Education and Research (MOER) has taken the initiative of establishing professional standards for teachers.

Today the teachers' qualification system is regulated by the decree of MOER – system of teachers' attestation which describes 14 requirements for K-12 teachers. Each teacher must:

- 1 Have a higher qualification (BA degree) in Education;
- 2 Have worked successfully during the previous three years. This is assessed by means of a written report compiled by a staff member appointed to that position by the school administration;

- 3 Have passed 160 hours in-serving training (4 academic credits) during the previous three years;
- 4 Have acquired an MA degree in Education;
- 5 Have mentored young pedagogues;
- 6 Have participated in school improvement programs;
- 7 Have published a research paper in an educational journal;
- 8 Have completed at least 100 hours lecturing;
- 9 Have organised students events, competitions or exhibitions;
- 10 Have facilitated students in state-level competitions;
- 11 Have developed teaching materials;
- 12 Have presented at educational conferences;
- 13 Have participated in educational work-groups;
- 14 Have facilitated youth organisations.

Requirements eight to fourteen must be accomplished at County or National level. After attestation, one of four skill-categories – Junior Teacher, Teacher, Master Teacher or Teacher-Methodologist – could be appointed to the applicant. The first of these is available for almost everybody with a BA degree and the fourth is relatively rare, appointed exclusively by the State level committee. The teacher's base-salary has until now been in direct correlation with the appointed degree.

The role of the national attestation is formulated as “... to support teachers' professional development and career by assessing regularly efficiency of their work by internal and external evaluation.”¹¹ Despite this, the general opinion is that the system does not provide sufficient information to guide the development of teachers' performance. On several occasions, the teachers who have been awarded the highest degree are in fact not recognised as good teachers by their colleagues. It seems that by focusing on formal criteria, the evaluation does not give much feedback to teachers, schools or parents on what spheres need further development. In addition, many of the requirements are simply not applicable for pre-school teachers and so it is evident that the teachers' qualification system has to go through thorough changes.

The most important change, as we see it today, is the shift of focus from structural to procedural criteria, which could briefly be described as characteristics of a teacher's everyday work in the classroom. Several options were considered in order to meet this requirement, e.g., evaluation of classrooms (settings, schedules); assessment of students' results (teamwork skills, problem solving skills, etc.); or satisfaction scales (students, parents, school administrations). In the end, we chose the evaluation of teachers' performance, without knowing then that it seems to be one of the most unpopular aspects of educational reform and practice. As a lucky coincidence, the International Step

by Step Association (SBS) started developing its quality standards and gave us permission to pilot them in Estonian pre- and primary schools.

Methodology

SBS framework standards were developed by an international executive committee and describe teacher's performance by six areas:

- Teacher-child interaction;
- Family participation;
- Planning and individualisation;
- Strategies for meaningful learning;
- Learning environment;
- Health and safety.²

These areas seem to represent almost the full range of practice and theory that are the primary target of the child-centred programs. Accordingly, most of the organisations implementing the SBS methodology found the standards to be applicable in their countries; the criteria about including disabled children were added to different standard areas.

The Need

Quality assessment systems usually serve two major purposes:

- 1 To improve the efficiency of teaching and learning by: evaluating the efficiency of the teachers' pre-service training; recognizing outstanding teachers; providing a reliable professional career path for teachers; motivating teachers to carry out regular self-assessment; providing feedback for teachers on professional achievements etc.;
- 2 To provide external accountability: by comparison of different programs ('regular', Waldorf, Step by Step, Montessori etc.) and by evaluating the impact of external factors (social, geographical, etc.).

In our case, we identified two more sub-goals that could be reached by a qualifications system. Firstly, the qualifications system should be considered as a mutual responsibility; if society is 'not satisfied' with teachers' work but does not describe explicitly what it wants the teachers to do, then we cannot expect the quality of teachers' performance to improve. Therefore, the quality standards, introduced by different non-governmental organizations, should somehow force society to describe its expectations to teachers.

Secondly, on a program level, we need to assure the quality of the program. In order to respond to the occasional misuses of the trademark, we need a yardstick that clearly

differentiates the classrooms using 'our' program (SBS in this case) from those who use only some elements of it. In addition, an adequate measurement tool is needed which enables assessment of the expansion of the program. Evaluation of the efficiency of in-service training programs also belongs to this group.

Process

In April 2004, we started the teacher evaluation as a pilot project (Incidentally, the grant applications we submitted earlier were all rejected with explanations that pre- and primary school education is not a priority or that evaluation of teachers is a private business and is not in the public interests).

One of the underlying principles of the qualifications' system is its focus on quality improvement rather than on creating ranking lists or sanctioning. The main local level obstacles we faced while achieving this goal could be described as follows:

- Teachers are not interested in any kind of extra work unless it is directly connected to certain benefits;
- School administrators are not interested in having external evaluators in their classrooms;
- Municipality officials are afraid of losing their job and control (also, NGO-reputation is not high in Estonia in general);
- Policy makers are afraid of any potential connections between the (state-independent) evaluation system and official approval and salary benefits.

These obstacles were complicated by the novelty of the standards-based evaluation. In spite of the remarkable history of pre-school and primary education in Estonia, it was probably the very first attempt to describe quality indicators, evaluate teachers' performance and give them meaningful feedback. Also, although the development of learner-centred programs has been a widespread issue, we haven't had much public discussion on indicators or criteria for it in Estonia.

It is generally accepted that meaningful learning takes place if the student feels secure. Since the evaluation process is key to professional development, it is clear that evaluation procedures must be safeguarded. Assessment is trustworthy and safe if the information is valid, if it provides accurate estimates and if it measures what it is intended to measure. Also, reliability, and in our pilot study the inter-rater reliability in particular, should be emphasised. In order to increase teachers' trust towards the evaluation results, it is crucial that the independent raters give the same scores to a given teachers performance (and portfolio).

Our sample of twenty-eight evaluators is not sufficient to provide data on statistical validity and the reliability of the scales. Still, in order to increase these measures in the pilot study, the following steps were taken:

- 1 Standard areas with descriptions of the criteria were sent two weeks beforehand to all teachers and principals. They were encouraged to ask questions and comment on both content and format of the standards;
- 2 Twelve potential observers were trained. From these, eight were selected to carry out the classrooms evaluations. All the observers worked in pairs. During first visits the chief-evaluator, serving also as a trustee of the teacher, attended the observations and facilitated follow-up discussions;
- 3 As a rule, the observers evaluated the work of the teachers whom they didn't know personally beforehand;
- 4 The final scores were only approved with the consensus of both observers.

Results

During the pilot project, the performance of twenty-eight teachers from eighteen pre- and primary schools were evaluated; among them the urban/rural, experienced/beginners, pre/primary teachers were represented almost equally. Neither of our main threats – low inter-rater reliability and high context-dependence – came true. In none of the occasions, serious discussions or third-party intervention were needed. Also, the scale seems to work similarly well in different classrooms, independently of the economical, social or geographical differences.

Three main challenges, all somehow technical in their nature, were identified as follows:

- 1 Giving feedback and pointing out weaknesses (areas for further development) is much more difficult than we expected, especially in the case of experienced teachers;
- 2 The whole procedure needs much more time and resources than we were prepared for. Also, evaluators, all working as teachers themselves, face significant problems in assembling the schedule for observations;
- 3 The school principals, although very interested in the process, claim to have no administrative resources to recognize the high results of their teachers.

Four basic principles were found to be important in facilitating further development of process:

- 1 The evaluation should be absolutely voluntary on the part of the teacher. Approval of the school administration should be also asked in every case;
- 2 The result of the evaluation will be announced only to the teacher. The results will be

- available to other parties only with the permission of the teacher;
- 3 Expectations should be clear. The observable criteria and observation procedure shall be available to the teacher before he/she agrees to be evaluated;
 - 4 Meaningful feedback should be given. The results of the evaluation should be introduced to each teacher in both written and oral form and in a meaningful content.

Participant satisfaction among teachers and observers was extremely high. Most expressed the importance of standards-based evaluation as an *attention-director*. The impact of our initiative was considerable both vertically and horizontally. Interest in participating in further evaluations increased significantly, and on two occasions, parents asked us to carry out the evaluation of teachers. Also, both municipal and ministry level educational officials were highly interested in our results. A further outcome of our pilot project is that the general readiness to hand over the qualification assessment to non-governmental organisations has increased also in the eyes of the public.

Notes

- 1 Decree of Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2, Published 27.12.2003.
- 2 See paper by Tatjana Vonta in this volume for more details.