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Changes In The Assessment Process In Swedish Compulsory School Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper investigates and analyses changes in the *assessment process* in Swedish classrooms between two consecutive years in two schools, with students aged 11-13 years. The assessment process is defined as the relationship between learning goals, teaching, and assessment. The first year, there were quite significant differences in the assessment process between the two schools. The second year, end-of-term grading was introduced, and national tests were administered in several subjects. The studied classrooms largely consisted of the same individual students and teachers in both consecutive years. The study is based on classroom observations, interviews and document analysis. The results indicated that the changes in the assessment process concerned the more frequent and detailed communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements, greater emphasis on students' understanding, more focus on discipline in schoolwork, and increased documentation of students' subject knowledge. The changes highlight that the assessment process in the two schools had more similarities in year 6 than in year 5. The conclusion is that the implementation of end-of-term grading and national tests, which are both based on new syllabuses and knowledge requirements, have strongly contributed to the changes.

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1. Introduction

The beginning of the 2000s has meant the introduction of many school and assessment reforms regarding Swedish nine-year compulsory school. Several major reforms have been accepted and implemented since the new right-wing government's entry in 2006. In 2011, a new national curriculum with syllabuses for all school subjects

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was implemented. A reform linked to the new national curriculum, end-of-term grading from year 6, was introduced in the autumn term of 2012. Previously, grading had been introduced in year 8. The grades given from autumn 2012 also meant a new grading scale, with more levels than before. As support for the teachers' grading, there are knowledge requirements which according to the National Agency for Education (NAE, 2011) 'define acceptable knowledge and the different grades' (Introduction). The knowledge requirements are expressed for years 3, 6, and 9. Regarding the grading reform, implying grading for younger students than before, Sweden can be described somewhat as 'swimming against the current', as compared to other countries. Lundahl, Roman and Riis (2010) assert that a European tendency is to postpone the first grading, but remark that Sweden takes the opposite route.

Another reform were the national tests in expanded form (in more subjects than before), which were introduced in year 6 during the spring term of 2013. The national tests in Swedish compulsory school have been implemented since 2012 in years 3, 6, and 9, with some variations between school years in which subjects the tests are given. The results of the national tests should be *one* part of the overall information on students' learning, on which the grading in years 6 and 9 is then based. The mentioned reforms of end-of-term grading, national tests, and new national syllabuses may, most probably, affect teaching and assessment in everyday classroom practice. Particularly as in Sweden, the teachers themselves are responsible for both grading their students' performance and assessing the results of the national tests.

The purpose of this study is to investigate possible changes in the assessment process in two consecutive years, with students aged 11–13 years old in Swedish classrooms in two schools, in light of the implementation of new reforms. The concept of the assessment process (cf. Pettersson, 2010) is defined as the relationship between learning goals, teaching, and assessment. The research questions are: Have there been any changes in the assessment process between the two years? If so, in what aspects have there been changes, and what can the changes be related to?

2. Methods

The paper is based on two field studies conducted in two consecutive years - spring term 2012 and spring term 2013 - in two schools (Fir and Pine) in different cities in northern Sweden. The two schools were selected on the requested premise that they would differ in several ways and that differences could therefore be expected in the assessment process. Fir school is situated in a small city in a sparsely populated region, while Pine school is situated in a medium-sized coastal city that has better economic and population growth than the city of Fir school. Fir school has also a lower proportion of parents with high education levels. Fieldwork was conducted, including classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. During spring term 2012, two year 5 classrooms were observed (students aged 11 to 12 years), and during spring term 2013, three year 6 classrooms were observed (students aged 12 to 13 years). The total observation time was around 130 hours spread over a period of two months. The observations each year were coherent in time, with some exceptions. The studied classrooms consisted largely of the same individual students and teachers in both consecutive years. The first year, in year 5, was before the introduction of grading and the national tests, but the first year guided by the new national curriculum, which includes the aforementioned knowledge requirements. The second year, spring term 2013 in year 6, the students had thus received grades for the first time and would receive grades for the second time at the end of the spring term. National tests were carried out in several subjects during the spring term.

The school subjects in which the classrooms were observed, were art, English, mathematics, science, social studies, Swedish and technology. In the observations, running notes were recorded via hand- and computer-written protocols. In addition, a portable microphone and video camera were used to capture some of the course of events in the classroom. To study the assessment process, the observation focus was primarily on assessment situations. During the second field study, there was an extra focus on some aspects of the assessment process that had emerged during the first field study. The observations were complemented with interviews with 18 students (12 girls and 6 boys), 6 teachers (3 female and 3 male), and 2 head teachers (1 female and 1 male). In selecting students to interview, the researcher requested that they should be a mixture of high and low achievers and an equal number of girls and boys. The teachers then asked students if they wanted to participate in the interviews. The students were interviewed twice, both in years 5 and 6. Three of the teachers were interviewed both years. The head teachers were interviewed once, in spring term 2013. In order to highlight changes in the assessment process between the two

years, the empirical material was analysed in relation to Bernstein's (1977, 2000) concepts of classification, framing, and codes.

3. Results and analysis

In year 5, the first year, the assessment process in the two schools differed quite a lot. Teaching in Fir school was, for example, more flexibly structured than in Pine school, and the students in Fir school had more opportunities to choose what to work with and how to work. Concerning assessment and documentation, it was less systematic and frequent in Fir school compared with Pine school. There were also some differences in communication of the learning goals and knowledge requirements. The communication was somewhat more frequent in Pine school. However, in the second year, the differences between the schools were reduced. In year 6, the assessment process in the two schools was much more similar, and the changes had substantially gone in the same direction. The changes in the assessment process between the two years were identified in the aspects of (a) more frequent and detailed communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements, (b) greater emphasis on students' understanding, (c) more focus on discipline in schoolwork, and (d) increased documentation of students' subject knowledge. Organisational changes, decided by the head teachers at the school level, have contributed to the changes in the assessment process. The organisational changes meant that some new teachers worked in the classrooms during year 6. In Pine school there were also some changes to the student group constellations. According to the head teachers, the organisational changes were not merely prompted by meeting the new reforms, but the reforms were an important factor influencing the changes. The head teachers were aware that the implementation of grading and national tests in year 6 were significant to their schools from several points of view and required a functional organisation. Other factors also contributing to the changes in the assessment process were the preparations that had been undertaken in order to facilitate the implementation of the new reforms. The preparations were planned and carried out at the school and municipality (principal organiser) levels as well as in classroom practice. At Fir school, some of the preparatory measures for year 6 were to provide more in-service training to the teachers and introduce a digital tool concerning the documentation of students' progress. At Pine school, however, similar efforts had been initiated one or a few years earlier, and the efforts had been ongoing for some time. Teachers in both schools reported that during year 6, and especially during the spring term, they prepared students for the national tests by working with material available on the website of the National Agency for Education and doing other exercises similar to what was going to be on the tests. The exact content of the tests was not revealed until just before the national, centrally set test dates. The following presentation shows a picture of the changes in the assessment process in the investigated classrooms, including direct empirical examples. In some aspects, the changes were more evident in one classroom than in another, but as mentioned, the assessment process in the two schools was much more similar in year 6 than in year 5.

3.1 *More frequent and detailed communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements*

In year 5, there was some communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements, more in some subjects than in others. The emphasis was generally on communication of the content of teaching, however, and on what the students would *do* rather than primarily on what they would *learn*. What was expected of students' performance was thus rather unclearly communicated. Year 5 was the first year with the new national syllabuses with knowledge requirements, and both teachers and students tried out the new system, not yet really familiar with it. In year 6, the communication of both the subject's aim and knowledge requirements were increased. What to do, i.e. the content of the lesson or work area in relation to the syllabuses, was still presented, but now it was to a larger extent also presented what was expected of the students to learn. However, it should be noted that the changes in the aspect of communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements were overall more distinct in Fir school. In Pine school, the characteristics of these changes were similar, but the changes had taken place at a slower pace.

One of the male teachers introduced the religion (social studies) work to the year 6 class in Fir school: "We will look at something which controls what we are working with at school. It is namely these knowledge requirements".

He continued to talk about different levels on the grading scale and which abilities needed to be developed in the subject of religion.

The students themselves also highlighted the communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements. One student stated that “there are notes put up [on the walls], the knowledge requirements which says what you should be able to do to get a C or a D or something like that” (girl, Pine school). A female teacher at Fir school pointed out that some of the students were also well aware of the knowledge requirements: “The skilled ones...they have understood, and they have read the knowledge requirements. They have looked in Lgr 11 [the national curriculum and syllabuses] about what is required”.

3.2 *Greater emphasis on students’ understanding*

In year 5, the emphasis in Pine school during classroom work was that the students would work as quickly but as accurate as possible. In Fir school there was a more relaxed approach where the students themselves had many choices and quite a lot of time to finish their tasks. In year 6, the circumstances were largely altered, it was no longer as much about students *keeping up* with their tasks or taking their own initiative to work on tasks. Instead, the students at both schools to a greater extent were advised to reflect and analyse based on predefined lesson content from the teacher. A teacher in year 6 reported, “I certainly think that my questions are a little different now...as much as possible, trying to get them to draw conclusions, to be able to move a discussion forward and all that” (female teacher, Fir school). There was now greater emphasis on the students working carefully and understanding what they did instead of, for example, quickly completing their tasks. Teachers emphasised that students should ‘write more’ on their tasks to show how they were thinking and justify their answers. This is requested in the national tests and is also requested in terms of higher grades when it is time for the end-of-term grading. Another teacher said, “a little more analysis is called for in the new syllabuses, *why* and *therefore*. It is not detailed knowledge and individual facts, it is how to *think* about the facts. But why are the rivers flowing that direction?” (male teacher, Fir school). It is about going *one step further* in thinking and through this demonstrating complex abilities: “You should not just come up with an answer and stop there; you should think *because of*...or *due to this* or *since you can see it this way, it becomes*...that you think in several stages and maybe from different perspectives” (male teacher, Fir school). At Pine school, one of the lessons involved working on an exercise to develop understanding and creativity: Students worked in groups. Together, they came up with answers to questions that the female teacher had written on the whiteboard. The students discussed the questions and wrote down their thoughts in their notebooks. The students were advised to come up with several suggestions. The questions were, for example, “What determines the movement of the vehicle?” and “How do you build a vehicle that rolls?” The teacher also justified why the students should document very thoroughly. She said it was partly because the work was going to be assessed by the teacher.

3.3 *More focus on discipline in schoolwork*

In year 6, many students appeared to be more concentrated on their tasks and the possibility of working undisturbed was generally better than in year 5. In the classroom, the teachers could to a higher degree engage themselves in teaching and assessment of the subject matter and to a lesser degree on admonitions of what was considered to be disruptive or negative student social behaviour. However, it should be noted that the change with regards to more focus on discipline was more evident in Fir school. In Pine school the working environment was already fairly calm in many respects in year 5. A male teacher at Fir school reported, “yes, I think it [grading] has affected eagerness to work and focus. So we have to do this? If you cannot deliver something that I can assess, then I can hardly grade. Oh, oops! Maybe I should finish this”. The same teacher, at Fir school, continued on the same topic, “the grading is as much a whip on us as on the students. Or a carrot. It has affected us. That is how it is; quite clearly. Had it not been for the grading, I think teaching would have been different. I think so”.

At Pine school, teachers had similar reflections, “The fact that the discipline in this class is so good - I think the grading is one component. It is a part of it all that makes them shape up. Focusing on knowledge, you get discipline into the bargain” (male teacher, Pine school). Another teacher pointed out, “Since we have managed to get such a

good working atmosphere, I think also that the conditions have been good. If the working environment is not good, it is extremely difficult for the students to perform at their best” (female teacher, Pine school).

3.4 Increased documentation of students’ subject knowledge

In year 6, the assessment of students’ performance became more systematic and teachers’ written documentation of students’ learning seemed to have increased. This change was particularly evident in Fir school, but the change was also apparent in Pine school. However, for Fir school, the starting point was somewhat different. The reason for the changes at both schools was, according to the teachers, that they felt the need for a comprehensive basis for grading. “To receive a grading basis during the autumn term, there has been a lot of written assessment. To think that you should put it into the head and remember - it doesn’t work. You have to write it down” (male teacher, Pine school). At the same time, the teacher thought that the documentation went to an extreme: “Damn it, we don’t have time to prepare lessons in this documentation rush! During this school year, I have prepared lessons maybe 5% of my working time”. The assessment of the national tests was also very systematic, and the grades received in the national tests (in the subjects they have national tests) had to be weighed against students’ performance in everyday teaching so that an end-of-term grade for each subject could eventually be awarded. In year 6, both schools used digital tools for the documentation of student progress. In Fir school the tool was used to enter individual development plans for each student in all subjects as well as results and grades from the national tests and end-of-term grades. In Pine school, the tool was used to enter the individual development plans. “An advantage [with the digital tool] is that all the syllabus goals can be found there...A disadvantage is the technical, with bugs and stuff - and suddenly you can’t find what you have written!” (male teacher, Fir school).

3.5 About the changes

The changes in the described aspects can be related to each other: The students’ demonstrated abilities (with reflection, analysis, and understanding as the most prominent abilities) should be assessed and graded in relation to the different levels in the knowledge requirements. The higher the quality of abilities, the higher should be the grade awarded. Teachers must be able to distinguish performances of different qualities from each other when setting grades. Therefore, the teachers need to give the students opportunities to show their performance through different kinds of assignments. For the students to perform as well as possible, they should know what is expected of them, and they also should be able to distinguish between the performances of different qualities. According to the observations, the students generally seemed to listen carefully to the teachers and tried to do their best in class. Because of this, concentration and effort during the lessons as a whole increased after year 5. Overall, the changes in the assessment process between the two consecutive years included more frequent and detailed communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements, greater emphasis on students’ understanding, more focus on discipline in schoolwork, and increased documentation of students’ subject knowledge. Although it was fairly obvious that the changes in a few aspects were more evident at Fir school, especially regarding the focus on discipline in schoolwork and increased documentation, changes went unmistakably in the same direction at both schools. Fir and Pine schools had somewhat different starting points in year 5, but the changes at Fir school went faster. In year 6 the schools were fairly close in the described aspects. When analysing the changes in the assessment process in relation to Bernstein’s (2000) concepts of classification (referring to relations and boundaries between e.g. school subjects) and framing (*who* is in control of pedagogical processes and about *what*), the results show that both classification and framing were strengthened in the classrooms, from year 5 to year 6. The trend towards stronger classification may be related to the fact that the teachers in year 6 were obliged to set grades in each subject. In order to obtain a basis for the grading, they became more rigorous in communicating the knowledge requirements and documenting specific subject knowledge. In addition, classification could in year 6 be considered applicable concerning the students’ display of knowledge; the boundaries between the kind of knowledge that was recognised and that which was not had become clearer. As regards framing and the controlled aspects in accordance with Bernstein (2000) - selection of communication, sequencing, pacing, criteria, and control over the social base - the teacher had the main control,

which implied strong framing. The stronger framing of different parts of the mentioned framing aspects, was apparent in varying degrees in all aspects of changes in the assessment process.

3.6 *The relation between the changes and the new reforms*

The changes in the above aspects can thus be considered as strongly related to the implementation of new reforms. The schools' undertaken preparations and the head teachers' organisational choices facing year 6 were closely related to the reforms. A factor not related to the reform implementation was the natural development that occurs in children's social and cognitive abilities from one year to another. This factor may partly have contributed to the students' increased concentration and purposefulness in schoolwork.

3.7 *Main change*

Central to the changes was that teachers, in teaching, reminded students to think in several steps, not stop at the obvious. This was the 'spirit' that teachers had found in the national tests and the attached assessment guidelines, as well as in the knowledge requirements of the new syllabuses. This spirit had found its way into the classrooms and implied changes in ways of working, behaving, and thinking in year 6 compared to year 5. Previous research has concluded that tests and grading can control or determine the content of teaching, teaching approach, and student behaviour (cf. Bernstein, 1971; Stobart, 2008). Regarding the relationship between national tests and grading in Swedish compulsory school, test results are not supposed to control grading but may be indicative in the sense that they show the kind of knowledge that should be rewarded in the grading. It can be argued that in the investigated classrooms of year 6, there was a sort of *teaching to the test*, which implies that teaching was guided by the upcoming test assignments. "Concerning what is asked for on the national tests, the directives have been a bit blurry. But one of my colleagues found out a little about what is coming, so we know a bit of what to practice" (male teacher, Pine school). The practice of teaching to the test can be described as a continuum (Mehrens & Kaminski, 1989), consisting of a range of activities types. The most extreme types of teaching to the test, according to Mehrens and Kaminski, implies practicing by using parallel forms of the actual test or practicing by using the actual test. However, at Fir and Pine schools in general, it was the *approach*, influenced by the aforementioned *spirit* in the national tests and knowledge requirements, that was meant to provide high test scores and grades.

3.8 *Perceived difficulties with the changes*

The students were therefore encouraged, to a large extent, to write a lot and develop their reasoning, and through this demonstrate their abilities. The teachers at both Fir and Pine testified to differing degrees of difficulties assessing and setting grades, particularly in Swedish, social science, and art. The assessment guidelines for the national tests in the subjects for which the tests were carried out, facilitated parts of the work in how to interpret the students' performances in other contexts, although even these guidelines could be perceived in different ways. It was clear that there was great difficulty when the teachers had to assess the quality of work in relation to the knowledge requirements: "It is really fuzzy. What is 'developed', 'somewhat developed', 'well developed'? There is plenty of room for arbitrariness, I think" (male teacher, Pine school). In the interviews, the teachers reported the difficulty in telling exactly how to proceed when assessing individual works and then when setting end-of-term grades. One teacher said, "Even though I have read the guidelines from the National Agency for Education and have looked over the knowledge requirements, it is still extremely difficult to be completely objective" (female teacher, Pine school). The basic question can be said to be: How to distinguish one from the other in terms of the various levels of the knowledge requirements?

3.9 *The changes in the assessment process – a 'better' way of learning?*

"The more you write, the more I can assess. Do you want a high grade? Write a lot. Do you want a low grade? Write a little bit!" (male teacher, Pine school).

Some of the changes in the investigated classrooms could form a basis for creating understanding-directed learning (cf. *deep understanding* versus *simple knowledge*; McMillan, 2010). However, does the implementation of new syllabuses, grading, and national tests imply that ideal learning arises? The teachers in this study were consistent in that they believed there were a lot of difficulties in assessing complex abilities and above all in being able to distinguish different performances from each other. An interpretation of these circumstances is that the more the students produced to demonstrate their understanding, the more difficult it became to assess their work, due to the amount of text to assess. Paradoxically, this because one purpose of urging the students to develop their reasoning in writing was to spot the qualities of the abilities and assess them. How was learning developed under these conditions? Some students seemed to know some of the knowledge requirements and formed their own opinions, while other students listened seemingly 'blindly' to the teachers regarding the prompts to write *more and developed*, without realising what it really meant. The risk is that it demonstrates neither understanding nor learning. The students wanted to show their skills, and would do anything to do the 'right things'. Ball (2003) argued that education reform changes identities (see also Bernstein, 2000), and in this study - especially in Fir school - there were clear signs of this, even in terms of the students. In year 5 the students in Fir in many respects freely followed their own ways. In year 6, however, the free search for knowledge became more limited, and the frames were firmer. The frank and open students from year 5 could still be recognised, but an interpretation based on the fieldwork is that learning became more regulated. The content of the national syllabuses came more into focus, even for the students' interest. The stronger classification and framing in the classrooms also implied changes in the educational knowledge codes (Bernstein, 1977), overall towards a *collection code*. This means a change of the socialisation process forming students' identities. The students had new ways to demonstrate certain abilities in the school subjects, which made it possible for the teachers to grade their abilities in relation to different levels of knowledge requirements. At centre stage in year 6 was demonstrating performance, in line with the content of the new reforms. This could be viewed in light of the concept of *culture of performativity* (Ball, 1998, 2008), a culture which among other things is characterised by an intention to continually improve students' results in order to increase a country's competitiveness. In this, the link between the events in Swedish classroom practice and the Swedish state's introduction of educational reforms becomes clear.

4 Conclusion

The indicated changes in the assessment process were about the more frequent and detailed communication of learning goals and knowledge requirements, greater emphasis on students' understanding, more focus on discipline in schoolwork, and increased documentation of students' subject knowledge. In this way, the assessment process in the two schools had more similarities in year 6 than in year 5. The conclusion is that the implemented reforms of end-of-term grading, national tests in expanded form, and new national syllabuses with knowledge requirements altogether have strongly contributed to the indicated changes in the assessment process. However, the consequences on students' learning and identities remain to be further investigated and analysed.

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