

The Politics of Assessment as Experienced and Enacted by Teachers and Guidance Counselors in the Finnish Comprehensive Education

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Author(s): Hannele Pitkänen (presenting / submitting)
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Chair: Hannele Pitkänen

Contribution

In recent years, Finnish basic education has undergone significant transformations in its policies and practices related to student assessment. For instance, reflecting the international trends (see e.g. Birembaum et al. 2015) the role of student self-assessment has been emphasized. This paper delves into the exploration of the current 'politics of assessment' and its historical evolution since the late 1990s, as perceived and experienced by Finnish basic education teachers and guidance counselors working with students in their final years of basic education.

The study employs the theoretical concept "the politics of assessment". "The politics of assessment" draws on the poststructural stance on governance, characterized as the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982, 1988; Fejes & Dahlstedt 2012; Rose, 1999/2009). The term encompasses the role of assessment policies, embedded in legislative and curricular documents, not only playing part in the governing of the practices of evaluation within educational settings but significantly, the part they play in shaping of subjectivities and future perspectives for students involved in assessment. Deriving from these theoretical starting points, 'the politics of assessment' captures the dynamic interplay of the governance of others, being governed, and self-governance within the realm of student assessment policies and practices (Pitkänen 2022).

Against the backdrop of the contemporary landscape of assessment policies, two parallel and globally impactful trends come into sharp focus. The first trend, referred to as 'the politics of self-evaluation,' emphasizes formative assessment and student self-assessment (Pitkänen 2022). In the transnational and European policy discourse and educational theory it has been widely

discussed under theme of assessment-for-learning (e.g. Birenbaum et al 2014, OECD 2008). This trend found its way into the Finnish basic education landscape, particularly with the introduction of the 1994 curriculum. Subsequently, the idea of formative assessment and student self-evaluation has firmly taken root in both the curricula of basic education and educational legislation. More recently, a second trend, termed here as 'the politics of standardization,' has emerged within Finnish assessment policy and practice. This trend is deeply intertwined with the international movement toward educational standardization (e.g. Riese et al 2022) including the emphasis of the standard assessment-of-learning (e.g. Sahlberg 2016). In Finland, the prevailing trend towards standardization is deeply rooted in the increasing policy emphasis on ensuring fair and equitable assessment practices. Studies, for example, have indicated that students with similar proficiency levels could receive significantly different grades in different schools (e.g. Hildén ym. 2017; Ouakrim-Soivio 2013), undermining the fundamental premise of comprehensive education to provide students with equal opportunities for further education. As a solution to this problem the assessment criteria have been introduced. They were first presented in the late 1990's as recommendation-type guidelines. Since 2004, the criterion-based assessment has become established in the Finnish basic education curricula. Currently, in assessments at the end of sixth and ninth grade, the criteria have been specified for grades 5, 7, 8, and 9.

This paper delves into the dual trajectory of assessment politics and its impact on everyday school life. The research analyses 1) teachers' and guidance counselors' perspectives on the history and formation of the current assessment policy. The study is interested in how teachers and guidance counselors describe and perceive the change. Secondly, the research analyses 2) how the current assessment policy, as narrated by teachers and guidance counselors, has been enacted in the school, how it has been experienced, and how its role is perceived from the perspective of governing teachers' and guidance counsellors work, students' schoolwork, and the students' understanding of themselves.

Method

The research presented in this paper is part of an ongoing ethnographic project that explores the politics of assessment and its manifestation in the everyday practices of education and guidance counselling within the context of Finnish comprehensive education. This sub-study is conducted within a single comprehensive school. For this paper, a series of 10-15 thematic interviews will be conducted with teachers and guidance counselors during the spring term of 2024. Teachers and guidance counselors play a pivotal role in this context, actively participating in the enactment of the politics of assessment in the day-to-day reality of education. Additionally, they serve as interpreters or 'translators' of these 'politics' to the students, shaping the students' understanding and engagement with the assessment processes. To provide a historical perspective, emphasis will be placed on inviting participants with extensive experience in final assessment and/or guidance counselling within comprehensive education. The analysis of the interview data will be twofold. Firstly, we will examine the narratively constructed histories of policy change. The focus in this phase of the analysis will be on understanding how these changes are rationalized by the informants and lived by the participants in the research. Secondly, the study investigates how recent assessment policies have been implemented within the school. This phase of the analysis is guided by the theory-based hypothesis that the policies are not mere implementations but active enactments by actors in the local school contexts (Ball et al 2011). They do not solely impact the actual assessment practices but also significantly contribute to shaping pupil identities, subjectivities, and their understanding of themselves. The analysis of the enactment of the politics of assessment is approached through the lens of participants' experiences as narrated during the interviews.

Expected Outcomes

The study will examine the recent transformations student assessment policies and practices in Finnish comprehensive education, by focusing on the historical narratives and lived experiences of the ones responsible for the implementation of these

policies in the grassroots level. This paper will present the preliminary insights derived from interviews with teachers and guidance counselors regarding their experiences with the current politics of assessment and its implementation in the daily routines of education and guidance counseling. The study will offer a rich and nuanced perspective of those actively involved in policy enactment at the school level and offer intimate accounts on their daily interactions with their students, directly affected by central policies and politics of assessment and guidance. While the study is situated within the context of Finland, the parallel aspects underlying the contextual specificities are universal and global. With the example of Finland, this paper argues that the politics of students' self-evaluation and standardization are prevalent in the common European policy discourse and solutions at large, making the results of this study relevant to an international audience.

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Author Information

Hannele Pitkänen (presenting / submitting)

University of Jyväskylä

Department of Teacher Education

Vantaa

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EERA Office

European Educational Research Association

Feurigstr. 22

10827 Berlin, Germany

Telephone: +49 (0)30 857 36220

Telefax: +49 (0)30 377 19572

office@eera.eu