

Teachers' assessments not always conducive to fair education

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Teachers' assessments of pupils' literacy can vary significantly, even for pupils with similar test scores. This may interfere with children's right to fair and gender-equal education, according to a new doctoral thesis from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Assessment of students' knowledge and skills is one of the most important tasks of the school system. However, some factors may affect the validity of the teachers' assessments.

Stefan Johansson based his doctoral thesis on data from the large-scale literacy study PIRLS 2001, involving more than 11 000 pupils and some 700 teachers from grades 3 and 4 in Sweden. The studied material consisted of teachers' assessments and pupils' test results and self-assessed literacy. The teachers responded to 12 different statements about their pupils' reading and writing skills and assessed their skill levels on a 1-10 scale.

Teachers who had had the same pupils for more than one year showed a higher correspondence between their assessments and the pupils' test results. The same was true for teachers with higher levels of formal competence, meaning more education and experience.

Moreover, Johansson found large differences in how teachers assessed classes with similar test results.

'The teachers had different frames of reference. They seem to interpret aims and assessment criteria in many different ways,' says Johansson.

In addition, girls and students with higher [socioeconomic status](#) received somewhat higher scores from the teachers than reflected in the PIRLS test results, which confirms previous research in the area.

'One way to explain this is that a test doesn't cover everything in the applicable curricula. So maybe girls are better at demonstrating skills that are not reflected in their [test results](#), such as verbal ability, and then their teachers include these skills in their assessments. Another possibility is that girls show more effort and are given credit for it,' says Johansson.

The results indicate that fair and gender-equal education in the lower grades requires an external instrument that can be used to calibrate assessments between different classes and schools. It may also be important to enable teachers to meet across class and school boundaries to discuss their views of assessments.

'The ability of teachers to identify pupils' strength and weaknesses and provide responses that support their learning is one of the most important parts of their job. If teachers don't do this well, their pupils may not get the help and support they need, which in the end will limit their opportunities for learning,' says Johansson.

'Even if the methods may differ between schools, the Swedish Education Act provides that children must be given equal opportunities to [education](#) and that [teachers](#) must consider children's different conditions and needs. Differences in assessments may lead to some schools providing feedback and support to [pupils](#) who need it while others don't.'

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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