

Assessment and Policy: a Finnish perspective

Patrik Scheinin

CBSE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ASSESSMENT

(In collaboration with ACER and SSC-Gurgaon Chapter)

24th – 25th January, 2010, Delhi NCR, India

Abstract

International and national assessment results, as well as the case of the Finnish comprehensive school, are used to discuss strategic questions of educational policy, teacher education, and teaching.

Paper

Are students prepared to meet the challenges of the future? Do they have the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society? These questions are central from the point of educational policy. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an internationally standardized assessment, jointly developed by participating OECD countries, and administered to 15-year-olds in schools. The domains of PISA are mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy. Students have to understand key concepts, master certain processes, and apply knowledge and skills in different situations, rather than looking at how well they had mastered a specific school curriculum. This makes comparisons between tens of countries with different school systems and circumstances both possible and fruitful. The PISA study is repeated every three years since 2001.

The PISA data shows that the correlation is very high on the country level between performance in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. We should, therefore, look for general rather than country or subject specific explanations for why some countries do better than others. First, money does not seem to be the answer. Countries with top results make relatively average investments in education. The influence of socioeconomic factors, especially parental education, is also relatively small. The results also show that the average yearly number of hours spent in school correlates negatively with PISA results on the country level. This indicates that spending time in school is less important than what is done during the instruction. Much has been made of the attitudes of students towards school. A closer analysis reveals that no country has managed to create a school system that produces excellent results combined with very positive attitudes. Maybe we should be less concerned with maximum happiness for everybody, all of the time. A serious but positive school atmosphere seems to be appropriate for learning.

There are two types of school systems with excellent or good results: many of the Asian and central European schools with large between-school differences, selection, testing and tracking, on the one hand, and the typically Scandinavian model of comprehensive schools for all, with small between school differences, on the other. The countries with the best PISA results do, however, all manage to keep the between-student variation relatively low. In other words, the weaker students are not left behind. What makes the Finnish school system interesting from the perspective of educational policy is that it is the only comprehensive school system with top PISA results.

The success of Finnish students in PISA has transformed our understanding of the quality of the work done in our comprehensive schools. The performance of Finnish students in PISA seems to be attributable to several factors. The role of schooling as a part of the Finnish history and cultural heritage is remarkable. Before independence education for the people was used as a strategy in creating the nation. Thus, teaching has been and is still a highly regarded profession. Finland is a poor country as far as natural resources go. The educational system has been built to achieve a high general level and quality of education. A nationally coordinated curriculum is the basis of teacher training and tends to make work at school more systematic. It makes the knowledge and skills required for secondary education and adult life in Finland explicit. It also helps writers of text books match the contents taught and teaching methods used in the comprehensive school. A research based teacher education on the masters level ensures a high standard of applicants for teacher training. This in turn enables a demanding teacher training of high quality. Education is generally seen as a road to social advancement – and the comprehensive school makes it quite realistic for most students, independently of their background. The students and their parents appreciate this. It also leads to giving the opportunity of further education to the brightest potential of the nation. These are key elements in the social stability and economic success of a democratic society like Finland. On the other hand, the choices made concerning schooling and career are still far too stereotypical and close to the example of the parents to be optimal from the point of national educational policy.