

Teachers value quality

Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund, Sweden, discuss quality, self-evaluation and school inspections



Quality and evaluation in the interest of teachers

It is the teachers who, alongside parents, have the greatest impact on the development of children and young people. Teachers also have the greatest expertise on how learning takes place and it is they who can develop this knowledge. But how are we making use of the development potential inherent in this situation today? How well are schools' organisations adapted to encourage teachers' and pupils' learning? What conditions are currently in place for teachers to increase their knowledge of learning and contribute to the growth of expertise in the profession within the framework of their day-to-day work and through their own research?

We believe that in order for the teaching profession to develop, we need the work on improving schools to be systematised and customised to the specific circumstances of each school. It is also necessary for the school management to acknowledge that work on development and improvement takes time, is complicated and requires an infrastructure in each school, which is able to take care of and support continuous improvement work.

Different perspectives on quality

The concept of quality is defined by values. If something is considered good or bad relates to the values you have. It also depends on the role of the person interpreting the concept - whether you are pupil, teacher, politician, parent, etc. What is meant by quality in education also depends on the level being described: national level, municipal level, school level or the level of teachers and pupils. For example, statements about schools at national level do not apply to all schools, if they apply to any at all.

Achieving quality in education requires fundamental conditions in the form of leg-

islation on equivalent schooling for all, advanced teacher education, research which reflects the significance of education in society, resources for education, etc. It is also necessary that there is a joint ambition for high quality at all levels: in the interaction between pupils and teachers, between students, across the whole school, within the municipal council and at national level.

In the long run, it is only possible to maintain quality in the interaction between pupil and teacher if individual schools and the system as a whole function well. There must be a focus on achieving reasonable consensus on the conditions needed in order to maintain quality in education. Such a consensus must lead to investments at much higher levels than those of today in Sweden, if teachers and pupils are to have a fair chance to achieve the objectives set out for them. There is also a need for a much stronger focus on research into learning.

How we view quality

We would suggest that a desire for constant improvement and targeted work to achieve this, are leading features of quality-conscious schools. However, in order to know how to improve, you need to know a great deal about the current situation. This in turn requires critical analysis in order to get at what is actually going on below the surface of what appears to be happening in schools. It is necessary to reflect on this, draw conclusions and learn lessons in order to finally plan and work on improvements. Such an approach would be a highly professional attitude, but traditions and structures in school organisations often prevent the school as a whole from adopting such a working culture. We would say that **the quality of a school is determined by the ability of the entire school to constantly focus on achieving improvements in order to meet the objectives set.**

Thus, assessing and documenting the way a school is striving to meet curriculum objectives would be a much more relevant measure of quality than a report on the degree to which the objectives are met.

Although the number or proportion of pass grades is used as a measure of quality, this says nothing about the school's potential or ability to become even better. With this approach, there is also a danger of setting the bar too low. There is a risk that "A pass is enough!" will become more common as a pupil's explanation for why they do not put much effort into certain subjects.

One of the cornerstones of our view of quality is the belief that improvements can only occur if those working and studying at the school, teachers, pupils and school heads, "own" their quality work. A high quality school will then be a sustainable school: a school with the ability to develop systematic quality work. Such a school is also able to handle stresses and strains better and does not depend entirely on the presence or absence of the school head, which is not to say that the school head is not incredibly important for school development!

Trust in the profession and accountability

Questions concerning quality in education are closely associated with the professionalism of teachers and school heads. A concept increasingly being used in international discussions is teachers' and school heads' "accountability," but this concept is used more by governments and politicians than by teachers. However, we could also view the term from another angle and talk about "trust".

In times when the teacher was the best-educated person in the village, this led automatically to high levels of trust and authority. Nowadays, we usually talk about

the teacher having to achieve an equivalent status. How can today's teachers gain the confidence and trust of society, how can we create trust in our ability to "keep our promises" and trust that we are clear about and are able to carry out our work? We can only achieve this if we can properly justify our actions – and we can only do this if we reflect on and critically assess our actions and, in professional dialogue with each other, examine and reflect on what characterises good practice and high quality. As we develop our ability to describe and create understanding of teaching activities and our own initiatives, we also develop our professional language, which is a powerful and necessary tool in our work on increasing professionalism.

Teachers' work on quality and the way teachers interpret their work as defined in the curricula and within professional ethics are crucial to the way curriculum objectives are realised in practice, or in other words: to the qualitative results of teaching.

Self evaluation: a way of developing quality

Quality work in schools cannot be an independent entity; it has to be "embedded" in the daily routines of a school.

If this is not the case, the quality work risks being tantamount to the system or organisation which a municipality (or other principal organiser) has for "tackling quality issues". It is good that a municipality has a strategy for ensuring the quality of schools and that there are structures in place to support this work, but that is not enough.

Schools are the most knowledge-intensive organisations in society. Despite this, most schools lack a development organisation which can take care of the development needs identified by teachers and school heads. At the moment, the organisation of

a school is focused to a high degree on simply running the school. This is one reason why there is often a demand for external expertise when it comes to work on research and development – and for various consultants in the area of evaluation.

The way teachers and school heads view quality and the conditions for school improvement can only be formulated by them. However, the evaluation of teaching which the teacher carries out together with her pupils is not enough. A school can be successful only if the *whole school* wants to improve, and that requires that this work be done in a systematic way, and that teachers carry through professional dialogues with each others. The self evaluation also has to cover part of, or aspects of, individual or joint practical work and collected data (interviews, observations, video recordings, questionnaires, etc.) must be documented in order that it can form a basis for evaluation and reflections leading to learning and improvements.

This is self evaluation

An evaluation of a school's own activities which meets these criteria can be considered to be self evaluation. The form and content of a self evaluation must be able to vary from school to school and within schools. This is the nature of the issue; in order to be meaningful, the evaluation must be based on the conditions at the school in question. And in contrast to the review made externally, it is the professionals who decide what is to be evaluated and why. This ensures that the teachers "own" the results. Another important condition is that all pupils, starting from pre-school level, have the tools and procedures to reflect on their own learning, and that parents can express their opinion and give their views on how well they think the school is functioning.

This can be the outcomes

Self-evaluation provides new insights; a better understanding of the school's own practice and a greater understanding of the whole picture. This makes it easier to create a long-term focus in development work at the school. Self-evaluation also creates better conditions for exploiting "the free area" in which the teaching profession can act. A self-critical monitoring can reveal hidden underlying structures which harbour for instance gender discrimination or xenophobia, and opens the way for shortcomings to be rectified in a long-term and sustainable way. The active participation of pupils in the self-evaluation gives them the opportunity for increased influence. Self-evaluation also generates the ammunition to support a credible argument when it comes to influencing issues such as resources, management structure, premises, etc.

Decentralised governance of the Swedish school system

Official documents describe two purposes behind the move towards decentralisation that was such a feature of the 1980s and 1990s in Sweden. To increase people's influence over their lives (the democratic aspect) and to increase efficiency by letting the decisions be taken as close to the people concerned as possible (the efficiency aspect).

Problems in the financing of the public sector in Sweden in the 1990s led to major cutbacks – with schools being particularly hard hit. It would seem that the decentralisation was also partly motivated by the economic situation – there was a hope that the cutbacks could be carried out with less damaging effect if the people concerned had some influence over how they were implemented.

However there was also an increasing political awareness of the importance of giving professionals greater influence over

school development in order to achieve better schools. In order to control schools, systems were developed for management by objectives instead of management by regulations. Decisions were to be made closer to the level where they would be implemented, but based on the national curricula. Teachers were asked to work towards fixed objectives, instead of carrying out prescribed tasks. It became a clear responsibility for teachers to ensure that pupils would achieve the objectives in the curricula for the various types of school – an important step in the right direction.

Increasing local influence over school activities was another motive behind the decision to change the control system for Swedish schools. This was also a strong driving force behind the two five-year collective agreements on conditions for teachers and school heads which Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund in Sweden drew up with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities in 1995 and 2000. The agreements contained a document of intent aiming at a range of measures for the purpose of school development. To enhance school development the agreements also aimed at strengthening teachers' influence over the organisation of work generally and their day-to-day work, something that was a major interest for the two teachers' professional unions.

New systems for controlling schools

A decentralised organisation with management by objectives and results instead of management by rules and regulations created a need for other instruments of governance and control. The government decision of spring 2003 to place a strong focus on inspection of the country's schools is one example of this. The Swedish National Agency for Education being commissioned to overhaul the whole system of results information is another. The fact that schools, and the way the local

authorities manage schools, are inspected and assessed by a national agency is a matter of national interest and the two professional teachers' unions have long demanded that national inspections be tightened up. An external review can give a good picture of the state of the school, which has an impact for example on the assessment of the right to equivalence and quality in education for all, the need for resources and the censure of municipalities which are not meeting their obligations.

Structures hinder development

However management by objectives has also not succeeded in mobilising the development potential of schools. The decentralisation and management of schools by objectives gave great freedom to the principal organisers, but the aim of giving professionals greater influence over school development is far from being met. In practice, management by objectives has frequently come to be a euphemism for budgetary control, with the decentralisation often stopping at the municipal border. The tight finances in the municipalities have rather meant new centralisation, this time at municipal level, which can be seen in the fear of delegating decisions to school heads and teachers. As well as a lack of resources, inflexible decision-making structures have also at times come to control school activities to a greater degree than policy documents.

The educational inspection and other external assessments and evaluations. A way of controlling quality

The educational inspections which the National Agency for Education was commissioned by the government to carry out in all municipalities every six years from 2003 is one example of external audits. Quality reports, which from 2005 all schools and pre-schools are demanded to carry through, is another means by which

the government wants to control that the policy of high and equal quality in education for all is accomplished.

Another example of external reviews is when municipalities have the school assessed through systems which they or the National Agency for Education have developed or through questionnaires developed by researchers and consultants on the market. School heads, teachers, pupils and parents are usually involved in this type of assessment, and the schools are expected to draw direct benefit from them. This can no doubt sometimes be the case, but it depends to a large extent on the discussions held within the school before the assessment and how it is carried out and followed up. The initiative to this kind of evaluation often comes from people other than teachers and school heads, and the latter do not have the opportunity to influence the content. Researchers, experts or consultants formulate the statements and questions, and the actual implementation often involves a considerable workload.

Experience from many other countries suggests that the “recipe book concept”, where schools are provided with a whole package of criteria and processes described in detail, leads schools into a position of strong dependence, where they rely on what others have said about what they should do. What schools then do becomes a sort of self-inspection. The schools have become their own internal inspectors, and this is often being perceived as time-consuming and a distraction from schoolwork.

The educational inspections

Naturally the requirement for equivalence, as set out in the Swedish Education Act, must be monitored by the state. To this end, the state has a well-developed information and control system, of which the grading system is one part. The state needs

to check THAT the grading system is being applied equally and THAT schools and pupils are achieving the objectives, something, which is of course also a focus for the teaching profession. However, the question of HOW one achieves this and WHAT is taught of most interest to teachers. We can clearly see how the “THATs” should guide the state’s choice of assessment methods, while for the profession the “HOWs” and “WHATs” are of most interest and should justify the evaluation methods and techniques.

As mentioned, the two teachers’ organisations have demanded and embraced expanded state inspection of the municipalities’ and schools’ adherence to laws and regulations. We can therefore set aside any discussion of the supervisory aspect of school inspections. What could be questioned however, from the perspective of our profession, is that the inspections are also meant to contribute to school development. We must ask: where does the boundary go between the responsibility of the profession and responsibility of the state for ensuring that the objectives for schools are achieved? Suggesting which areas should be developed takes the educational inspectorate to the brink of also getting involved in the question of what and how teachers should teach and how schools should act in order to achieve the objectives.

When it comes to determining which methods and ways of working are needed in order to achieve optimum results, only teachers are qualified to judge this. Professional freedom is also crucial to quality in a wider sense since it ensures that teaching remains independent of political, economic and religious interests. This is also a key element of teachers’ professional ethics, which are yet another guarantee of quality and the legal rights of pupils.

The role and status of the inspections

The inspection reports contain decisions on obligations for schools and municipalities to correct unsatisfactory situations, as well as recommendations to implement measures in highlighted areas of development. Supervision has to be reconciled with development, which is something of a dilemma.

Intended and unintended effects of educational inspection

What the effect may be is more difficult to determine. It depends to a large extent on how the inspections are carried out, the expertise of the inspection team and how follow up and feedback are handled. But perhaps most of all on how prepared the individual schools are to take the results on board as part of their own development process.

Opinions on the results are naturally valuable for a school to take into account. However if the school itself, the management and teachers, do not carry out constant self-evaluation, comments from an inspection rarely lead to any real development. This is apparent from many years' experience of school inspections in the UK. English schools are obliged to have an action plan for their development. There is an ongoing debate about whether the inspector's right to prescribe particular content of an action plan demoralises the school by removing its right to set priorities for its own development. In the best-case scenario, inspections can lead to schools and municipalities taking on board comments and starting to get to the root of problems. In the worst-case scenario, problems are tackled without everyone concerned having a deeper understanding of their actual nature. This creates a risk that the causes of the problems may remain or even be exacerbated.

The National Agency for Education's task of checking that legislation is being applied is part of its national mandate. At

this point too, it would be desirable if the external audit could be founded on an internal one, i.e. that the municipalities themselves (or any other principal organiser) critically reviewed their work and were able to report on how this review was carried out. There are examples of the National Agency for Education's inspections highlighting serious shortcomings, for example with regard to mother tongue tuition, education for pupils with learning disabilities and the working environment, in some cases jeopardising the legal rights of pupils and even breaking the law. Such failures should be identified and remedied by the municipalities themselves in their own audit of their operations. One of the purposes of the collective agreement which the Swedish Teachers' Union and the National Union of Teachers in Sweden drew up with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities in 2000 was to bring about such a review aimed at improving quality in education.

The relationship between internal evaluation and educational inspections

There are certainly grounds to discuss what is appropriate for internal and external evaluation and what the National Agency for Education's work actually means. Questions concerning teaching: methods, ways of working, development work, etc. – which is the key to quality – is now assessed by inspectors. These should instead be the responsibility of the profession and so come within the remit of self-evaluation. A more important and more relevant task for the National Agency for Education could instead be, in addition to checks on compliance with the law, to encourage self-evaluation and to review and assess this.

Only when the external review can be based on self evaluation can a meaningful dialogue be carried out on issues concerning the organisation and content of teaching. The school will then not be a "victim"

of external appraisals. On the contrary, it may welcome and request appraisals from outside and see them as a complement to its own view of the school.

An important question to ask, both for us as teachers' professional unions and for the Swedish authorities, is how we can marry the interest of professionals in making use of self evaluation in the development of schools and the justifiable need of the decision-makers to carry out assessments for governance and control. This interplay of interests could create synergies, which promote quality in schools and the professional development of teachers.

Concluding reflections

From the perspective of our profession, self-evaluation is the most relevant and interesting form of evaluation. It creates the best conditions for improvements, as it focuses on issues which teachers, school heads and pupils at the schools concerned consider to be important, and so worth examining. However, it is also reasonable and positive for schools to be assessed by an external body. This is good for teachers, as it can be valuable to have someone view the school from a different perspective. It is important that the National Agency for Education checks that municipalities are complying with the Swedish Education Act and that the school system's ability to meet curriculum objectives and other laws and regulations is kept under review.

However, when discussing external reviews, whether in the context of the state's need for checks and information or the municipalities' desire to progress with school development, it is necessary to be clear about what it is possible to achieve from "outside". Based on the research available on school development and school improvement, we would say that inspections alone do not lead to long-term and sustainable development in schools. Such development must be based on the internal drive and desire of teachers and

pupils. And it will only arise if initiatives carried out correspond to the challenges and problems which the teachers and pupils face on a daily basis. What these challenges and problems are, can only be formulated by teachers and pupils at each individual school.