

## International comparative research of assessment in arts education

An important topic for international comparative research in arts education is student assessment. Defining and interpreting criteria for quality must be part of any profession. Evaluation and assessment in (arts) education have various functions (such as selection, feedback, diagnosis, licensing, achievement of program goals and accountability) and can focus on different subject matter (students' learning, teaching, educational programs, etc.). Different functions require different evaluation methods. Moreover evaluation and assessment take place in different contexts and at different scale levels (individual, class, school, national etc.).

Both pedagogical and political arguments in favour of student assessment in arts education have been put forward and in the last decades, and a wide range of methodologies has been developed. They concern different approaches, such as authentic assessment of studio art through portfolios, research on the reliability of judgment by experts as well as nation wide standardized examinations and national assessments. However the debate on assessment in the arts has never ended. In primary education formal assessment and grading in arts education are largely absent. In secondary education and especially when students can take final examinations in the arts, many different assessment procedures exist. But questions concerning the reliability and validity of assessments remain. For many teachers the artistic processes are associated with emotions, unpredictability, and individual quality whereas assessment often stands for rationality, reductionism and quantification. And despite adaptations, national standards and standardized examination are criticised because of their restrictive impact on art instruction. Moreover, globalization and the use of new technologies (especially in popular art) unsettle the conceptions on which many traditional student assessments are based.

International comparative research on assessment in the arts can study different functions, subject matter and levels.

- *Comparisons of criteria of students learning*

On the level of individual student's learning a study could have arts teachers from different countries compare a set of portfolios of varying quality in order to study the (implicit?) criteria and achievement levels.

- *Comparisons of final examinations*

On the level of national examinations one could study the different examination formats but also what kind of knowledge and skills are being assessed in examination programs in the arts. For example a study by Bevers (2005)<sup>1</sup> illustrates the culture-based content of art examinations. He compared secondary school exams in music and art history/art criticism in the period 1990-2004 in four countries: France, Germany, England and The Netherlands (and later included Denmark and Slovenia). His question was whether a national canon of the cultural past still is present in these examinations or that this canon is being replaced by contemporary global culture. In

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<sup>1</sup> Bevers, T. (2005). Cultural education and the canon: A comparative analysis of the content of secondary school exams for music and art in England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, 1990–2004. *Poetics*, 33(5-6), 388-416.

France and Germany and to a lesser degree England their national canon from the past still dominates the exams. In The Netherlands a larger part of the examinations is devoted to art from different countries. Moreover the Dutch exams pay much more attention to contemporary art and popular art. Bevers concludes that a small country is inclined to follow the cultural centers of the world, and to emphasize and to join what is new instead of nourishing its own cultural past.

- *Comparisons of national assessments*

Besides individual student assessment (related to specified instructional goals, either by the teacher or a national examination body) there are national assessment projects, in which the 'level' of proficiency of students at a specified age is measured nationwide. Well known examples are the three NAEP studies that have been conducted in the United States. In the Netherlands there is an ongoing research project into the quality of education, known by its acronym PPON. This research concentrates on the last year of primary and special education, when pupils are aged 11 to 12 years. National assessments in music and the visual arts were carried out 10 years ago, but are still waiting for a follow-up. The differences between the US NAEP and the Dutch PPON reflect some of the problems of nationwide comparisons over time. First there is the issue of different views on the purpose and character of arts education. Secondly there is the validity of the assessment criteria used. How much do these criteria reflect what is actually and purposefully taught? And finally how stable are these assessments over time, also taking in consideration the social and cultural changes that take place. An international study could make an inventory of national assessment projects in different countries. Such a study could also raise the question whether or not something like an International Student Assessment (PISA) for arts education is feasible and desirable.

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