When assessment is a constant companion: students’ experiences of instruction in an era of intensified assessment focus

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ABSTRACT
The current study aims to deepen the knowledge of students’ experiences of teachers’ assessment related instructional actions, with particular focus on problematic consequences of an intensified assessment paradigm. Its empirical material consists of 20 focus-group interviews with a total of 102 sixteen- to eighteen-year-old students in ten Swedish municipalities. Through inductive qualitative content analysis on manifest data level, six categories of aspects emerge that together describe students’ experiences of assessment related instructional actions. Clearly, assessment, learning goals, knowledge requirements, tests, and grades are dominant elements in Swedish students’ classroom life. Consequently, they often feel strong pressure and great insecurity. For the students, it seems to make no difference whether assessment purposes are summative or formative. Rather, it appears to be the total amount of assessment related instructional actions that causes stress, and decreased desire to participate and learn in school. The results are problematized and discussed through the lens of the concepts of dilemmas and complementary attitudes. It is argued that the last decade’s intensified assessment paradigm, with its numerous macro-level reforms and decisions with bearing on summative as well as formative assessment, has led to teachers adjusting pedagogical and ethical positions in the classroom. Consequently, counterproductive practices seem to have evolved.

The present study reflects Swedish students’ experiences and perceptions of assessment-related instructional actions in an era of strong assessment focus. It is a stand-alone extension of another study (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020), based on the same empirical material, aimed at discerning aspects of successful teaching unfolding in students’ descriptions of the teachers they perceive as being the best teachers. In that study, a clear picture emerged of what (from a student perspective) characterizes the best teachers’ instructional actions. In addition, however, a different and more problematic picture could be discerned. Students contrasted their descriptions of successful teaching with descriptions of aspects that (from their perspective) counteract knowledge development and well-being. Such aspects were to a large extent assessment related. Thus, a second round of analysis was carried out, leading to the results presented in the current study.

Introduction
In 2011, new curricula for compulsory and upper secondary school were introduced in Sweden as part of a major reform package for schools. In addition to new curricula, the package included a new grading scale, an extended national testing programme, and the giving of formal grades from the age of 12 rather than 14 (as was previously the case). Already in 2008, a reform had been implemented where students from the first grade of compulsory school receive annual written assessments of their knowledge level in each subject.

The explicit basis for the government’s reform of school policy was the increasing competition in the global economy together with a perceived worrisome trend regarding Swedish students’ knowledge. In its basic features, the government’s reform logic was about tightening the goal-related governance of schools. To overcome the problem with declining results, it was argued that earlier follow-up of students’ knowledge is necessary and that teachers as well as students needed better information about the students’ knowledge development (Ministry of Education, 2007; Olovsson, 2015; Prop, 2009/10:219, 2008/09:66, 2008/09:87; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015).

At the same time that the above-described reforms led to greatly increased focus on summative assessment issues in the Swedish school, the interest for formative assessment, with its promises of great positive effects on pupils’ results (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Wiliam, 2010; Wiliam & Thompson, 2007), also grew stronger. Although there were scholars
There seemed to be very little critical discussion on policy level regarding the definition, meaning, or potential weaknesses of the concept at the time of the implementation of various assessment reforms in Sweden around 2011. An understanding of formative assessment as a model consisting of five key strategies for classroom work was picked up in writings produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE), among them a support material for teachers that came to be widespread (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). The key strategies, along with a spectrum of techniques and exercises for the classroom, soon came to dominate the understanding of formative assessment among Swedish teachers (e.g., Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015; Hultman, 2015; Levinsson, 2013).

**Aim and research question**

An assumption behind the present study is that a strengthened focus on summative as well as formative assessment will affect teachers’ instruction in various ways and, consequently, students’ experiences of school, instruction, and themselves as learners. Research that reflects experiences of those who are the subject of school reforms and teachers’ instruction and assessment is, however, quite scarce. Drawing on the research question behind and based on an analysis of focus-group interviews with a total of 102 sixteen- to eighteen-year-old Swedish students, the present study aims to deepen the knowledge of students’ experiences of teachers’ assessment-related instructional actions, with particular focus on problematic consequences of an intensified assessment paradigm.

- Which assessment-related instructional actions and experiences of such actions can be discerned in students’ descriptions of teachers’ instruction?

**Background**

Assessment-related reforms such as those described here are not unique to Sweden. In this article, however, Sweden will serve as an example, to the extent that the background described below takes its starting point in the Swedish case and in Swedish research and evaluations with bearing on the purpose of the present study.

**The impact of the reforms on instruction**

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2015) conducted a longitudinal study in 2011–2014 in which teachers at nine compulsory schools were studied through observation, interviews, and questionnaires with the aim of finding out how the reform package was received and implemented by teachers in practice. The study shows that the knowledge requirements (i.e., the assessment criteria in the syllabi that form the basis for grading students’ knowledge) and the national tests were the main catalysts for concrete changes in teachers’ instruction. The knowledge requirements had gained an increased importance for teachers’ planning and conducting of lessons compared to the time before 2011, and teachers reported that the reform package had led to an increased understanding among students for educational goals and grading criteria.

In another study of the impact of the 2011 curriculum on teachers’ ways of organizing instruction and assessing students’ knowledge development, 1887 teachers of grades 6 and 9 answered a questionnaire (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2105). Overall, the study shows that assessment had come to play a much more central role in teachers’ day-to-day work as compared to earlier and that teachers perceived that their own as well as the students’ possibilities to influence the teaching content and planning of instruction had decreased significantly. Expectations of pupils’ taking responsibility for and understanding their own learning had, on the other hand, considerably increased. Further, the study shows that the five assessment instruments that teachers considered to form the most important basis for assessing students’ knowledge were continuous observations of what students do in the classroom (85% indicated this as an important basis for assessment), oral assignments and reports (83%), written assignments (67%), results of national tests (66%), and results of other tests (62%).

**The increased interest in formative assessment**

In his doctoral thesis, Levinsson (2013) studied the connection between the growth of the evidence movement and the increasing interest in formative assessment. An organization of great importance for the evidence movement’s expansion and influence on educational research is, according to Levinsson, the OECD, with its sub-department CERI (Centre of Educational Research and Innovation). In a 2003 OECD report, CERI describes formative assessment – mainly referencing Black and Wiliam (1998a, 1998b) – as a collection of evidence-based classroom strategies with the potential for producing effects that are the largest ever recorded for interventions in education. Levinsson describes how Black and William’s writings, as well as CERI’s 2005 report Formative Assessment: Improving Learning in Secondary Classrooms and various systematic research reviews carried out by established broker organizations (e.g., Moyles & Yates, 2003; Randel et al., 2011), were highlighted in policy in various countries as examples of what can be accomplished by an increased...
evidence-base. In the wake of this, extensive efforts and investments in implementing formative assessment as part of teachers’ classroom practices were carried out in many countries, including Sweden.

The conceptual model of key strategies for formative assessment was elaborated by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) in a widespread set of guidelines for teachers. In the guidelines, the formative assessment process is described – with references to Wiliam (2010) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) – as follows:

A formative assessment process is characterized by clarification of the goals of instruction, the seeking of information on students’ current level in relation to the goals, and provision of feedback that clarifies how the gap between the students’ current levels and the goal can be closed. The three questions that must be asked by the students and the teacher are (1) What is the goal? (2) Where am I/the student currently? and (3) How should I/the student move on from the current level towards the goal? Based on these three questions, five central key strategies for formative assessment are described below. In these, the student, the classmate, and the teacher are important actors. (p. 15, my translation)

The SNAE argues that the goals for students’ knowledge development – corresponding (according to the SNAE) to the knowledge requirements – must be clarified to students. All feedback, whether provided from the teacher to the student or between students, should aim to reduce the distance between students’ current abilities and the abilities described in the goals. It is recommended that students discuss and evaluate examples of tasks performances in order to understand differences in quality between various levels of achievement, and, further, that peer and self-assessment should be practiced in order to develop students’ abilities to take responsibility for and control their own learning.

**Student’s experiences in an assessment-oriented era**

In a research project concerning sixth-grade students’ experiences of assessment, grading, and national tests (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017; Pérez Prieto & Löfgren, 2017), approximately 300 twelve-year-olds were interviewed. The studies show that the performatve pressure on the students (and the teachers) is high, and that much teaching is devoted to increasing students’ understanding of the curriculum, the knowledge requirements, and the structure of national tests. Students are expected to understand and comment on their own knowledge development during parent–pupil–teacher meetings; assessment criteria are frequently discussed during lessons; and they regularly practice assessing their own and peers’ tasks in line with the criteria. Thus, the researchers argue, assessment has become a teaching content in a way that did not exist one decade ago, and the students are made responsible for understanding issues that traditionally have been the teacher’s responsibility.

In a dissertation study, Vogt (2017) interviewed a total of 95 ninth-grade students in Sweden and Germany for the purpose of comparing their conceptions of just assessment. Additionally, she studied and compared assessment-related policy guidelines in the two countries, concluding that compared to Germany, the Swedish guidelines are remarkably many and detailed. Further, Vogt points out that the Swedish guidelines often refer to Anglo-Saxon research about assessment for learning, a line of research that does not seem to have had any greater impact on the German assessment discourse.

Vogt’s interviews with students show that assessment-related issues appear to be highly present in Swedish students’ everyday classroom experiences. Although her study mainly focused on grade-relevant assessment, the analysis reveals that assessment from a pupil’s perspective can be understood as “an interrelated and coalescing mélange of different assessment practices and purposes’ (Vogt, 2017, p. 109). Clearly, the curriculum’s knowledge requirements are discussed a lot in classrooms, and the students struggle to understand their complexity and meaning. Further, the students describe how they continuously receive grades on individual tasks. They experience that there are few occasions that allow for creative learning without having to think about grade-relevant consequences. As a result, students perceive that high grades depend on a display of constant flawlessness.

The students’ feeling that all assessment can be a potential basis for grading thus also applies to assessment practices traditionally attributed to the formative paradigm. Vogt (2017) concludes, therefore, that the conditions and consequences of the relationship between summative and formative purposes and practices of assessment are important to examine in more detail. Moreover, she advocates an increased consideration of pupils’ perspectives in research in order to further deepen knowledge about the perceived conditions and consequences that educational change and increasing standardization generate for those who are subject to instruction and assessment.

**Underpinning the current study**

As mentioned, the current study builds on a previous study (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020), based on the same interviews. In the previous study, eight aspects are distinguished that characterize, from a student perspective, the teaching of teachers whom the students
perceive to be the best teachers. It is concluded that the teaching that students perceive as leading to knowledge development and wellbeing is characterized by aspects that can be understood—in various ways—as relational, that is, as unfolding through participative communication in the interplay and interaction that constitute the space between teacher and students (Biesta, 2004; Littleton & Mercer, 2013; Sawyer, 2004). Throughout students’ descriptions it is obvious that the best teachers are scaffolders and shepherds (Sugrue, 1997) who manage to balance simultaneously scaffolding and challenging students cognitively while paying attention to affective dimensions in order to safeguard students’ social development, self-confidence and self-esteem. The best teachers seem to embrace a belief that respectful and personal relationships in affirming learning environments—where affective filters are low—are fundamental for learning to happen (cf. Gee, 2008; Krashen, 1983). Further, the teachers described as the best teachers seem to be extraordinarily sensitive to when it is appropriate to act in a certain way with a particular student. They seem to understand that teaching at school is a constant balancing act between purposes that seem to partially contradict each other. In the concluding discussion of the present study, issues concerning this balancing ability are raised. The concepts of dilemmas and complementary attitudes will be used to discuss how the tightened goal-related governance of the school together with an intensified assessment paradigm can potentially influence teachers’ ability to develop complementary attitudes.

**Dilemmas and complementary attitudes**

Educational systems are complex and contradictory. Teachers’ daily work is regulated and influenced by decisions at the policy/macro level. They are expected to fulfill their professional duties according to laws, policy guidelines, and other directives, while their work is inevitably also charged with an extensive responsibility for other humans. The contradiction between the formal climate and the caring climate is, in a sense, ever present. The neoliberal marketization of schools that, according to Grimmett et al. (2009), has had an almost hegemonic impact on educational systems worldwide in the twenty-first century will almost inescapably conflict with many teachers’ professional values and beliefs, not least in terms of interpersonal aspects. In the introduction to this article, several of the past decade’s policy decisions with bearing on assessment are described. Such macro-level decisions and guidelines will eventually involve teachers in micropolitical manoeuvres in their everyday classroom practices, where they must make decisions and adopt pedagogical and ethical positions. Due to contradictions at the system level, such decisions and adjustments are often of a dilemmatic nature (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013; cf. also Achinstein, 2006).

Dilemmas can be described as situations of difficult choice in which incompatible demands have to be fulfilled or where all available alternatives have at least one undesirable consequence. Values, obligations, and commitments conflict, and there seems to be no right way to act (Höijer et al., 2006; Honig, 1996). Thus, in a dilemmatic situation, one must fulfill different requirements that are perceived to conflict with one another, which is why the ‘solution’ to a dilemma is about positioning and balancing rather than problem solving (cf. Hirsh, 2014).

Agevall and Jenner (2008) discuss dilemmas in light of the concept of complementary attitudes, referring to professionals’ ability to see different requirements as complementary rather than contradictory. The concept also includes professionals’ awareness of the fact that a good value can be counterproductive, that is, it can turn into something negative if exaggerated. Regulatory follow-up can, for instance, turn into rigid bureaucracy. Agevall and Jenner argue for the importance of balancing the values judiciously and for being alert to the risks that accompany extreme postures. Adopting complementary attitudes is, in a sense, about choosing both alternatives rather than one or the other, not to be equated with an unspecified ‘in-between solution’ or a regular compromise. The conflicting values involved can be understood as each other’s guarantors for not ending up in either of two counterproductive extremes (Agevall & Jenner, 2008). Developing complementary attitudes is about developing one’s ability to see how, for example, regulatory follow-up can be balanced against flexibility so that it does not end up in rigid bureaucracy. In the context of school, it may concern developing one’s ability to see how policy requirements and guidelines can be put into practice in a judicious way such that an instrumental and alienated relationship to students is avoided.

Further, Agevall and Jenner claim that, for dilemmas to be handled judiciously, a certain degree of professional autonomy is required. Making ‘right’ decisions in situations where there is no given right is largely a matter of professional judgement, judgement that develops over time and as one’s professional experience grows. It is refined when professionals find themselves in the kinds of situations in which they need to make such decisions. Professionals who are strongly governed by different types of regulations and manuals risk not developing the complementary attitudes required to make judicious decisions on practical and ethical issues. This could result in their behaviour amounting to the expression of technical rule following or the mere performance of a technical task, where they do not
see or analyse the pitfalls that extreme postures may lead to.

**Method**

This study is situated within a larger research project with the overall aim of extending knowledge about successful teaching and teachers. For that purpose, 20 teachers and a total of 102 students in ten different Swedish municipalities were observed and interviewed. The present study draws on empirical data from the student interviews, but to understand how the selection of student respondents was made, a brief description of the entire selection process is required.

**Procedure and participants**

In each municipality one secondary and one upper-secondary school was selected, and the principals at the respective schools were contacted and asked to propose a teacher whom they considered to be their most successful teacher based on the inclusion criteria. The proposed teachers were given a brief description of the overall purpose of the project and were informed that the entire research process was guided by the Swedish Research Council’s (2017) ethical requirements. For each teacher, one lesson was observed, and an individual interview was conducted. Further, focus-group interviews (Vaughn et al., 1996) with 4–6 randomly selected (volunteering) students from each observed class were carried out. Student were chosen by the casting of lots among those expressing a will to participate in the interviews. As it turned out, volunteering students together represented a wide span of knowledge levels and individual needs (cf. Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020).

The student interviews followed a guide containing two open-ended introductory questions and several possible follow-up questions. The introductory questions were as follows:

1. You have gone to school for many years and met a lot of teachers. How would you describe a really good teacher? What distinguishes a good teacher from one who is not as good?
2. What characterizes teaching that you think leads to learning and development? (Try to give examples of what, more specifically, the teacher does to accomplish that.)

In the light of the wording of the questions above, it should be noted that the teachers whom the students in the various interviews talk about could be any of their present or previous teachers, i.e. they were not limited to talking about the teachers whose lessons we observed. It should also be noted that no specific questions about assessment were asked. Descriptions and experiences of assessment-related aspects were found in the students’ answers to the above questions. For the sake of clarity, it can also be added that neither in the interviews nor in the data analysis, the ambition has been to find similarities and differences across subjects.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In excerpts from the interviews, the designations S1, S2, etc., are used for students, and I for the interviewing researcher.

A total of 102 students, from a total of 20 different schools participated in the 20 interviews. **Table 1** provides information about the participants in the student interviews.

**Data analysis**

As mentioned, the students described both teaching that they believed promoted knowledge development and wellbeing and teaching that, in their opinion, led to the opposite. The first analysis (accounted for in Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020) did not include the problematic aspects, but it was noted that they were numerous and that a significant portion of them could be related to the intensified assessment paradigm described in the introduction. A new analysis of the data material was therefore carried out, with a specific focus on categorizing assessment-related and problematic aspects.

The current analysis was inspired by Graneheim and Lundman’s (2004) qualitative content analysis approach and conceptualization. The ambition was to search for patterns and create *descriptive* categories based on a manifest analysis of the data material. Categorizations should thus be understood as spun primarily from the empirical patterns found rather than from theory. The entire data set was considered

### Table 1. Information on respondents.

| School | 9th grade or upper secondary (US) | Subject matter taught at the lesson visited by researchers | Number of female and male students participating in the interview |
|--------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| A      | 9th Swedish                      | 3 F, 1 M (4)                                             |                                                               |
| B      | US Swedish                       | 3 F, 2 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| C      | 9th History                      | 3 F, 2 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| D      | US Mathematics                   | 2 F, 3 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| E      | 9th Mathematics                  | 3 F, 3 M (6)                                             |                                                               |
| F      | 9th History                      | 2 F, 3 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| G      | US Civics                        | 4 F, 1 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| H      | US Mathematics                   | 2 F, 4 M (6)                                             |                                                               |
| I      | US Mathematics                   | 6 M (6)                                                  |                                                               |
| J      | 9th English                      | 3 F, 2 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| K      | US Mathematics                   | 3 F, 2 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| L      | 9th Physics                      | 4 F, 2 M (6)                                             |                                                               |
| M      | US History                       | 3 F, 2 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| N      | 9th Civics                       | 3 F, 1 M (4)                                             |                                                               |
| O      | 9th Mathematics                  | 2 F, 2 M (4)                                             |                                                               |
| P      | US Mathematics                   | 3 F, 3 M (6)                                             |                                                               |
| Q      | 9th Mathematics                  | 2 F, 3 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| R      | 9th Science                      | 2 F, 3 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| S      | US Horse science 1 (theoretical) | 4 F, 1 M (5)                                             |                                                               |
| T      | US Horse science 2 (practical)   | 5 F (5)                                                  |                                                               |
the unit of analysis in which meaning units were sought. Meaning units refer to content areas identified with little interpretation, shedding light on specific areas of content responding to the research question. In this study, the analysis is best described as a directed content analysis (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; see also Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), which means that meaning units were searched for that could be linked to assessment-related aspects. The meaning units were subsequently labelled with codes summarizing their core meaning in a few words. Further, the codes were sorted into groups sharing a commonality, finally resulting in six categories/areas that together describe students’ experiences of assessment-related instructional actions.

Results

As described, no questions specifically related to assessment were asked in the interviews (apart from occasional follow-up questions). Despite this, large portions of students’ descriptions of teaching and teachers came to deal with assessment-related issues. The students’ descriptions in the various interviews showed major similarities with each other, and the mention of assessment-related instructional actions and experiences of such actions presented in the six categories below occurred frequently throughout all 20 interviews. Note that no quantitative content analysis was carried out, and that the order in which the categories appear is not based on quantitative hierarchical occurrence.

The feeling that everything is subject to evaluative judgement

In the previous analysis of the data material (accounted for in Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020), it became clear that the most crucial prerequisite for students’ learning and wellbeing in school, according to the students themselves, is a safe learning environment. One aspect that the students return to in all interviews and which appears to be one of the strongest contributing causes of insecurity in the classroom is the feeling that everything one says and does can be subject to evaluative judgement. This, in turn, creates a fear in students of asking the teacher questions or asking for help when they do not understand:

S3: Susanna is a brilliant teacher. She constantly asks, ‘How do you feel about this content, do you understand?’ And if I say ‘Not fully,’ she says, ‘Then let’s sit down and talk about it. I’ll explain it to you.’

S4: Yes, you feel safe with her … you dare to open up and to raise your hand in class.

S1: But with Samuel, for example, … he has such high demands. He talks about such difficult things all the time … but I don’t dare to ask. He rushes through things so fast … I often don’t understand a thing, but I don’t dare to ask him.

I: Why are you afraid of asking?

P1: I don’t want to appear stupid. He’ll think I’m not smart.

P2: Exactly … I often get that feeling … You know, you’re so scared that the teachers will see that you don’t understand, that they’ll think ‘Aha, you don’t really get this, so I might lower your grade.’ … I think many of us feel like that.

P3: Yes, often.

I: Do you dare to tell Susanna that you don’t understand?

P3: Yes, she’s different. She is more like ‘Aha, you have a problem. Let’s sit down and solve it together.’

P2: Yes, with Susanna it’s okay to show that you don’t understand … Many other teachers say that our grades are based on everything they see. (School E)

The study by Vogt (2017) referred to in the background points to the same phenomenon as that described by the students in the excerpt above. In Vogt’s comparative study, the Swedish students’ descriptions of their classroom situation differed from the German students’ in several respects. The Swedish students described that there are few opportunities allowing for creative learning where they do not have to think about grade-related consequences. As a result, they perceive that high grades depend on a display of constant flawlessness.

The constant talk about goals, knowledge requirement, sand grades

The fact that the degree and quality of each student’s achievement in a subject are subsequently graded, where grades can play a crucial role for further study or work, is constantly present in the interviews (cf. Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020). Students’ descriptions clearly show that their relation to achievement and grades is ambiguous; their participation and learning in school is driven by the end goal being a grade, and the grades are important to them. At the same time, many of them argue that it is stressful when teachers, through their words and actions, place too much focus on learning goals, formal requirements, and grades. It is obvious in the interviews that both the expectations/requirements communicated to students before a work area and continuous achievements and results during work areas are frequently expressed in terms of grades. There are also several examples in the material that the students in self-evaluation situations (cf. Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009) are expected to determine and express their own levels in terms of grades. In fact, the students often talk about themselves as being a certain grade:
S1: Amanda talks a lot about our own responsibility, that we should take responsibility for our development. We should know for ourselves what grade level we are on. And if some of us say E, then E’s we are.

I: Are you saying that some teachers let you decide for yourself that you are ‘E students’?

S1: Yes, many. And especially Amanda. She doesn’t say ‘No, I know you can do better.’ Instead, she says, ‘If you feel that you’re at E-level, that’s the level where you should be working.’

S2: I know … she doesn’t boost you to study, she’s more like, ‘Some can’t do this, so you don’t have to do the difficult tasks in the book.’

S1: Yes, I only do the E-level tasks during lessons. I never go higher.

S2: But, actually … you really want to hear that your teacher believes that you can do better … Because I think many of us really want to get better, even those of us who do worst in maths … but then we would need … you know … help from the teacher.

S1: Yes, a good teacher had helped me understand the problem-solving tasks that always appear on the tests … you know, the difficult part of the test … because it’s awful to feel … every time you do a test, that there’s a whole part of it you don’t understand … But … no wonder I don’t understand when I just do E-tasks on lessons.

S2: Maybe, as a student, I will say that I’m an E, because I think I’m lousy at maths … But obviously I want to get better in maths because it’s such an important subject … So I ask for help with, like ten tasks every lesson … but she says that it’s my own responsibility to try to understand how I can develop … So I keep doing the E-tasks. I’m an E, that’s it. (School S)

None of the students interviewed describe the explicit clarification of learning goals and assessment criteria as characteristic of good teaching. On the contrary, they frequently describe how it increases their stress level and lowers their motivation when goals, requirements, and formal writings from the curricula are constantly referred to:

S3: Monica, she’s one of the few who’s not just going on about, you know, ‘The knowledge requirements in the curriculum say that you need to learn this,’ … like most other teachers do. Monica, she says that we need to learn to …

S2: To benefit from it … And she explains why. She explains why we’ll need to know stuff later in life.

S4: Yes, had there been a Monica in each subject, I would have liked going to school every day … Now, I just feel stressed out. (School G)

S4: When I get to see an assessment matrix at the beginning of a work area, I often feel that ‘I will never be able to learn all this’ … it’s kind of stressful to see all of it before you have even started to learn. It feels like it’s no use even trying … It feels sort of … insurmountable.

S3: Yes, and you get tired of constantly hearing teachers saying that the Swedish National Agency for Education says that we must learn this. (School B)

The constant demands for development

One of the aspects found in the previous study that, from a student perspective, characterizes the best teachers (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020) was the teachers’ communication and enactment of confidence in the students’ ability to learn, develop and reach further. In recurring descriptions in all interviews, it becomes clear that the students greatly value teachers communicating a genuine belief in their ability to develop and learn but that the boundary is subtle between such communicated belief and stressful expectations of constant development. The teachers the students perceive as the best seem to succeed in finding the right balance. It is argued that one reason for their success is that they communicate so clearly – in words and in action – that they share the responsibility for learning with the students. Students do not feel left alone with high expectations and demands.

However, it is not uncommon for expectations of continuous development to be perceived as stressful. A recurring theme in the interviews is that students often feel inadequate:

S4: It makes me kind of sad when the teachers only complain and never give praise. Never ‘you did so well,’ but always ‘it could have been better.’ We’re expected to be so high performing all the time … It feels like we are never allowed to be pleased with ourselves. I got a C on a test in maths once … I had really done my best, and when I got a C, I was really pleased with myself … But it felt like I wasn’t really allowed to be happy … Eh, feedback is good, but what I mean is that it would be nice sometimes to hear ‘Wow, you’ve done so well, you’re really good,’ instead of just ‘this and this can be better.’ I don’t think it’s necessary to always hear about one’s development areas, because then it feels like you’re never good enough. (School T)

In the background, it was described that the SNAE published a support material on assessment at the same time as the new curricula were introduced and implemented in 2011. In the support material, which came to be widespread, it is emphasized that the goals of students’ knowledge development must be made clear to the students, and that feedback should be given that aims to reduce the gap between the students’ current ability and the abilities described in the goals. Reasonably, the purpose of this type of feedback practice, inspired by Hattie & Timperley’s large
overview The Power of Feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), is benevolent. It is, after all, about increasing student knowledge. Agevall and Jenner (2008) argue, however, that also a good value can turn into something negative if used technically/instrumentally and not balanced judiciously. This issue will be returned to in the discussion.

The fear of losing face

In a previous category, it was described how students are often afraid of showing that they do not understand the teaching content or the teacher’s explanations, a fear that grows from believing that their grades would be adversely affected. Another fear that is described throughout the data is the students’ fear of losing face in the classroom. Two assessment-related aspects are particularly highlighted by the students as situations in which they feel they lose face: when the teacher randomly chooses who should answer questions in the classroom and when one is engaged in peer assessment. It is hard enough, several students argue, knowing that you are inferior to others. When one’s inferiority also becomes fully visible to everyone else, one often feels ashamed:

S3: At many lessons, I find it quite difficult and stressful to get the question suddenly, you know … when the teacher just chooses randomly who’ll answer.
S2: Yes, me too … I feel like the world’s most stupid person … I just sit there like an idiot and can’t answer and everyone else is watching.
S3: But, at Johan’s lessons … Johan is great, at his lessons you never feel that way.

I: How is that?
S3: I don’t know … but I think it’s because he treats us in a certain way … always. He is so positive, he likes us so much, he always says that everyone contributes something good.
S4: Yes, and that it’s important that we always try to support each other and that we are never allowed to laugh at each other. And he doesn’t assess everything we say. (School O)
S1: Damn, I hate peer assessment … I’m not smart, I know it. And what comments can I give to classmates who are much better than me?
S4: Yes, I know … And when we make oral presentations, and give feedback to each other … I feel so bad that I almost faint … and when it’s my turn after someone who has done a great presentation and received great feedback … I know that everyone else is a hundred times better, and it feels like everyone will just laugh at me being so bad. (School K)

For those acquainted with the key strategies for formative assessment, the random choice of who is to answer questions in the classroom is a familiar phenomenon. Activating as many students as possible in the classroom is considered to be an important part of the formative work. In order to be able to guide a student’s learning and development towards a certain goal, one first needs to find the student’s current level. Traditionally, hand-raising has been used in classroom settings, but researchers who advocate the use of formative key strategies argue that hand-raising is ineffective (e.g., William, 2011). It is usually the same handful of students who raise their hand and thus get the opportunity to interact with the teacher and receive immediate feedback, while others remain silent and receive no feedback. One way to activate everyone is to use some type of random generator as a tool. Thus, we are, again, dealing with a seemingly benevolent purpose; everyone must be activated in order for everyone to get equal opportunities for feedback and help. However, we are also, again, dealing with a method that risks becoming counterproductive if not balanced judiciously. Students are, potentially, exposed to a situation where they openly display, to classmates and teachers, weaknesses for which they are ashamed.

The feeling of time pressure

The new curricula that were introduced in 2011 include fairly detailed descriptions of the learning content that should be taught in different subjects. In the former curriculum the goals had been specified, but it was up to the profession to make decisions on what content was needed for the goals to be achieved. The previously described study by Wahlström and Sundberg (2015) showed that teachers perceived, after the introduction of the 2011 curriculum, that their own as well as students’ possibilities to influence the teaching content and planning of lessons had decreased significantly. In the present study there are plenty of indications that the students often experience a highly regulated and ‘content crammed’ classroom situation.

Most students interviewed keep returning to time pressure. There is a lot to be done and the lesson time is insufficient. The responsibility for understanding content and solving tasks is often left to the students to handle on their own and outside school hours, a situation described as both stressful and frustrating by the students:

S1: Our English teacher works like that, it’s sort of ‘bam, bam, bam,’ you know, she says ‘This is the goal of the lesson today, this shall be done today, and if it’s not, you must do it at home.’ She says that we should blame ourselves if we’re not done by the end of the lesson … That’s a bit stressful. (School F)
S3: There’s so much stuff that should be included in the tests. Teachers don’t have time to go through and explain all of it during lessons … but they still include everything in the tests, because the knowledge requirements say that we must know all areas … and then you have to read it yourself, at home … And it’s really hard to understand things that no one has explained. I try to learn the book by heart … but it’s no good, because I don’t get it. (School N)

S5: It feels so boring and stressful when we just have to squeeze things in all the time … like Peter’s lessons. He always says … ‘If we don’t get all this done before the national tests, you might get bad results … and then I will have a problem because of you.’ I hate to hear that. (School O)

The feeling of everything being at stake

Throughout the interviews, the students talk a lot about tests. The very existence of the national tests, for instance, seems to greatly influence the teaching, not least when teachers (as exemplified in the quote above) refer to everything that must be done and learned before the tests come. However, the national tests are not the only tests the students have; other tests are also frequent. Although the frequency itself is experienced as stressful, it is the importance that (according to the students) is attributed to the tests that contributes to a pressing feeling of everything being at stake on one occasion.

S1: Tests, tests, tests all the time. And it’s just the tests that count when they grade us, at least for many of the teachers. We know that. It doesn’t matter if you do well during lessons.

S6: And what feels really hard is unprepared tests … It’s completely unplanned, you get into the lesson and ‘Ok, now we have reading comprehension test.’

S2: Mm … you get that feeling of panic, and then you just sit there, completely blank.

S1: You get the feeling ‘Okay, I haven’t prepared myself, I can’t do this.’ Then you make mistakes … and sometimes nothing comes out on the paper.

S2: And the teachers say that ‘it’s just exercise.’ But it doesn’t matter. They should say beforehand that there’ll be a test … so that we don’t get into the first lesson in the morning and panic, like, ‘Oh, hell, we have reading comprehension now.’

S6: Yes, and even if the teachers say that it’s only exercise, they include it when they grade us … we all know that … they even say so … ‘You didn’t have good results on the reading comprehension.’ (School H)

On the one hand, some students, as described in the first category, believe that all they do in school can potentially form the basis for evaluative judgement and grading. They argue that teachers often tell them that ‘everything they do’ is assessed. On the other hand, many students seem convinced that the tests have a particularly prominent position when grades are to be awarded. Much is at stake on the special occasion that a test represents, which causes many to feel great nervousness in that situation. If, in addition, they know that there will not be a second chance, the stress is potentially even more tangible:

S2: It’s good that there are requirements and some pressure … but it is tough when teachers don’t understand that a student may not be able to show his best side on a test … if teachers don’t understand that, it’s very hard for you as a student, it’s such big pressure. But with Eve, if we don’t succeed on a specific test, then we always get a second chance. She never stops believing in us.

I: Isn’t there a risk that students use second chances to their advantage?

S2: Most teachers probably think so … Isac, for example, he says that there’s one test and then it’s over. Even if you were ill and couldn’t come to school that day. With some teachers you get no second chance … While Eve, she would surely give a third chance as well.

S3: And it’s not like you want to escape from it forever.

S2: No, exactly, that’s what I’m trying to say, some teachers probably think all students are just trying to get away.

S1: And even if you get a second chance, it doesn’t mean that chance is easier than the first one. It still has to be done.

S4: Exactly. It’s good with second chances sometimes … because you’re not always on top, you have periods when you feel tired or sad over something. And then, if you do a test and don’t do well … and you don’t get a second chance, you’ll perhaps get an F. But to know there’s a second chance and that the teacher doesn’t give up on you, that’s really important. (School H)

Concluding discussion

It is reasonable to assume that the past decade’s numerous school reforms – many of which have bearing on teachers’ assessment work – affect both teachers and students in various ways. The governance of the school and its professions can be considered as both ‘hard’ (that which is expressed in the Education Act and the curriculum) and ‘soft’ (that which is expressed in the near explosion in the
number of guidelines from the SNAE). As mentioned earlier, macro-level decisions and guidelines will inevitably involve teachers in micro-political manoeuvres in their everyday classroom practices. Teachers’ pedagogical and ethical positions will be adjusted.

In the background, reference was made to Vogt (2017), who argues for an increased consideration of pupils’ perspectives in research in order to further deepen our knowledge about the perceived conditions and consequences that educational change and increasing standardization generate for those who are subject to instruction and assessment. The present study reflects the students’ perspectives. Reading the excerpts in the results section, one can object to the students’ descriptions for a variety of reasons. It could be argued that students give a distorted picture of the situation, that they do not understand their own best, or that they do not understand the framework within which the school’s professionals work and which shape their teaching actions. Potentially, there may be grounds for making such objections, but the authorization of students’ perspectives is nevertheless important. They share their experiences and perceptions, and although such experiences are not the same as objective truths, it is precisely the experiences that get in the way of their desire to learn and participate in classrooms.

Vogt’s (2017) interviews with sixteen-year-old students, as well as the interviews with twelve-year-old students in the studies by Pérez Prieto and Löfgren (2017), show that assessment is constantly on the agenda in Swedish classrooms. Knowledge requirements are widely discussed, and students struggle to understand their meaning and complexity. Students are continuously graded on all tests and assignments they do, and they experience that moments of creative learning – where they do not have to worry about grade-related consequences – are few. Students feel that, in order to obtain the higher grades, an almost constant display of flawlessness is required. The 102 students interviewed in the current study describe the same situation. The pressure is great, and they feel stressed. Goals, knowledge requirements, grades, tests, and assessments are constantly present. They all seem to know what the National Agency for Education is, because it is so often referred to by their teachers. They self-assess and peer-assess and are trained to understand what grade level they ‘are.’ Their school performances are continuously recorded in assessment matrices that correspond to the knowledge requirements in the different subject syllabuses. They are told that their grades are based on ‘everything the teachers see.’ They refrain from asking questions when they do not understand, for fear that it will affect their grades.

In accordance with the conclusions of Pérez Prieto and Löfgren (2017), Löfgren and Löfgren (2017), and Vogt (2017), the current study also shows that assessment has become a teaching content and that the students are made responsible for understanding issues that have traditionally been the teacher’s responsibility. Further, this study confirms Vogt’s conclusion that assessment from a students’ perspective is experienced as a coalescing mélange of different assessment practices and purposes. For the students in this study, where many apparently feel stressed by the constant talk of goals, knowledge requirements, and grades, it seems to make no difference whether purposes are summative or formative. Rather, it appears to be the total amount of assessment-related actions that causes stress and decreased motivation and desire to learn. Clarification of goals and assessment criteria or knowledge requirements, as well as various peer- and self-assessment exercises, can, for example, be attributed to a formative paradigm that has been regarded almost by definition as favourable (cf. Lau, 2016).

Swedish teachers have been strongly recommended by national authorities to work with five key strategies for formative assessment. Reasonably, the intentions underlying the encouragement of such formative assessment practices among teachers are benevolent; after all, the idea is that students’ learning and results should increase. Whether the implementation of formative assessment strategies contributes to such increased learning and results has been questioned in research (e.g., Bennett, 2011; Heitink et al., 2016), but increased results are the intended outcome. However, against the background of the present study and other studies referred to here, there are clearly unintended outcomes as well. The negative ways in which the assessment-centred era (including summative as well as formative practices) seems to have affected students’ stress and motivation levels as well as their views of themselves as learners may be classified as an unintended outcome.

The question is how we ended up here. In the previous study based on the same interviews as the present study, a number of aspects are identified that, according to the students, lead to both knowledge development and wellbeing. The students do meet teachers whose teaching is characterized by the relational aspects previously summarized, and they value them highly. However, it seems that they are even more likely to meet teachers who do not have time for or attach importance to creating trustful personal relationships with the students, who refer to formal requirements to a very high degree, and who apply, in a seemingly instrumental way, key strategies for formative assessment without considering situational appropriateness or appropriateness in relation to students’ differences and varied needs. Many of the eight
aspects that (according to students) characterize good teaching and teachers (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2020) appear to be counteracted by the kind of ‘school climate’ and teaching practices that have emerged in the wake of the reforms of the past decade. Similar results have been found internationally. In a study from 2007, for instance, Valli and Buese demonstrate and discuss how the policy directives of the No Child Left Behind Act made teachers enact pedagogies that were at odds with their own beliefs. The teachers found themselves in a dilemmatic space, where their professional judgement told them one thing and policy directives something else.

In teachers’ work, several dilemmas are embedded. There exists, for example, a contradiction between the use value and the exchange value of knowledge (cf. Engeström, 2001). In exchange for demonstrated knowledge, the students receive grades that are needed for them to move forward in studies or professional life. At the same time, we want students to see the intrinsic and use value of knowledge, not least for the sake of motivation and wellbeing. Teachers therefore need to consider the extent to which it is possible to refer to grades and formal requirements without such practice becoming counterproductive. Another balancing act concerns the extent to which one can communicate high expectations and trust in the students’ ability without ending up in a counterproductive extreme where students feel they are never good enough or where experiences of pressure become overpowering. A third concerns the balance between covering all the specified content in steering documents and being responsive to the students’ interests and needs. A fourth dilemma, with potential serious consequences, is related to teachers’ concern about awarding students grades that reflect, as far as possible, students’ true knowledge with teachers therefore basing their grades on all the available information. When this is communicated to students, an understanding arises among them that grading based on all available information also includes information that teachers get in day-to-day classroom work. This, in turn, causes students to fear asking questions when they do not understand. If students think they are in school to (preferably flawlessly) exhibit knowledge that is constantly assessed, rather than to learn new content, practice (which involves sometimes making mistakes), and gradually consolidate knowledge and abilities, then I would argue that we have ended up in a counterproductive extreme.

Based on the results of the present study, there is reason to consider whether the strong focus on goals, knowledge requirements, and assessment – along with the numerous and rather specific guidelines on both summative and formative aspects of assessment that have permeated Swedish schools during the past decade – has led to the kind of counterproductive practices that Agevall and Jenner (2008) describe as a possible consequence of too much control of and too little autonomy for the profession. I would argue that the results of the present study, reflected through the six descriptive categories in the results section, are an indication of the kind of instrumentality and alienation of students that is described by Agevall and Jenner as a possible consequence when complementary attitudes are not developed by professionals.

Jons (2008) uses the concept of ‘prescriptive educational recipes’ to describe guidelines that are very specific, that contain stereotypical sequences of actions to be performed in order to achieve particular goals (for a lesson or work area). People have a need to control complexity, Jons argues, and a prescriptive recipe helps by reducing the number of interpretive frames and options for action. It is possible to understand the guidelines for classroom implementation for formative assessment offered to Swedish teachers as such a prescriptive recipe. It can be argued that the teachers have merely done what the SNAE – referring to evidence-based studies by well-known researchers – has (strongly) encouraged them to do. Teachers have been told that there is a set of evidence-based classroom strategies with the potential to produce effects in student achievement that are the largest ever measured in education. They have been told that these strategies mean that the goals of lessons, work areas, and education in general should always be clarified to students, that all feedback should always be aimed at reducing the gap between students’ current ability and the abilities described in the knowledge requirements, that they together with their students should discuss and evaluate examples of work performances of different quality, and that peer and self-assessment should be used in order to develop students’ ability to control and take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers have done what they have been encouraged and told to do. One could be as provocative as to suggest that teachers have been told that there is a correct answer to the question of how to act in the classroom. This leads to a situation where the development of complementary attitudes is not encouraged. There is a risk that teachers may fail to recognize the dilemmatic nature of teaching and consequently develop an instrumental and alienated relationship to the students.

The interview extracts used as illustrative examples in the different categories of the results section are typical examples of aspects that the students in the interviews describe frequently. The empirical material in its entirety contains an overwhelming number of similar examples. Therefore, I argue, there is reason to consider whether assessment for summative as well as formative purposes has increasingly turned into technical rule following, and, if so, what is gained and lost in terms of students’ knowledge development as well as their wellbeing in school. I argue that such unintended outcomes must be taken very seriously.
Notes

1. Bennett (2011), for instance, criticizes formative assessment on several aspects, pointing out that the term does not represent a well-defined set of practices or artefacts, and that it is therefore highly problematic to make claims about its effectiveness. Additionally, he criticizes some of the research underpinning the claims, arguing that ‘(the) magnitude of commonly made quantitative claims for effectiveness is suspect, deriving from untraceable, flawed, dated, or unpublished sources’. Torrance (2007) describes how the practice of assessment seems to have moved from assessment of learning, through assessment for learning, to assessment as learning. Consequently, assessment procedures tend to completely dominate the learning experience, and ‘criteria compliance’ tend to replace ‘learning’ (s 281). Klenowski (2009) argues that the commonly used definition of assessment for learning -“deciding where learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there” (p. 263) – increasingly has come to be (mis)interpreted as an invitation to teachers to summatively test their students frequently to assess achieved levels in accordance with prescribed goals and knowledge requirements. In such a scenario the result/score, which is intended to be an indicator of learning, becomes the goal. In Sweden, Carlgren has, repeatedly (e.g., Carlgren, 2015a; 2015b; 2016) and critically discussed how the goal and result related governance of the school in combination with ideas of visible learning, formative assessment and the involvement of students in the assessment of their own learning risk trivializing and instrumentalizing education.

2. Aware of the fact that there is no given definition of successful teachers, we still needed to define inclusion criteria when respondents were to be found. We define successful teachers as teachers who have the proven ability to create knowledge development for students based on their respective prerequisites, to adapt their teaching based on students’ varied needs, and to create a desire in students to learn and take part in classroom activities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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