

## Assessment and National Exams in Social Studies and Social Sciences

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**Purpose:** In the Introduction are outlined some central questions relating to why there has been increased interest toward assessment, evaluation and testing in educational policy in the last 30 years, and what effect this may have had on pedagogy. In the Introduction attention is drawn to the both negative and positive potential that there is in the new emphasising of student assessment.

### ASSESSMENTS IN EDUCATION – JUST A VARIANT OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT?

Questions of assessment have been in the forefront in education and education policy in the last 30 years, at least partly as a reflection of the trend that often is referred to as New Public Management. Interest in the assessment questions also received new nourishment around the turn of the Millennium when international comparative studies certified some European countries as top status educational systems and others as mediocre, which led in some countries to fear of losing economic competitiveness. Public services in education, health care, public administration etc. are, according to New Public Management, to be developed and evaluated according to how effective they are – effectivity being here equal to the outcome of quantifying the input and the output of the service in question. This approach in evaluating how, for example, the educational system fulfills its tasks is very narrow. (Hultqvist, Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2018).

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The aims of teaching and learning are multi-layered and the outcome of a learning process may become visible only slowly and after a long time. Moreover, the educational system is not only contributing to the qualification of students in terms of knowledge and skills but also – in the words of educational philosopher Gert Biesta – to the socialisation and subjectification of the students (Biesta, 2020). The last two are difficult to operationalise, measure and assess. Still, the trend of putting emphasis on assessment and measurement has been strong, and it has had also negative consequences as schools and teachers have come to focus more on test results rather than educating the students (e.g., Ravitch, 2016).

## EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IN NATIONAL EXAMS

But the increased emphasis on assessment and evaluation has also been motivated by a pedagogical interest to support learning processes and enhance equality and fairness in assessment by way of developing the guidelines and instruments of assessment. It has also been shown by the international comparative studies that educational systems do not offer all students the same opportunities, most of all students with a low social status may be particularly disadvantaged. Making assessment criteria more clear and transparent is expected to give more concrete signals to students and teachers in what they need to learn or teach, and how the learning results are judged so that assessment is valid and reliable. (Löfström & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2022.) Assessment should be just so that within one country there is a reasonable level of unity of standards in how students are assessed.

Especially national exams have a special role here. They can serve as instruments for the selection of students to secondary and tertiary education. The final year exams, like the German *Abitur*, the French *baccalauréats*, the English A-level exam, and the over 170 years old *ylioppilastutkinto* (*studentexamen*) in Finland, have often had such a selection function. But for schools and teachers national exams also serve as a measure of what knowledge and skills students are expected to master in the end of their studies and how they are assessed in school. The exam results may impact students' future opportunities, and the exam can in such a case be characterised as a high-stakes test. Such exams are likely to have a considerable backwash effect so that students and teachers adjust their learning and teaching strategies to what the exam is like. (Au, 2007.) This is not necessarily a negative thing, provided the exam is designed to assess higher-level cognitive processes and relevant knowledge in the subject. The exam constructors have a great responsibility and may, in fact, wield considerable power in making an authoritative interpretation of what the goals and aims in the curriculum entail at the level of concrete exam questions and assignments (Löfström, Virta & van den Berg, 2010). For the national education policy agencies national exams and tests can serve as an instrument in following up student cohorts' levels of skills and knowledge, but as mentioned above, interest in assessment is sometimes motivated by the view that exams and tests are instruments for calculating the input and output of the educational system.

There are differences between school subjects in how knowledge and skills as goals are described and operationalised and how the challenge of reliable assessment appears, and

there are more challenges in some subjects than others. For example, in a Social Science or History exam and in the assessment criteria for them one has to consider the open-endedness of socio-scientific questions and historical interpretations and, consequently, the diversity of approaches the student may take when answering the exam assignment (e.g., Seixas & Ercikan, 2015). It may be contraproductive to try to describe in great detail the assessment criteria because it may curbe the autonomy that the teacher should have as the expert of pedagogy in his/her subject(s). Compared with subjects like Mathematics or Natural Sciences, Social Studies and Social Sciences have not been among the school subjects that get most attention when students' knowledge and skills – or the lack of them – are discussed in public and development plans for improving students' performance are debated. An exception may be seen, when for example economic examination tasks have been criticized for focusing on macroeconomic relations but not enterprises or markets.

Questions relevant for Social Studies and Social Sciences are, for example, how to develop assessment methods for students' skills to deal with societal issues and realise their potential as civic actors. Some aims in learning civic skills and socio-scientific orientation are difficult to operationalise so that they can be assessed by teachers with reasonable effort and so that assessment is just and valid. Further, it can be asked if assessment of individual students can ever capture the wider social dimension of “civic consciousness” (Sandahl, 2015) and democratic consciousness?

### **Contributions to the Special Issue: Assessment and national Exams**

Contributions to this Special Issue were invited that would discuss the afore mentioned topic areas. It was emphasised that assessment or testing and test results as such were not a topic area for this issue, except if discussed from the perspective of the theoretical and methodological questions in the analyses of assessment in Social Studies, Social Science education or Civics and Citizenship Education.

In his article Tobias Jansson explores the assessment practices of Swedish civics teachers. In the article, Swedish Civics Teachers' Assessment Decision Making, Jansson presents a study where he has both interviewed teachers (n=13) and analysed the assignments the teachers have used in assessing their students' proficiency in civics. The central question for Jansson is the decisions the participating teachers make regarding three different content areas in the civics curriculum in the upper secondary school: subject content, skills, and methods. The findings indicate there is room for the kind of teacher autonomy that was mentioned above. This makes it possible for them to navigate with some degree of freedom between the different content areas in the curriculum. In their assessment practices, the teachers use a variety of methods including written tests, home assignments, and seminars. From the interviews, Jansson concludes the reasons behind the teachers' decisions are found in their own experiences as students in school and in inspiration from colleagues, but not in their formal teacher training.

Authors of the article, Measuring Citizenship Competences: Assessment of

Measurement Invariance, Lianne Hoek, Bonne Zijlstra, Anke Munniksma, and Anne Bert Dijkstra, ask how sensitive the instruments for measuring citizenship competence are to the fact that the construct “citizenship competence” is dynamic. For example, how to deal with socio-economic inequality is not the same kind of question to pose now than it was twenty years ago, and it appears different to different social groups because of their economic resources and social experiences. If an instrument was used for measuring students’ competences in the past, it is important to be aware that it is risky to use it now without considering how changes in society and differences between social groups may affect how applicable it is to different segments of society. For example, asking students about their willingness to discuss media news in the classroom the researcher should be sensitive to the fact that the students’ answer may reflect their material resources in consuming the media rather than their attitude toward participation in classroom discussion. Having analysed the data in the Dutch Citizenship Competence Questionnaire, the authors come to the conclusion that the measurement invariance is in most cases sufficient for cross-groups comparisons but the invariance should be assessed periodically, to ascertain the validity of the instrument.

The results in the tests on economic education often show the deficits of young people, often to justify the need for quantitative expansion of economy teaching. Nina Welsandt and Hermann Josef Abs take an analytical look at 30 years of measuring economic and financial education. They examine the central measuring instruments used in the English and German-speaking countries. In their contribution, *Testing Economic Literacy*, they give an overview of 26 important tests with over 1000 items, and they also examine the development of the subject perspective, the learner perspective, the assessment formats, the technique and the authenticity over the past 30 years. They show how the focus of economic and financial education has increasingly narrowed in the last 30 years from a broader general understanding of economy to consumer education and financial literacy, although on the other side sustainability issues have been included in recent years. They also found that although today’s technology would much more allow real-life references to be integrated in the tests, retrieval and understanding are still of central importance, while analysis and the use of knowledge is more or less neglected, and even authenticity is rare. But even if their results show that the current measurement methods are in a state that is open to criticism, the authors do not give up hope that, using digitization, more authentic materials and more realistic tasks can motivate and prepare students better for real economic challenges.

In various European countries, access to higher education is guaranteed via a national examination, like a matriculation examination, and is no longer in the hands of individual schools or teachers. While some criticize the inflation in grades and the reduction in entitlements, others fear that students and teachers will be overwhelmed. Najat Ouakrim-Soivio, Sirkku Kupianen and Jussi Hanska present the development and the challenges of the Finnish matriculation examination exam. Above all they are interested in how the results in the matriculation examination in social studies corresponds to the performance

in the social studies courses in school. Basically, they find a high correlation between the school course grades and the matriculation examination result, also compared with other subjects. The central result is that the individual examinations succeed well in measuring the competence of the students in the respective subject across the various courses, albeit to different extent in the subjects, and that the matriculation examination results can reasonably safely be used as a tool in the student selection to tertiary education. They also underline that the matriculation examination is an instrument to ensure fair treatment of students whereas the school course grades may show bigger variation in how well they measure the student's skills and knowledge. The assessment criteria as an interpretation of the curriculum show by example that the general goals in social studies do go beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge and promote skills relevant to academic studies.

### **Country Reports, Research Reports and Book Reviews**

The issue also includes a country report on Greece. The report titled, *The place of social studies in the Greek education System. Problems, inconsistencies, contradictions and stakes*, authored by Despina Karakatsani and Panagiota Fragkoulidou, covers a spot on the European map that has been in urgent need of being reported to the international audience. Upheavals in the history of the Greek political system, government and democracy have left indelible marks on citizenship and civic education in the country. The authors of the report point to a gap that there is between the public rhetoric concerning the role of social sciences, and their implementation in the Greek education system. Although it seems that the general principles of curricula are permeated by a democratic and flexible orientation that encourages critical thinking and participation, they are not implemented in practice but are by and large annulled, due to the emphasis that the Greek education system places on knowledge acquisition and exams.

JSSE is still looking for country reports (in alphabetical order) on: Albania, Belgium, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Iceland, Ireland, Kosovo, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Slovakia, Serbia and Switzerland. In addition, some of the old published country reports may need an update soon, for example Austria (2002), Bulgaria (2011), Cyprus (2007), Macedonia (2003), Portugal (2003), Slovenia (2003), and Türkiye (2011). Authors of country reports will find important advice in the starter kit for transnational European research, presented by Tilman Grammes and Jan Lofström in the JSSE issue 1-2019. A modified double-blind review procedure is applied to country reports that takes into consideration the character of this academic genre. The language policy of JSSE prefers multi-lingual presentation, not global English only. Hence, in country reports the key terms should be given in active bilingualism, in English and in the local language(s).

Financial education always relies on specific models of citizenship and civic education, whether explicitly or implicitly. At the same time, it conveys certain ideas not only of a financially "correct" private behaviour, but also of the relationship between democracy

and politics on the one hand, and money economy and financial industry on the other. This raises the question whether, and how, critical financial education is possible. David Lefrançois, Marc-André Éthier, Amélie Cambron-Prémont and Stéphanie Larocque focus on these issues in their research report, *Financial Education as a Social Studies Discipline: The Equivocality of the Critical Aspirations Found in Québec's Curriculum and Its Educational Materials*. They find that the curriculum and the textbooks spread a clear message: "Financial issues are of an individual nature. They are never social or political". In contrast, critical perspectives remain rare.

In the end of this issue, in their book review Olga Bombardelli and Marta Codato present the book by an Italian team of authors on the topic of integrated digital citizenship and sustainability workshops and how to implement them in school. The book gives ideas to teachers and other curriculum developers on how to support students' digital citizenship while also developing their skills in disciplinary thinking.

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