Assessment:  
A pivotal tool in the continuous development of teacher quality  

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Executive summary

In our efforts to develop high quality education at all levels, the role of the teacher is crucial, and it has become increasingly clear that teacher quality is closely related to learners’ achievement. Teacher assessment plays a significant role in the establishment, maintenance and further growth of a high-quality education work force. This paper addresses the questions that face policy makers and education professionals, namely, how we can establish conditions and procedures for assessment that contribute optimally to the development of qualified and effective teachers. The aim is to provide international examples of teacher assessment, as well as an outline of the various routes that lead to effective teacher assessment policy and practices.

This paper first sketches the various educational traditions on which the concept of teacher assessment may be based. Policy makers and practitioners need to understand that assessment philosophies do not stand alone. On the contrary, they are embedded in education traditions and associated quality standards. Subsequently, this paper discusses the question of what exactly should be assessed or, in other words, what combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes constitute teacher quality. Once these variables have been clarified, it is possible to address the question of how teacher quality can be measured in such a way that it is instrumental to teachers’ professional development. Briefly, assessment tools are described that are especially suited to promote teachers’ critical reflection on their own performance. The paper concludes with some pointers for further discussion.
Assessment:
A pivotal tool in the continuous development of teacher quality

*International experience in the assessment, evaluation and certification of teachers*

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**Introduction**

It is now widely recognized that, for any nation, a substantial and continuous investment in the quality of their teachers is the key factor in establishing a productive education system. Evidence that this is wise policy comes from all sides. The Commission of the European Communities (2007), for instance, issued a report on recent research showing that teacher quality is significantly and positively correlated to pupil achievement (e.g. Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, et al., 2005) and that teacher quality is the most important within-school aspect that explains student performance: its effects are much larger than the effects of school organization, leadership or financial conditions (Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2005).

There are more international data that should convince us how crucial it is to focus on teacher quality. The Global Monitoring Report (EFA, 2005) shows that the four countries listed as top performers in education (Finland, Korea, Canada and Cuba) all place a high value on teacher education and continuous development.

One of the pivotal tools that serves this continuous professional development of teachers is a wise use of assessment. This paper focuses on the positive role that assessment procedures may play in the establishment, maintenance and further growth of a high-quality education work force. For policy makers as well as for education professionals the key question to be asked here is: Under what conditions and in which form does assessment contribute optimally to the development of qualified and effective teachers? This paper aims to provide some promising examples of teacher assessment based on international experience, as well as an indication of the various avenues that can be taken to strengthen teacher assessment policy and practices.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First, the concept of assessment will be put into perspective. It makes sense, for policy makers and practitioners, to realize that assessment philosophies do not stand alone. On the contrary, they are embedded in education traditions and associated quality standards. Subsequently, this paper discusses the question of what exactly should be assessed or, in other words, what combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes constitute teacher quality. Once these variables have been clarified, the next question to be addressed is how teacher quality can be measured in such a way that it is instrumental to teachers’ professional development. This will be followed by a brief description of assessment tools that are especially suited to promote teachers’ critical reflection on their own performance. Finally, some pointers will be presented for further discussion of these issues.
1 Assessment and education traditions

It goes without saying that teacher assessment reflects prevailing educational traditions and quality standards. Educational traditions or movements entail certain assumptions regarding the quality of teaching and how this should be assessed, although typically these assumptions are implicit. Three relevant educational tradition will be discussed here with a view to the implications for teacher assessment.

The **humanist tradition**\(^1\) is based on the assumption that learners are at the center of “meaning-making” in the education process. This implies a relativist interpretation of quality, in which education, strongly influenced by learner actions, is judged central for the development of each child’s potential. Supporters of the humanistic approach tend to follow the same line of reasoning when choosing a system of teacher assessment. The role of assessment would be to give teachers information and feedback about the quality of their work; this is considered integral to their professional development. Self-assessment and peer assessment are considered the essential way to develop awareness and self-reflection in teachers. In the humanist approach, formal assessment of teacher behavior based on strict criteria tends to be limited.

The **behaviorist tradition** leads in the opposite direction. This tradition focuses on changing human behavior through specific external stimuli. Although few educationalists adopt behaviorism in its pure form, a behaviorist approach can be found in many countries. In this approach, the role of assessment would be to provide an objective measurement of the teacher’s behavior against preset assessment criteria.

Various **indigenous movements** developed as an effort to deal with the realities of education in local communities. Mainstream approaches to education are often looked upon as being less relevant for local social and economic circumstances. Here, the role of assessment is not specifically defined, but teacher training and development generally emphasizes the need for locally designed, culturally relevant curricula and assessment.

Clearly, education traditions range from a strongly outcome-oriented approach to a much more “relativist” approach, and these differences in emphasis may be reflected in different approaches to teaching quality and assessment. Nevertheless, whatever assessment procedures are chosen, there should be a clear understanding of what exactly is to be assessed in the first place. In other words: Which qualities should we look for to establish whether the individual is a proficient teacher?

The following paragraph presents a framework for teacher behavior that has proved useful in the Netherlands. The Dutch example will be discussed in the light of the international standards that are being developed in the European context. While this comparison may assist policy makers and professionals who are striving update their assessment systems, it is acknowledged that, although it is important to study international guidelines, in the end each country needs to develop education standards that are tuned to its own societal demands.

\(^1\) For a more extensive description of various educational traditions, see the EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005.
2 What should we assess?

The European Commission report *Education and Training 2010*, which appeared in 2004, described the progress that had been made toward the Lisbon Objectives in the field of education and training. This report called for the development of common European principles regarding the competences and qualifications required of teachers. In 2005, in response to this call, the Common European Principles (CEP)\(^2\) were defined by the European Commission in close cooperation with experts from various member states.

According to the CEP, a teacher should be:

*Well-qualified:* A high-quality education system requires that all teachers should be graduates from higher education institutions. Teachers should have extensive subject knowledge, a good knowledge of pedagogy, the requisite skills and competences to guide and support learners, and a sound understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of education.

*A lifelong learner:* Teachers should be supported in their professional development. They should be encouraged to review evidence of effective practice and to engage with current innovation and research in order to keep pace with the evolving knowledge society. Therefore, the institutions that employ teachers should value lifelong learning, in which teachers evolve and adapt throughout their careers.

*A mobile professional:* Teachers should be encouraged to participate in European projects and to spend time working or studying in other European countries in order to promote their professional development. Also, they should be offered opportunities to move to different levels of education and different professions within the education sector.

*A partner with all stakeholders:* Teacher education institutions should collaborate closely with schools, local work environments, work-based training providers and other stakeholders. Teacher education partnerships, which should emphasize both practical skills and a scientific basis, should aim to promote teachers’ competence and the confidence that will allow them to reflect on their own performance and that of their peers.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Association for the Professional Quality of Teachers (*Stichting Beroepskwaliteit Leraren SBL*) presented a framework for teacher competencies in August 2006\(^3\). This framework will be summarized here and will be related to the CEP.

In the Dutch SBL outline for “the competent teacher,” as shown in fig. 1 on the following page, the *competencies toward the learners* (interpersonal, pedagogical, teaching content, and organizational) clearly reflect the CEP “well-qualified.” These four competencies encompass the knowledge, skills and attitudes that no teacher can do without. In order to be effective in the classroom, every teacher should have a high level of competence in this respect, i.e. competencies 1 to 4 should be at the heart of every assessment procedure. All four


\(^3\) [http://www.lerarenweb.nl](http://www.lerarenweb.nl)
competencies should be assessed in teachers, no matter what type of student or which age level they teach.
**Fig. 1 The competent teacher**

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<tr>
<td>1. Interpersonal</td>
<td>5. Achieves an optimal alignment between one’s work and that of one’s colleagues; contributes towards the optimal functioning of the school organization.</td>
<td>6. Achieves an optimal alignment between one’s professional activities and the activities of others outside the school (parents, agencies).</td>
<td>7. Reflects critically about one’s teaching behavior and continually works on one’s personal and professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates a positive atmosphere in the classroom that induces cooperation and open interaction among learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Pedagogical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates a secure learning environment in the classroom; promotes learners’ social, emotional and moral development; helps learners to become independent and responsible individuals.</td>
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<td>3. Teaching content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates a strong learning environment in the classroom; helps learners to incorporate cultural resources needed to function as a full member of society.</td>
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<td>4. Organizational</td>
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<td>Creates a clear, orderly and task-oriented atmosphere in the classroom.</td>
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Within this group of competences, one can hardly overemphasize the third: teaching content. For effective teaching of subjects such as language, maths, science, knowledge, digital competence, and information literacy, teachers require a thorough insight into the subject matter and considerable proficiency in domain-specific teaching. It is no wonder that competence in teaching content takes up a large part of the European Framework for Key Competences.4

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4 See Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2004), which can be found at http://Europe.eu.int/comm./education/policies/2010:objectives
Competencies 5 (*towards colleagues*) and 6 (*towards the environment*) clearly refer to the CEP that the teacher should be “a partner with all stakeholders.” Competence toward colleagues is particularly important. There is always the risk of teachers working in isolation in a school, each within their own classroom, and this tendency should be countered, for two reasons. First, cooperation and discussion with colleagues promotes the professionalism of all involved and, secondly, every team member’s contribution is required in order to develop and maintain a successful school.

Competence 7 (*towards oneself*) is undoubtedly the crucial competence that teachers require to ensure their own energized and continuous professional development. A highly competent teacher will inevitably be “a lifelong learner,” as formulated in the CEP. Like every professional, a teacher should be willing and capable to reflect on his or her own professional behavior, and should do so on a regular basis. Since it is crucial for teachers to keep their knowledge and skills up to date, it is worthwhile to assess whether they are capable of critical reflection about their own behavior. Moreover, a reflective attitude is a prerequisite for teachers to profit optimally from assessments. After all, an assessment is not merely an external evaluation as to whether the teacher’s performance is up to standard; it should also be viewed as feedback that helps teachers to upgrade their teaching behavior. This mechanism will be elaborated in the following paragraph, in which constructive feedback is described as a potent incentive for professional development.

3 Assessment and professional development

The role of assessment in teachers’ professional development may be related to the specific phase in the teacher’s career at the time of the assessment. A teacher’s career generally entails the following phases:

- admission to a teacher training college
- theoretical training
- practical training
- college exams
- on the job

*Admission to a teacher training college:* Teacher training colleges in various countries differ in their admission policies. For some institutions, previous qualifications may suffice, but in other cases, there may be a policy that requires candidates to take mandatory entrance exams, in particular when previous qualifications are not considered sufficiently sound. In the Netherlands, for example, specific tests have been introduced to assess the levels of language and math proficiency in applicants for teaching colleges.

*Theoretical training:* It is essential to assess students’ progress regularly in the course of their theoretical training, and not just at the end of their studies when they graduate. At different points in their training, there may be a shift in focus on assessment domains, e.g. from knowledge assessment to skills assessment.
Practical training: The period of practical training is eminently suited for skills assessment. Both co-assessment by teacher trainers and school staff are particularly effective in this context.

College exams: Examinations should include assessment of all the competencies required in the prospective teacher.

On the job: Ongoing assessment of teachers’ competencies is crucial to sustain high-quality education. Assessment is not only the responsibility of individual schools; a national assessment system is required to ensure constant quality assurance.

The years in which teachers pursue their theoretical and practical training and, later, when they are working as qualified teachers offer ample opportunities to foster their professional development through assessment. Assessment not only provides motivating, positive feedback, but also brings to the surface the teacher’s possible need for further education and in-service training. In other words, proper assessment bolsters teachers’ strong points and motivates them to work on their weaker points.

In order to achieve this positive outcome, assessment procedures should contain two ingredients: a high level of challenge and a high level of support. This means that assessment should aim to measure high levels of competence and at the same time offer teachers the opportunity to shore up their professional development (mentoring, training, peer support from colleagues, etc.) Michael Barber developed the following matrix (shown in Fig. 2) to illustrate the dynamics between the variables of challenge and support (Barber, 2002).

**Fig. 2 The challenge-support matrix (Barber, 2002)**

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High support

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<th>Slow, uneven progress</th>
<th>Rapid progress</th>
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<tr>
<td>Complacency</td>
<td>High performance</td>
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Low challenge

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<th>Stagnation</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
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<tr>
<td>Underperformance</td>
<td>Demoralization</td>
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Low support
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Barber used this matrix to clarify national education systems in general, but the principles easily apply to teacher assessment as well. Assessment may be highly challenging, but without the ingredient of support it leads to demoralized teachers. On the other hand, it can be highly motivating for teachers to be challenged to deliver quality teaching, knowing that they will be offered all the support they need to achieve those standards.

An additional benefit ensuing from a high level of challenge is that it raises teachers’ professional status within society. Strenuous selection procedures for admittance to a teacher training college and high standards for professional qualification send out a signal to other stakeholders, e.g. parents and employers, indicating that the teaching profession is an important one and that teacher quality is expected to be excellent. Professional status adds to teachers' sense of pride: it obviously feels good to belong to a highly respected group of individuals.

It is crucial to foster this ‘esprit de corps’ in teachers because it adds to the success of a national education system. In this respect, Finland is a convincing example. In Finland’s highly successful education system (a consistently high ranking in international comparative studies, see, for example, PISA, 2006), admittance to a teacher training college is not easy: year after year, there have been substantially more applicants than available places. And once these men and women are on the job as qualified teachers, they are highly regarded by the local community.

These important factors should be taken into account while assessing teacher’s competencies. Standards should be high. This stimulates teachers to reflect critically on their teaching practice, the more so if the assessment is based on tools that promote a reflective attitude in teachers to the maximum. Some examples of such tools, in use in a variety of countries, will be presented here.

4 The tools

In order to be instrumental to teacher’s personal development, assessment tools should:

- monitor professional growth
- stimulate self-reflection on the part of the teacher
- encourage the teacher to take initiatives for self-improvement
- pinpoint the needs for further training

The following examples of assessment tools meet these criteria:

*Portfolios:* A collection of materials offers assessors an insight into a teacher’s qualifications, motivation and professional attitude. Portfolios, which are meant to be composed by the teachers themselves, may include not only standard items such as information about the teacher’s career and work experience, but also video clips of class performance, personal reflections regarding the teacher’s strong and weak points, the teacher’s ideas regarding further schooling, etc.
Criteria interviews: A personal interview addresses the pivotal facts contained in teacher portfolios. Interviews focus on the teacher’s significant strengths and weaknesses and open up possible avenues toward further professional development.

Simulation assignment: The teacher is asked to give a series of lessons designed to clarify specific competences for the assessors. Simulation assignments typically aim to demonstrate the teacher’s pedagogical competence and methodological competence in teaching content and subject matter (language, maths, etc.). Assignments also bring to the surface the teacher’s capacity to plan and organize lessons in ways that are both efficient and effective. Assessors observe the lessons and analyze them according to preset criteria. Teachers are always informed in advance what kind of criteria will be used.

Classroom observations: Similar assignments are given in regular teaching situations. As in the simulation assignments, teachers are informed beforehand about the focus of the observations.

Self assessments: Teachers clarify their view of their competencies in various domains (interpersonal, pedagogical, etc.) by filling out a preset questionnaire, which is then discussed with their assessors. This procedure not only promotes the teacher’s self-reflection, but may also bring forward the needs for further training.

Feedback scans: Digital self-assessments open the way to ‘distant learning’ or ‘e-learning’. The teacher goes on-line to fill out a digital questionnaire on a teacher college website and immediately receives digital feedback in the form of a personal competence profile. The teacher then communicates with teacher college staff about the profile through a secured website portal.

All these forms of assessment aim to foster “the lifelong learner” in a teacher. This is crucial, not in the least because the demands that are placed on the teaching profession are changing constantly. Nowadays, for instance, schools teach “information literacy” (i.e. the capacity to make use of the internet in a sensible and critical manner), but, for most teachers, teacher training at the time did not adequately prepare them for this task. For this situation to improve, assessment should not only establish the shortcomings in a teacher’s repertoire. What is also needed is a high level of support to enable the teacher to broaden his or her repertoire, and this support should consist of providing more in-service training. However, in this example more training will in itself not suffice; the teacher’s working conditions should also be improved. Teachers need sufficient time and adequate facilities to prepare lessons using the internet if they are to develop their own information literacy, and this is a necessary condition to be able to teach information literacy effectively.

This example shows that the pivotal function of a dynamic assessment system, characterized by open communication between teacher and assessor, is to establish not only the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses, but also to clarify his or her needs for support. Assessment that meets these requirements can make a significant difference in teachers’ professional development.
5 Pointers for discussion

• How do we establish assessment procedures that promote a reflective attitude in teachers in an optimal way?
Assessment procedures should not only consist of an evaluation of the teacher’s competence. Proper assessment should also stimulate the teacher’s motivation to explore ways of improving his or her teaching practice.

• How can a high level of challenge be combined with a high level of support?
Teachers should be challenged to perform at their highest possible level. But policy makers should know that increased challenges without proper support may have negative effects and lead to the demoralization of the teaching work force. Therefore, a comprehensive support system needs to be developed for the teaching profession at the same time.

• How can the social status of teachers be improved?
Since it is an established fact that a high regard for the teaching profession is instrumental for a successful national education system, it is worthwhile to consider creative ways to improve teachers’ status.

References


