

ANTRIEP Seminar on
School Evaluation for Quality Improvement
From (July 2-4, 2002)
Genting Highlands, PAHANG, Malaysia

The fifth international seminar organised by ANTRIEP in Kuala Lumpur focussed on the issue of "School Evaluation for Quality Improvement". The choice of this theme inspired a series of interrogations. Evaluation can and does serve several purposes: control, accountability and quality improvement. How can we ensure that such evaluations do not simply strengthen the control over schools, but can be used by schools in a process of improvement? What different school evaluation mechanisms exist, and what criteria are used in each of them? Do these criteria reflect the overall quality of the school? The following article presents a summary of the discussions and some of the conclusions.

Why do we need to Evaluate Schools?

Education policies are increasingly preoccupied with the issue of evaluation. International achievement tests, which reveal variations in student performance across countries, are commented upon on the front-pages of newspapers. League tables of schools based on their examination results have also become popular information for journalists, decision-makers and parents alike. The reasons for this interest are varied and include the concern for improving quality; the need to prove, in a competitive international environment, the superiority of its human resources; and a stronger demand for accountability in the public service. This focus on evaluation thus seems well justified, but the question still needs to be asked as to why focus on evaluating schools, rather than teachers or the system as a whole? "Evaluation" can indeed cover different dimensions: it can be focussed on stu-

dents (examinations being a prime example), on teachers (through the traditional teacher appraisal), on schools (through league tables, external audits or self-evaluation by the school) and on the education system as a whole (through, for example, the publication of indicator reports or thematic studies on topics of specific concern).

The interest in school evaluation finds a first justification in the present trend towards school autonomy. Recently, in many countries around the world and on the Asian continent, schools are receiving more freedom in making decisions in fields as crucial as the curriculum, staff management and budget. This greater autonomy has provoked equally greater demand for accountability at school level and for evaluation procedures which should allow central governments to guarantee standards of quality and equity across the system. A second explanation lies in research findings, which have highlighted the role that the "school" as an institution plays in improving and assuring quality of teaching and learning. The way the teacher interacts with the students in the classroom evidently is crucial, but that interaction is influenced and shaped by the way the school functions, by the leadership of the principal, the relationship with the parents, the support received from other teachers and the overall "climate" of the school. Consequently, a growing number of countries are developing tools to assess the quality and performance of the school as an institutional unit. There is a third reason for ANTRIEP's interest in school evaluation: previous seminars explored themes such as school efficiency and school management. Those discussions highlighted that all countries of the Asian region

are strengthening and diversifying their school evaluation mechanisms.

How to Evaluate a School?

Three tools are at the disposal of education policy-makers to evaluate schools. External Inspection is a common tool. It is generally undertaken by the traditional inspection or supervision services, although increasingly specific bodies are set up to “audit” the schools. Such bodies have been existing for ten or more years in several Australian States and in New Zealand. In the countries participating in this seminar, no such a separate service exists as yet, although some Indian States are reflecting on its creation. Malaysia has gone a little further; it is reorganizing its inspection system to allow supervisors to undertake institutional school reviews. A presentation by the Malaysian Chief Inspector at the seminar explained its purpose to cover the whole operation of the school (all aspects of resource management; appraising the quality of teaching and learning through classroom observation; investigating the relationships with parents and the wider community). Its aim is to present to the school and to its community a report on the school’s performance, with precise recommendations. The main challenge is not to reform the structure of the service, but its culture. Inspectors will be asked to work in groups and to give up on their direct control over teachers for a more distant relationship.

Internal School Evaluation is the second tool that can be an authentic self-evaluation process, when all members of staff examine their own performance and where they all together evaluate the school. Or it can be a project undertaken only by the school principal with some small help of the senior staff. It can be the school’s own initiative or it can be an obligation imposed by the Ministry. Several countries are demanding schools to do some form of self-evaluation, generally as part of the preparation of a school improvement plan. The justification is that, for schools to change character and direction deeply, external pressure needs to combine with internal conviction of the need for

such change. Nepal for instance is one of the many countries in the region where all schools are expected to prepare their own development plan.

Examinations and Tests form the third tool. Examinations are no longer used simply to distinguish the “able” from the “not able” students. Student results by school become a judgment on the school’s performance. In a growing number of countries, “league tables” of schools, especially at secondary level, are published in newspapers, as information to the public, to allow parents to choose a school. Ministries might promote such ranking of schools, as an incentive to schools to improve. Evidently, such listing is useful only to those parents who have the opportunity of choice and seems to benefit the school with good results much more than the weaker ones. But the seminar expressed a greater worry with the use of examinations. Examination results can be very useful information to teachers, to give them insights into the weaknesses and strengths of their students and therefore their teaching. It demands, however, that the responses are analysed and that specific feedback is given to teachers. Few countries so far have asked their examination units to refocus interventions from the preparation and administration of examinations to analysis and feedback to teachers.

The findings and outputs of these three tools are the potential sources of a database, which in turn can become a tool to monitor and evaluate schools. The challenge is to include in such a base not simply the easily collected quantitative data, such as examination results or pupil/teacher ratios, but also the more qualitative information, taken from inspection or self-evaluation reports on, for instance, relationships within the school or the leadership of the school principal.

Using School Evaluation for Quality Improvement

The seminar acknowledged that the evaluation of the school as a unit is slowly becoming more prevalent in various Asian countries. Examinationations

are the most popular tool, if not the only one in some countries. External inspection exists but is not commonly used for quality improvement. Moreover, it seems to take place mainly in those schools, which are functioning fairly efficiently and less in those which might need most such an internal assessment of strengths and weaknesses. School self-evaluation is yet to take off.

It became evident that school evaluation can serve several purposes. Two are particularly important: accountability (schools should prove that they spend public money wisely); and quality improvement (the identification of a school's strengths and weaknesses as a crucial step in an improvement process). At present, in many countries, school evaluation is meant to serve mainly the accountability purpose. In developed countries, where the practice of evaluating the school as an institutional unit started, all schools receive sufficient resources and thus making them accountable for the use of these resources, makes sense. This is also supposed to make them conscious of the need to improve their quality. But in developing nations, where many schools are under-resourced, it might make less sense to judge schools on how they use those resources and make them responsible for using resources which they do not have. In such a context, school evaluation should focus much more directly on quality improvement.

The objectives of "school evaluation" have an impact on the choice of instruments to be used. A school evaluation strategy, which concentrates on accountability, relies mainly on examination results and on external school audits. The agenda for such evaluation is being set by the ministry of education and increasingly reflects the concerns of the wider "public", interpreted by politicians and the media. In many cases, teachers feel as victims rather than the beneficiaries of such an evaluation.

Where school evaluation aims at quality improvement, school self-evaluation and supportive supervision are the appropriate tools, while teachers and the school's close community have to be allowed a say in the agenda. As such, the transposition of

the concept of school evaluation from the developed countries, within the context of a demand for greater public accountability, to developing countries and to under-resourced schools, can have adverse effects. The school evaluation strategy which is often being promoted is not appropriate to such schools. They need support, not simply pressure, a closer involvement with their communities and better relationships among staff. The challenge is not to choose between accountability and quality improvement, but to find the right balance between these aims, between internal and external evaluation, between the criteria set by the central authorities and those set by the school staff itself, between the demands of the "public" and the needs of the professional community.

Some Details

This fifth ANTRIEP seminar took place in Kuala Lumpur, from 2 to 4 July 2002. It was followed by a one-day meeting of the staff of ANTRIEP member institutions, on 5 July, at the Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB). Both events were organized through a collaboration between the IAB, in charge of the local organization, the NIEPA, the ANTRIEP Focal Point, and the IIEP, responsible for the thematic preparation. Financing for the seminar came from the IIEP, for the first time, from the Colombo Plan Secretariat, which funded 20 international and 5 national participants and the European Union in India. As a result, the number of participants was higher than at previous meetings and they came from a larger number of countries: some 60 people from 18 countries. Several top level ministry representatives included DG or Secretary from the countries in the region; 16 of the 18 ANTRIEP member institutions were represented, so were 3 UNESCO offices in the region.

The presentations and debates in the seminar would be turned into a report, and would be published on behalf of ANTRIEP by the IIEP.

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