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"So that we know where we stand" Assessment of learning and competence in basic education and general upper secondary education

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The purpose of this evaluation focusing on the assessment of learning and competence in basic education and general upper secondary education was to study what kind of experiences and perceptions school principals, teachers, learners and guardians have on the methods, practices and culture of assessment. The evaluation was based on text documents dealing with assessment in the local curriculum, electronic surveys conducted in spring 2018 in the sampling units (basic education and general upper secondary schools) comprising more than 8 000 respondents, and discussions in small groups organised in the sampling units. The three main questions of the evaluation received the following answers and recommendations:

**1. What are the assessment practices used in basic education and general upper secondary education?**

The most frequently used *assessment methods* were summative and individual-based. The teachers' *feedback practices* were perceived to be effective, and in their replies, the teachers, learners and guardians stressed the importance of encouraging feedback. Subject *grades* were usually based on the objectives and assessment criteria, although learners' performance was also compared to the rest of the group. Criteria behind the grades were not as clear for the learners and guardians, as they were for the principals and teachers.

The *assessment at the pivot point* at the end of the second year of basic education emphasised the learner's strengths as a learner and progress in different subjects. At the end of the sixth school year, the development of working and learning skills, progress in different subjects and support for study motivation were emphasised. Only slightly more than one-fifth of teachers in general upper secondary schools believed that the grades described the learners' competence well, as they moved from the ninth grade to general upper secondary school.

The formation of grades in the *final assessment* was an imprecise combination of how the objectives had been achieved on average, the learner's competence at the time of the final assessment, and other factors. Differences were detected in the assessment criteria between schools of different sizes, school subjects, teachers' experience and between lower and upper classes in basic education. National tests for the entire age group did not receive convincing support as a solution for unifying assessment.

The principals and teachers felt that both the *mutual consistence* of grades and *fairness of assessment* in their schools and educational institutions were good. Threat to fairness was considered, in particular, when making decisions regarding the three-step model of support and in connection with the assessment of learners with an immigrant background. The learners thought they received a reasonably fair assessment, and their guardians described the assessment as very accurate and fair.

The teachers felt that the *assessment criteria based on objectives* were usable in terms of defining good competence, guiding the learner, and making decisions between a pass and a fail. In particular, clarifications were hoped to be made in terms of assessment criteria in basic education, in order to improve the consistency of grades; some respondents hoped for more criteria. Teachers in general upper secondary school did not have a uniform view of the necessity of criteria in general upper secondary schools.

Principals and teachers pointed out that *the assessment of behaviour* was most typically based on local assessment criteria, the school's educational objectives as well as compliance with the rules. However, clarifications regarding the assessment of behaviour were missing from approximately one-third of local curricula, which had local clarifications. The learners did not have a clear idea of the criteria behind the grade for behaviour. However, they felt that the assessment of their behaviour was fair.

Most of the principals and teachers felt that the learner's attitude had a significant impact on the assessment of behaviour. According to the learners, personality had an effect on subject-specific assessment, for example, in terms of working skills, and 14% of teachers admitted that the learner's personality or temperament affected the assessment at least to some extent. Less than one third of the teachers stated that learners' behaviour affected subject-specific assessment.

*In general upper secondary schools*, the assessment criteria and learning objectives were discussed at the beginning of the course, and the students were provided with diverse feedback on their work. Exercises based on the matriculation examinations were commonly used in the assessment, and more than half of the teachers felt that the final course test gave sufficient information on the student's competence. The practices for resits and for improving grades varied considerably from one general upper secondary school to another.

In terms of developing the assessment practices, the assessment group suggested, first and foremost, that increasingly more attention should be paid to versatile formative and interactive assessment methods guiding the learning process. In addition to a retrospective review, guidance supporting future learning is particularly required. Secondly, it was recommended that the teachers', learners' and guardians' knowledge of the learning objectives and criteria should be strengthened,

as well as the assessment based on the aforementioned, as factors affecting the grades could not presently be adequately identified. The objectives and criteria should correspond to each other in the curriculum in order to provide enough support for the learner-specific assessment made by the teacher. According to the third recommendation, the practices for results and for improving grades should be clarified, especially in the general upper secondary school, but also in basic education.

## **2. What kind of assessment competence do the principals, teachers and learners of basic education and general upper secondary education have?**

The main factors contributing to teachers' *assessment activities* were the established assessment practices and information gained about the learners during learning situations. Assessment was also guided by the school community's collegial interaction and discussion practices, and increasingly also continuing education, as more work experience was accumulated.

The principals *developed their assessment competence* mostly with the involvement of the school, education provider or a third party, and the teachers mainly independently. The teachers' involvement in assessment training was considerably limited.

The teachers believed they were able to support the *learners to recognise and develop their own learning methods*, but they were not as able to help the learners compare their competence to the objectives or assessment criteria. Similarly, only half of the learners were satisfied with the support provided by the teacher in terms of setting their own goals for assessment. Guidance provided by the teachers to learners in terms of setting goals increased as the learners moved from lower to upper classes, and to general upper secondary education. The teachers felt most *confident about their own assessment competence* when assessing how the objectives of optional subjects had been met, and the least confident when assessing working skills demonstrated in multidisciplinary learning modules, and in the assessment of other competence.

In terms of the development of assessment competence, the team recommended, first of all, that assessment should be taught more in the basic and continuing education of teachers. Schools and educational institutions need adequate and socially inclusive opportunities to try, discuss and develop assessment together with all parties involved, and in a manner that promotes pedagogy. Secondly, it was recommended that the learners' assessment skills should be developed, in particular, by providing guidance in self and peer evaluation skills, and by strengthening inclusion. Such learning-to-learn skills play a major role in maintaining an enthusiasm for learning, and, as follows, developing positive attitudes towards assessment. In that case, assessment will be more beneficial than earlier.

## **3. What is the assessment culture like in basic education and general upper secondary education?**

The principals felt that they *encouraged* teachers to diversity and enabled experimentation in assessment. The teachers were satisfied with the assistance they received from management, but

they were more critical about the assessment culture (such as giving versatile feedback, teachers' discussions with the principal, instructions provided by the principal).

According to the principals, a fair amount of time was reserved for *joint planning of assessment* at schools and educational institutions, but the teachers did not share the view on the adequacy of time without reservation. Both the principals and teachers felt they planned the assessment mostly alone. According to the teachers, joint planning of assessment with the learners rarely took place. Learners were mostly included in the planning, for the most part, in general upper secondary schools.

According to the guardians, *interaction between the home and the school in terms of assessment* was particularly close in lower classes, but it diminished in the upper classes and in general upper secondary school. Guardians contacted the principals or teachers less frequently than guidance counsellors, and did not, in general, question the assessments made by teachers. According to the principals and teachers, homes were well informed by the schools and educational institutions about the assessment practices, but they had differing views on how much access homes had to learner-specific *documents*. The guardians felt that the dialogue was insufficient.

The principals were quite optimistic about *using the information gained in assessments* for the purposes of developing education and the school. However, both the principals and teachers felt that the results were not as successful in terms of identifying the assessment's effectiveness, as the assessment practices were typically monitored only to a certain degree.

*Local curricula* showed a considerable lack of solutions that the principles of the national core curriculum explicitly require to be recorded.

In *SWOT discussions* taking place at schools and educational institutions, the assessment culture's strengths and areas for further development, as well as threats, focused on how well the common principles, policies and practices work. Atmosphere was mentioned as one of the strengths, while the areas for development included the diversity, continuity and flexibility of assessment, self and peer review, and assessment's ability to encourage. Some of the opportunities related to assessment culture included an increased ability to offer better support, guidance and motivation for the learner through assessment.

Firstly, the evaluation group recommended that all key assessment practices falling under local authority should be entered in the local curricula. This requires good planning and leadership, and the inclusion of teachers should be as comprehensive as possible, so that they can commit themselves to the shared policies. Secondly, the recommendations suggested strengthening the mutual cooperation between the different assessment parties. Here, special attention is required in the dialogue between the home and the school in regards to assessment. Thirdly, it was recommended that an assessment culture is built through the means of pedagogical leadership, which encourages the experimentation with and development of different assessment practices.

**Key words** Assessment, learning and competence, grade, criteria, basic education, general upper secondary education, national core curriculum, local curricula