THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF SLOVENIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM

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INTRODUCTION – THE CONTEXT AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE STUDY

Quality is a very ambiguous term. In our investigation, we defined it as ‘meeting the standards’ (Nightingale and O’Neil 1994, 7) whereby standards mean the mission and goals, as stated in the documents of an institution or nation.

In Slovenia, a broad curricular reform, encompassing all school subjects and levels of education, has recently been carried out. Its underlying goals, as stated in the official documents, are quite far-reaching and ambitious, like:

- to raise the over-all quality and long-term effects of students’ knowledge,
- to develop strategies of (creative, critical, independent) thinking,
- to foster a deeper understanding of real-life problems,

Among the means, needed to achieve those aims, the following are being stressed (Izhodišča . . . , 1996, ibid.):

- Problem-based, active forms of teaching and learning,
- interdisciplinary integration of knowledge,
- linking cognitive, motivational, emotional and social dimensions of learning,
- fostering learning to learn.

In the years 1996–99, there was a great effort invested in modernizing curricula, with about 600 subject matter experts and numerous teachers involved (up to 90% of teachers were asked via questionnaires for their opinions on curricular drafts). But it is becoming clear, even to the government officials, that freshly stated goals, new curricula, even new textbooks, are not going to change substantially teaching and learning practices in the
desired direction, unless teachers and students embrace the changing roles and philosophy behind them, which can be described briefly as the trend ‘from teaching to learning’ (Vermunt 1989; Barr and Tagg 1995) or from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching.

Also, the paradigm of knowledge should change in a constructivist direction: knowledge is not being conceived as a ready-made substance to be presented to students to absorb; it is the result of an active process of re-construction of meaning (Dahlgren 1984; Shuell 1986; Voutilainen et al. 1990; Gardner 1991). It means not only ‘knowledge that’ (declarative knowledge), but also ‘knowledge how’ (procedural knowledge) and metacognitive knowledge.

High quality learning that leads to high quality knowledge, is characterised by (Nightingale and O’Neil 1994, 53–55):

- long-term retention of the knowledge,
- being able to discover knowledge by themselves,
- being able to make connections, to perceive relations between old knowledge and new,
- being able to create new knowledge,
- being able to apply knowledge to solve problems,
- being able to communicate knowledge to others.

Also the motivational aspect is important: high quality learning is characterised by students wanting to know more about themselves and about the world, to go on with learning.

Quality learning occurs when learners are active, trying to connect, to relate, to apply, to solve problems, and supported in there activities by the teacher. It is not enough that the teacher connects, relates, compares . . . instead of students. This means a new definition of the teacher’s role; some speak about ‘a new paradigm’. For the teacher, it means relying less on the traditional role of transmitter of knowledge and embracing to a greater extent the role of facilitator of independent learning (Gow and Kember 1993). The students’ role should also change accordingly towards more initiative, independence and responsibility, more deep-level learning and less passive reception of ready-made knowledge (Vermunt 1989; 1993; Simons 1997).

There are numerous contextual factors that do not make a change of paradigm in the desired direction an easy task. Secondary teachers are being educated at different faculties in a heavily academically orientated way. The professional part of their education is comparatively small (about 10%), with little or no supervised preservice practice (Marentič Požarnik 1997).
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The situation is complicated by an over-burdened and tightly prescribed curriculum (there are many signs that the situation did not improve substantially during the recent curricular reform, in spite of official recommendations). Also, teachers are working in the last two years of the secondary school under the increasing pressure of preparing students for ‘matura’ – an external exam in five subjects, the results of which have a decisive influence on admission to higher education institutions. This means a serious threat to the alleged autonomy of the teacher.

AIM OF THE STUDY

Our study is concerned about how the goals of reform and characteristics of quality learning are being realised in the general university preparatory secondary school (gymnasium). A preliminary study showed that existing mental models of teaching and teacher’s and student’s role are quite traditional, in the sense of a knowledge-transmission mode. Student’ expect from a ‘good teacher’ to present clearly everything they need to know; the surface approach to learning prevails and the students are quite satisfied with it (Šteh Kure 1998; Marentič Požarnik and Šteh Kure 1998).

The main aim of the study is to find out what is actually happening in the secondary classrooms in terms of changing roles of teachers and students. Is there, according to professed curricular aims, more student initiative, more active, problem based learning, fostering deeper understanding and independent thinking? Is the teacher’s role changing accordingly from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of learning? How do teachers and students see and interpret those changes? Where do they see obstacles to change in the given context? How do teachers’, observers’, researchers’ and students’ perspectives compare? And finally: can the sensitivisation and challenge lead to a deeper reflection and to necessary changes in the classrooms and in school policy measures?

METHODOLOGY

Deliberately, a combination of quantitative objective and qualitative interpretative methodology has been used. We think that quantifiable, objective, pre-defined low-inference units of observation have some merits, as they focus the attention of observers on a broad scale of phenomena. But there have to be possibilities to make a synthesis, to be open to the unexpected and to include the subjective perspective of teachers and students (we should
not forget that also the categories in the observation schedule are also not purely objective, but the result of researchers’ perspective!).

Among other instruments, we used a questionnaire for students and teachers. Some questions were the same for both and some were in the form of a 5-point rating scale.

We intended to compare the interpretation of the same classroom processes between the observers, teachers and students.

We would like to thank Ms Zora Iłc Rutar who was a member of the researcher team that developed the instruments.

## Sample

There were 568 students and 83 teachers of different subjects from the 1st grade of 10 Slovenian general secondary schools (gymnasia), chosen in terms of size and region, included in the sample.

## Preliminary Results and Interpretation

We are presenting here only a small portion of the results.

The focus is on comparison, how students and teachers perceive the frequency of certain classroom activities, especially those at higher cognitive level. We presented teachers and students the same questions and plotted the answers.

There are some differences in the perception of students and teachers; but the main trend remains: in the classrooms, the activities of lower cognitive level are definitively prevailing (later, we intend to validate those results by comparing them with results obtained by observers in the classrooms).

We presented teachers and students similar rating scales; they were supposed to rate the frequency of occurrence of various classroom activities, like: the teacher encourages students to look for applications of knowledge. The rated activities on a 5-point scale, from 1 – very seldom to 5 – very often (Figure 1).
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Teacher makes connections to other themes and subjects
Teacher makes connections to life situations and practical applications
Teacher encourages students to look for applications and connections
Teacher checks for understanding
Opportunity of additional explanation
Teacher includes thinking questions
Students are active
Students put questions, suggestions, ideas
Clear assessment criteria
Teacher gives clear feedback
Teacher encourages students to make connections to previous knowledge

Figure 1: Profile of mean ratings of various classroom activities by the students and by the teachers (— students, – – teachers).

On the average, teachers’ frequency ratings of various desirable classroom activities were much higher than students’ ratings of the same activities. All differences in mean rating between students and teachers were statistically significant. Especially large were discrepancies (differences in mean ratings) on following items:

- clear assessment criteria (difference 1.54),
- clear feedback (difference 1.41)
- encourages students to look for applications and connections (difference 1.40),
- includes thinking questions (difference 1.26)
- makes connections to life situations and practical applications (difference 1.20)

Further analysis showed that especially perceptions of weaker students differed a lot from the teachers’. Teachers were more often convinced that they included in their teaching aspects that were important for quality learning; but their students did not think so. Classroom observations confirmed students’ views to a large extent.
The study revealed a considerable gap between ambitious high-level goals of secondary school curricular reform as stated in official documents and classroom reality as perceived by teachers and especially by the students. If quality means raising the cognitive level of learning, enabling students to connect knowledge to their experiences, to apply it to problem solving, to see its relevance for their life situation, then the processes in the classroom leave much to be desired.

We have to move away from ‘simplistic assumptions about what will achieve this quality revolution’ (Nightingale and O’Neil 1994, 55). The quality can not be achieved solely by ‘prescribing’ new goals and by giving the schools new curricula and textbooks; neither can quality be achieved by applying more pressure, more external measures, achievement tests and international comparisons. We have to study the conditions under which quality learning is to occur and to look inside the classrooms whether these conditions appear. Are there processes that lead to quality learning? Then, teachers have to be systematically supported in their efforts to achieve quality learning.

Quality in this sense means closing the gap between the rhetoric of official documents and the classroom reality. To achieve it, we need long-term well-defined projects which include genuine support of teachers and whole schools in their professional growth away from a transmission mode towards a new role facilitating independent, active learning of students. Also, some changes in broader school policy are needed, like a re-thinking of the scope and philosophy of external final examinations and a more efficient model of pre-service and in-service teacher education.

We can not escape the complexity of the phenomenon ‘quality’ in education as much as we would like it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


