



# Navigating educational challenges: insights into accountability, support and teacher professionalism in diverse contexts

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*This issue addresses several challenges in education and examines how school actors navigate them, providing insights into accountability, support and teachers' professionalism in diverse contexts.*

## 1 Overview of EAEA 1/2024

The implementation of school-based assessment reforms is a crucial aspect, driven by both internal school aspirations and external mandates. These reforms continually adapt to meet the diverse needs of educational systems, posing challenges for school leaders. In the first paper in this issue, Oo et al. (2024) argue that it is unclear from research evidence what approach and factors best support the implementation of assessment reforms. In their review of research, the authors address three key research questions: (1) how have school-based assessment reforms been investigated in terms of location, school level, research design and participants? (2) What approaches are used to implement these reforms? (3) What factors influence assessment reforms in schools? Following PRISMA guidelines, the authors conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on school-based assessment reforms, synthesising insights from 28 selected articles to provide a nuanced understanding of diverse implementation approaches and influencing factors. Contrary to a one-size-fits-all solution, their findings suggest that there is no singularly effective approach to implementing school assessment reforms.

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Schools may choose from various strategies based on their specific reform objectives. Based on their findings, they propose a framework for school leaders that identifies political, cultural, structural, chronological, paradigmatic and technological perspectives that warrant consideration during assessment reform implementation. This framework offers a practical guide tailored to unique institutional contexts.

The second paper by Contreras et al. (2024) explores the impact of accountability policies, particularly the system for measuring the quality of education (SIMCE), on the Chilean education system. This context is characterised by increasing privatisation, rooted in the quasi-educational market established during the military dictatorship in the 1980s. The SIMCE tests, originally designed to stimulate quality improvement, have faced strong criticism in the last decade. The study focuses on three public municipal schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and examines how SIMCE is perceived and enacted by school leadership teams and teachers. By applying an ethnographic case study, the authors explore narratives and meanings embedded in the school experience, facilitating an understanding of how educational policies, particularly those associated with SIMCE, are interpreted and recontextualised. Key findings show that despite differences in specific school practises, the strategies used before, during and after the SIMCE test, were remarkably similar among schools, reflecting the influence of the market system in which they operate. Schools facing pressure to retain or improve their classification employed adaptive and evasive strategies. The study reveals complexities in participants' experiences, showcasing contradictions between the demands of the SIMCE results and the actual possibilities within their schools. The authors identified similarities in policy interpretation, as well as nuances based on schools' categorisation and test achievements. Schools with positive results credited themselves, while those with poor results blamed external contexts and policymakers. The study challenges the assumption that schools should experience varying levels of pressure based on classification, as all participants felt threatened by potential drops in official classification levels.

In the third paper, Lopez-Agudo et al. (2024) delve into the global debate on managing academic progression for students who do not meet the minimum knowledge level required for their grades. Examining diverse approaches across countries, the study focuses on the impact of grade retention on the academic competences of Andalusian lower secondary education students in the short term. The methodology involves census and longitudinal data, utilising ordinary least squares estimation with student fixed effects within-student between-academic years. The results indicate a null influence of grade retention on reading competencies and a positive influence on mathematics in the short term. Notably, age differences from the average age of the classroom emerge as a relevant variable, with older students exhibiting higher levels of reading competence. Despite the null influence on competencies in reading, students who undergo grade retention automatically progress to ninth grade, potentially accumulating gaps in their competencies compared to their peers. While grade retention seems to positively influence mathematics competencies, the authors argue that its implementation needs careful consideration. The study suggests the need for precise measures, including potential support such as complementary lessons for repeater students. Additionally, early identification of potential repeaters

and implementing remedial measures to improve their competencies is emphasised as a more effective strategy than grade retention alone.

The fourth paper by Lucksnat et al. (2024) addresses a development in education primarily attributed to the prevalent issue of teacher shortages, namely, that an increasing number of individuals lacking conventional teacher training have opted for the teaching profession through alternative certification programmes in both Europe and the USA. This paper focuses on the impact of alternative certification programmes on teaching quality by comparing alternatively certified (AC) and traditionally certified (TC) mathematics teachers in Germany. In particular, the authors examine whether AC teachers provide the same teaching quality as their TC counterparts and whether teaching quality differs based on teaching experience and school track. In their analysis, the authors utilise secondary data from a large-scale study in Germany, employing a multilevel analysis with a doubly latent modelling approach. Three dimensions of teaching quality (classroom management, student support and cognitive activation) are assessed using student ratings. The analysis explores differences between AC and TC teachers and considers the influence of teaching experience, school tracks and other variables. The authors find no significant differences in teaching quality between AC and TC mathematics teachers in the three assessed dimensions. While no certification-related differences are observed, teaching experience is found to play a role in classroom management and student support. Novice teachers, both AC and TC, face challenges in managing disruptions, while experienced teachers, regardless of certification, excel at maintaining a positive learning environment. The findings underscore the importance of classroom management skills for all teachers and advocate for the inclusion of such courses in teacher education programmes. Additionally, the study highlights the impact of teaching experience on classroom management and student support, emphasising the need for ongoing professional development and support for novice teachers.

The final paper in this issue addresses the unintended consequence of performance-based accountability (PBA), which has emerged as a key mechanism to enhance education quality by holding school actors accountable for student performance in standardised tests (Verger et al., 2019). This accountability approach expects teachers and principals to utilise test-derived data for reflective purposes, identifying areas for improvement and implementing instructional changes to boost learning outcomes. In ‘higher-stakes’ systems, the primary accountability rationale is centred around the consequences linked to the test, often involving specific incentive or sanction schemes, which often lead to an overarching focus on the repercussions associated with the test results in these high-stakes settings. While numerous studies have explored factors associated with student cheating, there is a dearth of research on the factors contributing to teacher-led opportunistic actions. While teacher-led opportunistic actions are often associated with higher-stakes systems, Ferrer-Esteban and Pagès (2024) contribute a nuanced understanding of these phenomena in an education system which is categorised as low stakes. Utilising theoretical frameworks of social capital and institutional trust, the authors uncover the contextual factors influencing teacher behaviours aimed at manipulating outcomes in the Italian low-stakes accountability system. Logistic regression models incorporating fixed effects at the classroom level and

interaction terms are employed to identify factors that increase the likelihood of teacher misbehaviour. The analysis involves approximately 79,100 primary, lower and upper secondary classrooms. The results suggest that teacher cheating may be interpreted as a form of support for vulnerable students, particularly aiding low-income students, grade-retained students and those in socially homogenous school settings. The findings also indicate that teacher cheating is consistently associated with non-civic-minded behaviours and practises shared collectively among teachers, deviating from legal requirements. These practises include within-school social segregation and the exclusion of students from tests. Heterogeneous effects reveal that even in classrooms with external controllers, lower civic capital in a school corresponds to higher levels of misbehaviour. The study discusses pertinent implications for research, social theory and policy, considering these findings.

## 2 Some reflections

Examining the contents of this issue, several compelling topics warrant attention. The papers authored by Contreras et al. (2024) and Ferrer-Esteban and Pagès (2024) investigate the impact of PBA instruments, coupled with incentives, sanctions and market-driven mechanisms, on teachers' working conditions and behaviour. An overarching enquiry arises: Do teachers' conceptions of professionalism evolve over time, and can instances of misbehaviour, such as cheating, be attributed to perceived needs for support, introducing ethical considerations into the professional landscape of teachers?

Numerous papers underscore the imperative need for support for school actors. Lopez-Agudo et al. (2024) proposed the early identification of potential repeater students, coupled with targeted support to prevent students from repeating a grade. The study by Lucksnat et al. (2024), set in the German context, accentuates the significance of continuous professional development and support for novice teachers. This emphasis remains consistent regardless of whether teachers hold traditional or alternative certifications, particularly in areas like classroom management. The research underscores not only the ongoing necessity of professional development for novice teachers but also the pivotal role of teaching experience in advancing professionalism.

Oo et al. (2024) add another layer to the discourse by recognising the need for a nuanced understanding of teacher professionalism. In their study, the authors acknowledge the multifaceted nature of assessment reform implementation, emphasising the adaptability of assessment concepts to local needs. Lastly, Contreras et al. (2024) argue that local control, democratic values and nuanced teaching and learning concepts may prove more effective in fostering positive educational outcomes and enhancing teacher well-being. In summary, these papers collectively shed light on external pressures, the evolving nature of teacher professionalism, the crucial need for support and the potential efficacy of approaches that include nuanced and localised adaptations in education.

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