

Editorial

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Received: 5 September 2011 / Accepted: 12 September 2011 /
Published online: 18 November 2011
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We begin with a cause for self congratulation. The quality of contributions to this journal over the last 2 years has merited the accolade of ISI, The Thomson Reuters Citation Indexes: the prestigious international quality hallmark. It is both tribute to those who have entrusted us with their research and to the referees who invest a great deal of their time in reviewing and commenting on papers submitted. The final quality of the papers, almost always a second or third iteration, owes much to their insightfully critical comments. We are in their debt.

The first article in this issue provides insights into a subject that will resonate with policy makers and schools in almost every country of the world. The evaluation of school quality and effectiveness is a perennial concern in the pages of this journal and the role of school in their own self-evaluation is at the heart of the debate. Yet where do we look to find robust evidence of its efficacy or its wholehearted adoption by teachers? To what extent it is seen as an empowering addition to the daily work of teachers and to what extent may it be regarded as yet another imposition on the mounting pressure of the job? And, is the critical variable in the equation the role, enthusiasm, commitment or political skills of senior leaders in embedding self-evaluation in routine classroom practice?

A teacher in Emstad's two school in-depth study in Norway makes a telling comment, 'We didn't have it under [our] skin, and it is a project that involves many more things than QIS [the evaluation instrument]. QIS was a bit "on the side". If, as this teacher testifies, school A found it an intrusive and fairly unproductive process it may be because no virus, no stimulus, no nutritional force can change behavior if it fails to get into the body politic, 'under the skin'.

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The Emstad paper starts with the question ‘How does the principal engage in the post-evaluation work as part of the development of teaching practices?’ aiming at an understanding of what the principal does following an evaluation process to make it a positive and meaningful force in teachers’ priorities and planning. While both schools in the study adopted the QIS protocol the outcomes of the evaluation process in the two schools were quite different. This, Emstad attributes to the principals’ role and skill in ‘providing a proper context for knowledge sharing and reflection’. ‘For it to be effective, the teacher’s assessments should provide a basis for dialogue and negotiation’. Dialogue and negotiation, the essential concomitants of self evaluation and improvement planning assume an openness, collegiality and positive predispositions. As Emstad adds, ‘using evaluation to improve methods and practices in an organization requires the ability to learn’. Professional learning and organizational learning are premised on getting under the skin and into the emotional bloodstream. The more self evaluation is seen as an event rather than as an integral day-to-day integral aspect of learning and teaching the less likely it is to be embraced and internalised. While in the two cases explored in this paper, leadership plays key role, it is not the simple elixir. There is necessarily an institutional history, which explains resistance or embrace. Cultural change can often require a long-term investment.

The statement that ‘students are the most informed parties regarding the quality of their feedback to the teachers’ may resonate internationally. The ability to listen and to take on board young people’s comments does presuppose a learning culture, a theme that is revisited in the second article in this issue. In a Belgian context it examines how Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) can be used to provide feedback in order to improve planning and teaching. As the context for the discussion here is institutions of higher education, one might assume a more mature response on the part of students and a less resistant response on the part of teachers. One might also assume a more definitive set of findings. Whether an instrument such as SET will provide the answer to the relationship between exam success and pedagogic qualities is the focus of the Brock, Spooen and Mortelmans’ study. Data from 1,244 evaluations were collected by the authors using the SET-37 instrument and then analysed by means of cross-classified multilevel models. While there is evidence to show a statistically significant relationship between course grades and SET scores we are advised to treat these findings with a modicum of caution. The authors’ conclusion is that we need to consider a range of possible interpretations.

While results from their multi-level analysis show positive significant relationships between course grades, class attendance, the examination period in which students receive their highest course grades, correlated with students’ teacher evaluation score (SET), we are offered a variety of possible interpretation for those inter-relationships. When student characteristics are added into the model only one strong relationship proves significant, that is, between students who always attended class and SET scores. ‘The effect parameters demonstrate that students who indicate that they always attend classes assign significantly higher ratings (around five points higher) to their teachers than do those who report almost never attend classes’.

We are left with the question: Do students evaluate their teachers more highly because they get good grades, or do they get good grades because they have a positive attitude to their teacher? Is the higher rating for teacher by students’ who have better attendance records a cause of a consequence of that relationship? Could

it be, ask the authors, that students who always attend classes might be highly motivated, and this motivation might colour their evaluations as well? And what kind of evaluations would one expect of students whose attendance is erratic and possibly subject to sanctions? What other complex of factors might be in play? Hidden factors that a quantitative study such as this could not account for, admit the authors, has to be open to the possibility that teachers might pass their students during the first examination round, ‘assigning grades that are higher than the students actually deserve. Students might then reward these teachers for doing so’. We are reminded of the recent scandal in Atlanta, Georgia where teacher evaluation and tenure are dependent on students’ test scores, leading to teachers cheating by changing students test results, found to be endemic in the system.¹

While posing more questions than it answers this paper is a health warning for researchers and readers of research to exercise caution as to the validity of any inferences that may be drawn in a climate where extrinsic and/or ‘political’ influences weigh heavily with teachers and their students.

Half a world away we are in familiar educational territory. Assessment and evaluation in Nigeria are, Ekuri, Egba and Ita write, ‘associated with unreliability, invalidity and deviousness’, quoting Torrence’s observation that school based assessment and evaluation are ‘used as a basis for undue rewards and penalties, which hinge largely on overall learning achievement of students’.

Their paper explores factors, which may help to explain greater expertise with assessment practices, the variables being qualifications, length of service, gender and attitudes to the teaching subject (social studies) as well as to assessment needs. The study evaluated perceived assessment practices needs among social studies teachers in Cross River State, Nigeria involving 297 social studies teachers (144 males and 153 females) from 116 secondary schools in the state.

Outlining the very wide range of issues encompassed within the simple term ‘assessment’ and the consequent importance of getting it right, the study starts from a low base as ‘research evidence in sub Sahara Africa indicates that teachers’ competence in assessment especially in testing, is below expectation’. But, where there is greater expertise, better professional development and support for teachers what differentiating factors may emerge?

The least surprising finding is that attitudes to the subject are related to greater expertise, more surprising are gender differences, while surprisingly ambiguous is the relationship with qualifications. ‘Highly qualified teachers may have been exposed to more elaborate training in assessment than their relatively less qualified counterparts yet while teachers who have been in the profession for many years would be exposed to more distinct needs according to their teaching experience. However, the positive relationship between years of teaching experience and perceived needs suggest that the more experienced teachers tend to have more perceived needs than the less experienced’.

While the authors regard this as a surprising finding it may well be that the further one develops professionally and the greater the insights into issues such as assessment, the greater are the complexities and dilemmas that become apparent.

¹ See <http://www.ajc.com/news/investigation-into-aps-cheating-1001375.html>

Is this not indeed the purpose of education, to make life less simple and less tolerant of simple answers?

Making life simpler and ironing out dilemmas and complexities is not the purpose of an education in the arts and sciences of policy making. In Belgium political knowledge and participation is a curriculum subject with the aim of helping young people gain insights into the way the political system operates. Hooghe and Dassonville's own dilemma is to weigh the balance between an experiential approach to the issue and direct 'instruction' (or our own preferred term 'teaching'). Knowledge is a necessary baseline for any further hand-on exploration and problem solving and 'knowledge allows citizens to play a meaningful role in the political process'. The question is 'How is knowledge gained? And where?' Do we learn by being told or by a more dialogic process, or by osmosis, a gradual filtering of understanding through the day-to-day experience of living in a politicized environment? How effective is the classroom as a 'construction site' as opposed to the home, community or media?

The perhaps disappointing finding is that the school effects is limited while the most powerful effects came from living in a politicized environment and through relationships with parents or peers as well as the pervasive exposure to the media. This does not, however, imply that teaching is inconsequential; rather that it needs to build on what happens outside the classroom. Traditional lessons about political institutions 'obviously are not the most effective manner to install this motivation' whereas group projects which draw on the best of cooperative learning are most benefit to those who already know more about politics to start with.

The problem with traditional approaches to 'knowledge transfer' (if such a concept has any validity) is that lessons democracy may fall on stony ground if hierarchies, decision making processes and autocracy within the school stand in too stark contradiction with information abstracted from direct experience.

The authors question whether these issues are an idiosyncratic aspect of the Belgian educational systems given the somewhat unique context of French and Dutch language communities which adopt differing approaches to the issues and so complexity the approach of a controlled study. The conclusion that whatever the language or cultural communities in question, school culture should receive more attention in future evaluation research is hardly contentious. This seems self evident if, as the authors conclude, 'The main challenge for educational systems seems to be to motivate pupils to gain knowledge about politics'. As it said that fish were the last to discover water, so perhaps the first lesson to be learned is in the school itself- a political system in miniature.