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OECD/INES/NETWORK A

REVIEW OF ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

Issue 8 *Spring 1998*

In This Issue

Welcome to the eighth Review of Assessment Activities newsletter. This issue celebrates three years of successful collaboration and information sharing on topics of interest to Network A members. As such, the feature article reflects on the topics of past newsletters and describes how some countries' assessment practices and policies have changed since the overview of activities appeared in the first newsletter. It also presents a discussion of how participation in recent international assessments has impacted national policy, research, and practice in member countries. This edition's Country Highlights describes the assessment system in Sweden, the first of the Scandinavian countries to be featured.

New in this issue is a resource guide (which we hope will be expanded in future editions), alerting readers to web-sites and documents of relevance in OECD countries. Finally, as always, this issue provides updates on the activities of Networks A, B, and C and the Board of Participating Countries (BPC), as well as a brief review of assessment activities occurring in member countries between January and June 1998.

Thank you to the Network members and correspondents who contributed to the newsletter—and on such a short deadline! Special thanks are due to Agneta Sundman-Claesson for providing information on the assessment system in Sweden and to Jaap Scheerens and Allan Nordin for regularly providing the updates that keep us informed of activities around the INES Project.

Reflections on Assessment

It is hard to believe that it has been three years since the newsletter was first distributed, in the Spring of 1995. In the seven previous issues, the newsletter has addressed various topics in assessment, becoming progressively more focused over time. In 1996, new features were added to the newsletter such as *New Developments* and *Country Highlights*, intended to provide more in-depth information on the activities of countries that were using new and interesting approaches to assessment.

Newsletter Topics of the Past

- Issue 1 provided an *overview of assessment* activities in 17 OECD countries, identifying for each the students tested, assessment approach and timing, and subject areas tested;
- Issue 2 examined *responsibilities for assessment* activities and methods of reporting;
- Issue 3 focused on how countries' develop assessment *frameworks and tests*;
- Issue 4 provided an overview of *data collection* methods and efforts;
- Issue 5 described *assessment items* used in member countries;
- Issue 6 discussed the use of both *high and low stakes tests*, along with the reasons some countries use such tests; and
- Issue 7, most recently, described *authentic assessment* as an increasingly popular assessment method used in OECD countries.

In reflecting on the topics of past years—from broad overview to exploration of methodology to highlights of developments in assessment (see sidebar)—it seemed natural to wonder how countries' assessment policies and practices have changed since we've been writing about them.

Changes in Assessment

Out of nine responding countries, all except for Turkey noted some change in its national assessment system, although both the type and magnitude of the change varied from country to country.

Countries which are implementing changes in the national assessment system include Belgium (Flemish), Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

- In **Belgium (Flemish)**, national assessment is limited to research projects on effectiveness and involve a small sample of students. However, in the last few years, Belgium (Flemish) has invested much effort in formulating national goals for primary education in mathematics and languages and in developing assessments that, while not high stakes, will track students' progress against the goals to provide important information on the education system.
- In 1998, **Finland** will implement a national system of assessment in basic/comprehensive school, upper secondary school, and adult education. The commencement of this program represents a fundamental shift in thinking that has taken place over the past years and an increased awareness of the usefulness of assessments for educational development.
- The primary change in the assessment system in the **Netherlands**—the Dutch National Assessment Program (DNAP) in Primary Education—is the adherence to National Attainment Targets established in 1993. DNAP developed standards for minimum, sufficient, and advanced levels of mastery for the attainment of targets in mathematics, Dutch language, social studies, and music education.
- Over the past several years, **Sweden** has been implementing education reforms resulting from a 1991 national act. Reforms, of note for this newsletter, included a shift from norm-referenced examinations to criterion referenced examinations—a criterion-referenced test is now being used for students at the end of compulsory school—and the development of a model for evaluating examinations results and questions of equity.
- In the **United Kingdom**, 11- and 14-year-olds now take two mathematics assessments (one allowing use of calculators and one prohibiting their use), as well as a mental arithmetic test. Fourteen year-olds are tested in a variety of other subjects (e.g., history, geography, design, and technology), as well. One interesting change noted was a tightening of security surrounding assessments, in order to prevent any cheating that might occur.

For **New Zealand**, the changes in assessment are observed at the school level. For instance, improvements observed include: availability of resources (sets of assessment tasks) for teachers to use voluntarily and at their discretion; improvement in schools' planning and monitoring of student achievement via their participation in Assessment for Better Learning professional development activities; and a stronger focus on schools' assessment practices by the Education Review Office.

In the **Czech Republic**, policy makers are beginning to consider the development of a national assessment system in future years. In the meantime, they have developed, and are in

the process of instituting, standardized examinations for students leaving secondary school.

The Role and Impact of International Assessments

While many of our newsletters have focused on the different and similar ways in which we conduct assessment at a national and sub-national level, we are, as a group, engaged in the work of international assessments, as well. Thus, it seemed a worthwhile question to ask about the role of international assessments (compared to national assessments) and if and how they have impacted policy, research, and practice in the last half of this decade.

Many of you remarked that international assessments play a unique role in providing a picture of student performance that is relative and thus a rich source of information with which to examine national performance and the educational policies that may affect it. In countries, such as the Czech Republic, where there are no national assessments, international assessments take on an especially important role in providing the only available macro-level data on student performance.

Nearly every responding country also noted that participation in international assessments had led to change or had some positive impact on policy, practice, or research. Countries described a variety of influences from participation in international assessments and subsequent examination of their results. For instance:

- **Finland** noted that international assessments are highly valued and have considerable influence on curriculum development and, to some extent, steer subsequent evaluation activities.
- **Spain** also described how international indicators projects had supported the interest and necessity of a national indicators system, prompting the culture of evaluation at the national level and in the Autonomous Communities.
- In **Turkey**, knowledge gained from international assessments contributes to developing educational programs and to preparing teaching materials and textbooks.

Other countries describe more particular impacts, as well:

- In **Belgium (Flemish)**, the results of SIALS, in particular, will inform the goals that are currently in development for secondary education.
- In the **Netherlands**, results of international assessments led to the foundation of an expertise center for Dutch language at the University of Nijmegen.
- In **New Zealand**, results from SIMSS led to an increase in math advisors in schools and, subsequently, TIMSS prompted the formation of a Ministerial taskforce on mathematics and science.

In several countries, examination of the results from international assessments led to reallocation of resources in order to strengthen certain curricular areas.

- In response to their disappointment in the results of TIMSS population 1, policy makers in **Sweden** decided to put more money into educating teachers in mathematics and science in order to raise the standards of achievement; and
- In **Finland**, participation in international assessments has led to resources being redirected towards areas in which weaknesses were found.

The **Czech Republic** described a particularly favorable experience with international assessments. One major impact cited was an increase in awareness among policy makers as to the importance of empirical data as a basis

for improving the education system—ultimately resulting in the current development of a school leaving exam and the interest in developing national assessment in the future. Another key benefit for the Czech Republic was for the research community, which was able to become more knowledgeable about the methods, procedures, and standards for large-scale assessment. Finally, the Czech Republic noted that teachers were now becoming more interested and familiar with testing students and in using the results, sometimes in non-official comparisons to students in other schools, to better understand student performance.

Spain cited benefits similar to the latter. Through participation in international assessments, personnel developed expertise in conducting large-scale assessments (e.g., in design, coordination, consensus building, test construction, etc.), and teachers showed an increased interest in reflection and debate about their teaching practices and results.

In some countries, no specific or direct impacts were thought to be brought about by participation in international assessments, but they were still positive about the knowledge gained from them. For instance, the **United Kingdom** viewed such assessments as a tool for identifying models of excellence from which to learn.

Network Updates

Network A

Last November, Network A met in Salzburg, Austria, to discuss possible indicators for EAG 1998; to begin discussing development of an assessment of problem-solving, to review activities with which to coordinate in INES/OECD; and to explore ways in which to mobilize and conduct development work. With respect to the latter, the Network decided that future work would draw heavily upon outside expertise to provide a strong conceptual foundation and a high level of validity to instruments developed. Since the plenary meeting, members of the Network have met to discuss the CCC Self-Concept instrument and conceptual paper, and to discuss the upcoming task to develop an instrument to measure problem-solving.

The next Network A plenary meeting will be held in San Francisco, California, on April 22-24. Topics on the agenda will include a review of draft indicators for EAG and the final draft of the Analysis and Presentation of Outcome Indicators plan, as well as discussion about future directions of the Network. A focal point of the April meeting will be CCCs, as the group will discuss the upcoming pilot test of the Self-Concept instrument; discuss a proposal to conduct development work in problem-solving, and hear presentations on conceptual issues in the field of problem solving.

Network B

Members of three Network B subgroups met recently in Paris to prepare for the plenary session to take place in Bonn, Germany on April 23-24. The topics of discussion included rates of return to education, transition from school to work, and continuing education and training—the three main areas of interest to the Network. Discussion on rates of return focused on results of a pilot data collection on private and fiscal returns that was undertaken in eight countries. They also discussed the need to try different scenarios for second chance learning and outlined tasks to be completed in the next six months.

A pilot test relating to the labor force and student status of young people aged 15 to 29 was also discussed under the transition from school to work subgroup. Also, substantial

progress was made on the Employment Outlook chapter for EAG and consideration is being given to a special section on the student status of this age group. Finally, on continuing education and training, the principal areas of work were identified as: identifying existing data sources; participating in discussions on harmonizing the main concept and definition of international training statistics (through an electronic discussion group); and discussing a future module on different topics of training.

Network C

Network C last met in Prague, Czech Republic, in February to discuss proposals for a pre-study and survey of upper secondary schools and two conceptual papers produced by the Education Personnel subgroup—one on staffing in tertiary education and one on a comparative framework for in-service training. Outcomes of this meeting included decisions that countries would write expert reviews on themes in the proposal for the upper secondary study and that the Network would produce a report with qualitative descriptions of each country's in-service training system.

The Network also has been engaged in preparing its indicators for EAG. The 1998 indicators draw upon the survey of teachers and curriculum and the locus of decision making survey. In addition to the indicators on decision-making typically published, the Network will propose an indicator using data from TIMSS and a trend indicator on teacher compensation and training time. The next meeting of Network C will be held in Neuchatel, Switzerland on May 23-27. At the meeting, the Network will address the contribution to EAG, the revised proposal for the upper secondary school survey, and on-going work on equity and staffing.

The BPC

The Board of Participating Countries (BPC) met last in Paris in December to discuss proposals to implement the first cycle of the Data Strategy. The group came to consensus in recommending as contractor the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The BPC Executive Group negotiated with ACER in January, and the contract was signed in early February. Since then, ACER has been busy, working in consultation with the Secretariat and the BPC Executive Group, to establish and convene the functional expert groups (FEGs) in mathematics, science, reading, and CCC/context questionnaires and the Technical Advisory Group.

The BPC will meet in April in San Francisco, in conjunction with the Network A meeting, to: review the outcomes of the first round of meetings of the FEGs in Melbourne; provide directions for implementation and continued development of the program; discuss the implementation of the program at the national level; review the initial plans for analysis and reporting; and have a first discussion on protocols for sampling, test administration, scoring and data quality. Finally, the BPC is pleased to announce that Poland recently joined the project, as did Malaysia, the first non-member in the Strategy. There are now a total of 27 countries participating.

Country Highlight: Sweden

Prepared in consultation with Agneta Sundman-Claesson and drawn from publications of the National Agency for Education in Sweden

The Swedish State school system has seen some major changes in the past decade. These changes began with the national education act of July 1991 that decentralized the school system. Prior to the act, the school system was governed by the State, through financial

means, regulations, and national curricula. Now, schooling and curricula are based on a division of responsibility.

Under the decentralized system, many of the activities that were once controlled at the national level are the responsibility of the municipalities. As such, each municipality decides how its schools should be managed, within the goals and frameworks defined by parliament and the government.

The national curricula provide a good example of the new division of responsibilities. The national curricula (implemented in 1994-95), as well as the syllabi, are much changed in character from previous years. Now, they are smaller documents, which outline the goals, objectives, and guidelines for different subjects. In these documents, there are two types of goals: those to strive for and those to attain, the latter of which are tested at the end of years 5, 9, and each year of upper secondary school. Within this framework, municipalities develop additional or more specific curricula.

Municipalities are required to produce an education plan describing how schooling is to be funded, organized, developed and evaluated. The headmaster of each school has the task of drawing up a local working plan, in consultation with teachers and other staff, based on the curricula, national objectives, and the education plan.

The Structure and Schooling and Assessment in Sweden

The Swedish Education Act stipulates that all children and young people must have access to education of equal value. All pupils enjoy this right, regardless of gender, place of residence, and social and economic conditions. Tuition in state schools is free—neither pupils nor their parents usually incur any costs for teaching materials, school meals, health care, or transportation.

The school system is Sweden comprises both compulsory and various types of voluntary schooling. Compulsory school includes compulsory basic school, school for the Saami peoples of northern Sweden, special school (for children with impaired sight, hearing, or speech), and compulsory school for mentally handicapped students. Voluntary schools include upper secondary school, municipal adult education, and education for mentally handicapped adults.

Additionally, about two percent of the students in compulsory basic education attend independent schools that are open to all students. Independent schools must be approved by the National Agency for Education (NAE).

The NAE has the task of developing and supervising state schooling in Sweden. At three-year intervals, the Agency is required to provide parliament and the government with an overview report on Swedish schooling. This forms the basis of a national development plans for schools.

Assessment in Basic Compulsory School

Basic compulsory school in Sweden is nine years and for all children between the ages of 7 and 17. (Although, if parents prefer, they may start their children at age 6.) Much of student assessment at this level is by the classroom teacher.

Teachers award grades during each term in year 8, at the end of the autumn term in year 9, and when compulsory school comes to an end (in the form of school-leaving certificates). Grades are awarded in all subjects taught in compulsory basic school, although they sometimes may be organized into a single grade for a block of related subjects. Grades comprise the following categories:

- Pass,
- Pass with distinction, and

- Pass with special distinction.

Term grades (year 8 and middle of year 9) are set in relation to local objectives that are determined for each subject. If a pupil fails to achieve the objective for a pass in any subject, no grade is awarded. Similarly, no grade is awarded if a pupil does not achieve all the objectives for all subjects in a subject block. In cases such as these, students and their parents may request a written assessment showing the students' progress in a subject or subject block, including measures of support which have been adopted.

In the assessments that occur at the end of year 9, teachers may call upon the assistance of national objectives as described in the syllabi. If the objectives are met, a student receives a pass grade. For a Pass with distinction grade, there are nationally agreed-upon criteria that must be met. Similar criteria for the Pass with special distinction grade currently are under development by the NAE and will be reported to the government in April 1998.

There also soon will be national assessments in compulsory basic school. In an effort to increase equality in teaching and assessment, the government mandated national tests in Swedish, English, and Mathematics for year 9. Such assessments are optional in year 5.

Assessment in Upper Secondary School

Upper secondary school is voluntary in Sweden, and as of 1991, it consists of 16 three-year national programs, all of which are intended to provide a broad-based education and confer general eligibility for further studies in higher education. In addition to national programs, there also are specially designed and individual programs.

Grades in Upper Secondary school are awarded much like they are in basic compulsory school, except that students receive grades for every course completed each year and for special project work. Any student who has completed more courses than required for a full program may choose which grades and courses are to be included in the leaving certificate—which is a summary of all courses and grades for special project work.

Like in basic compulsory school, there is a Pass, Pass with distinction, and Pass with special distinction grade; although, there also is a Fail grade. The NAE determines the criteria for Pass and Pass with distinction for national courses, and they are developing criteria for the special distinction category. These criteria will be reported to the government in January 1999. For the grades of Pass and Pass with distinction on local courses, the education board determines the criteria.

Also, there are national tests in upper secondary school in Swedish, English, and Mathematics. Teachers are recommended to use the national course tests set by the NAE, in order for assessment to be as unified as possible across the country.

Future Changes

With more local control often comes greater accountability. The government and the NAE would like to improve the follow-up and evaluation by municipalities. Thus, a quality system with a number of quality indicators will be prepared by the NAE. This quality system will be used by the municipalities to account to the State.

Current Assessment Activities

Many assessment activities are being conducted between January and June of this year. Individual country activities are described and summarized in the table.

Test construction, development, and revision are taking place in the following countries:

- **New Zealand** is continuing with item development and trialing for the Assessment Resource Bank in mathematics and science.
- **Sweden** currently is constructing national tests for courses in upper secondary school in English, French, German, Swedish, and mathematics, as well as tests and diagnostic material for compulsory school and tests in Swedish for immigrants.

The following countries are engaging in coordination, preparation, or consensus building.

- **Spain** is planning two general evaluations of post-compulsory education (one in baccalaureate education and one in vocational training).
- **Sweden** is planning to develop an item bank, which it hopes to coordinate with similar efforts in other Scandinavian countries.

The **Czech Republic**, like many other countries, will be involved in pilot testing for TIMSS-R and IEA Civics Education Study during the first half of 1998.

Several countries will be collecting data between January and June 1998, including:

- **Czech Republic** will collect data from students at the end of secondary school through administration of a new, national school-leaving examination.
- **Finland** will be collecting sample-based data from students in basic/comprehensive school in mathematics and science.
- In the **Netherlands**, data collection for the third national assessment of Dutch language will occur.
- **Sweden** will be collecting results from national tests in upper secondary school and preparing a large study on the results from the first tests in the end of compulsory school with the new assessment system.
- **Turkey** will administer an assessment in June 1998 for students leaving compulsory education and entering vocational and technical secondary education.

Scoring and analysis will occur in several countries:

- During the first half of 1998, the **Netherlands** will be analyzing the results of the third national assessment in mathematics and of the second national assessment of music education.
- **Spain** will be analyzing the national results based on the outcomes of the Teaching and Learning of English Language study, conducted with students at the end of compulsory school in Spain, France, and Sweden.

Many countries will be reporting on assessment activities during the first half of 1998:

- The **Netherlands** will report results of national assessments in English as a Second Language, visual arts, traffic education, and science and social studies.
- In **New Zealand**, a document for public discussion (green paper) on options for a national assessment system will be published.
- **Spain** will be publishing several reports, including: a final report (Diagnosis) on the end of compulsory secondary education (14- and 16-year olds); a first publication of educational indicators at a comparative report on the Study of Teaching and Learning of the English Language.

Addendum

There is one point of clarification we would like to make from the Autumn 1997 newsletter. It was stated that Denmark does not have authentic assessment. However,

although there is no national assessment, there are uses of authentic assessment at the local level. We apologize for the misinterpretation.

Resources to Note

Several countries noted national reports and web-sites that may be of interest to those in the education assessment community. We hope to expand this section in the future to include more detailed information on the range of available resources in member countries. For further information, contact national correspondents listed on the back cover of the newsletter.

National Reports

Czech Republic

- Report on the development and state of the Czech education system, 1995-96 (Skolstvi y pohybu)

New Zealand

- Annual school sector report to Parliament
- Reports on student achievement from the National Monitoring Project
- Three national TIMSS reports

Sweden

- TIMSS national report
- Report on results from national assessment at the end of compulsory school (due in October 1998)

United Kingdom

- National Curriculum
- Qualification and Curriculum Authority's Standards Reports
- Two TIMSS national reports
- DfEE Annual Report and DfEE National Results (booklets and leaflets)

Web-Sites

Finland

- Ministry – http://www.minedu.fi
- National Board – http://www.oph.fi
- National Institute for Educational Research – http://www.jyu/tdk/ktl/

Netherlands

- Site under construction!

Sweden

- Ministry – http://www.skolverket.se

Spain

- Ministry – http://mec.es
- National Institute for Quality and Evaluation – http://ince.mec.es

United States

- Department of Education – http://ww.ed.gov
- National Center for Education Statistics – http://www.nces.gov

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