RECENT DISSERTATIONS

RUNAR SIGTHORSSON, 2008

Assessment for learning or learning for assessment: National examinations, teachers' conceptions, teaching and learning in Science and Icelandic in four Icelandic compulsory schools

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Abstract

This dissertation reports case studies in four Icelandic compulsory schools into the impact of national tests in Icelandic and Science in year 10, and Icelandic in year 7, on teachers' conceptions, their teaching organisation, and on students' learning activities and outcomes. Data was gathered through interviews with head teachers, subject teachers, classroom observations in their lessons, focus group interviews with students and document analysis.

A curriculum framework was developed as a theoretical basis for the study, and used to analyse the data and organise the presentation of findings. The framework comprises four main elements: Intended curriculum, teachers' conceptions, implemented curriculum and attained curriculum.

The teachers found the National Science Curriculum difficult to implement within the given time limits, even though they endorsed its instructions. In their view the National Science test did not reflect the curriculum, but in order to prepare their students for the national tests, the teachers adapted their teaching to the demands of the tests rather than the National Curriculum and their own conceptions. This created a professional tension for some of the teachers. Despite this it is not clear to what extent the teachers' implemented curriculum was shaped by 'wash-back' effects of the tests or to what extent it is cast in a long standing teaching tradition, influenced among other things by a long tradition of national testing.

The prominent style of teaching was that of 'informers' who mainly presented facts and information to the whole class and rarely asked open questions. This organisation gave little scope for differentiation in mixed ability classes, but the teachers who endorsed the teaching style of 'problem solvers', with more student independence, more demanding activities and problem solving saw more possibilities of this. The assessment practices of the teachers were characterised by an emphasis on written tests and other forms of summative assessment. There was also a widespread use of older national tests to assess student learning.

Some students reported anxiety and stress caused by the tests and test preparation. The use of older national tests as 'practice tests' seemed to amplify this, and so did the heavy emphasis, placed by teachers and most parents, on the importance of good results. There were indications of a learning culture characterised by limited motivation and a desire for grades rather than learning. Curriculum areas not covered by the tests got little attention in the implemented curriculum, and, consequently, in the students' attained curriculum. There were also indications that learning activities within the implemented curriculum were characterised by factual knowledge and rarely presented students with activities that demand reflection, problem solving, deep understanding, evaluation and creation.

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