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Developing and Assessing Teaching Effectiveness

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Abstract

Who is an effective teacher? It isn't possible to give a single answer to this question because defining a teacher isn't a simple question. Many studies have demonstrated that an effective teacher can have an enriching effect on the daily lives of children and their lifelong educational and career aspirations and can also have a direct influence in enhancing student learning. That's why it isn't possible to define an effective teacher only referring to their students' grades; the question is much more complex; as a matter of fact we can say that it has a multi-dimension character. Starting from this point of view it's important to define the suitable methods/instruments of a teacher's evaluation and capability.

Keywords: teacher, effectiveness, reflection, development

1. Introduction

Who is an effective teacher? It isn't possible to give a single answer to this question because defining an effective teacher isn't a simple question. Many studies have demonstrated that an effective teacher can have an enriching effect on the daily lives of children and their lifelong educational and career aspirations and can also have a direct influence in enhancing student learning (Stronge, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Through their research Goe, Bell and Little have identified five dimensions of a teacher's effectiveness:

«- Effective teachers have high expectations for all students and help students' learning, as measured by value-added or other test-based growth measures or by alternative measures.

Effective teachers contribute to positive academic, attitudinal, and social outcomes for students such as regular attendance, on-time promotion to the next grade, on-time graduation, self-efficacy and cooperative behavior.

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Effective teachers use diverse resources to plan and structure engaging learning opportunities; monitor student progress formatively, adapting instruction as needed and evaluate learning using multiple sources of evidence. Effective teachers contribute to the development of classrooms and schools that value diversity and civic-mindedness. Effective teachers collaborate with other teachers, administrators, parents and education professionals to ensure students' success, particularly the success of students with special needs and those at high risk for failure» (Goe, Bell, Little, 2008, p. 11). That's why it isn't possible to define an effective teacher only referring to their students' grades; the question is much more complex; as a matter of fact we can say that it has a multi-dimension character. Starting from this point of view it's important to define the suitable methods/instruments of a teacher's evaluation and capability. The OCSE-OECD (2010) report "Teachers' Professional Development: Europe in international comparison" shows that teachers need a feedback on their work in order to gain an advantage on their teaching development. A variety of training opportunities and better working conditions at school are main elements in professional development. The report highlights that teachers are motivated taking part to training initiatives, but that the coincidence to the many proposed activities at school within their working hours creates an obstacle to the attendance. This consideration invites to ask ourselves about the distributions modalities and on the creation of developing activities for teachers, as well as the necessity to give more attention to evaluation, feed-back and a positive climate at school (Dozza, Cavrini 2012; OCSE-OECD, 2009; Vieno, Perkins, Smith, Santinello, 2005). It's necessary to underline that the performance improvement function relates to the personal growth dimension and it involves helping teachers to learn about, reflect on, and improve their own practice. Therefore we will linger, following a teacher's effectiveness on these three elements: reflection, assessment and development and we'll propose a Plan of Personal Development as well as a support process/ instrument.

2. The reflection

Generally, reflective practice is understood as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice (Jarvis, 1992; Boud et al 1985; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Mezirow, 1981). According to Dewy the primary function developed by a reflective thought is «transforming a situation whereby an experience is lived in the darkness […] in a solved situation, clear and harmonious» (Dewey, 1933, p. 172). Dewey also argued that reflective thinking has directed people away from a kind of routine thinking/action and towards a reflective action; in details he argued that we 'think the problem out' formulating hypotheses in trial and error reflective situations and then we use these to plan action, testing out our ideas. Dewey's ideas provided a basis for the concept of Schön's reflective practice (1983). Schön identified two types of reflection: *reflection in action* (thinking while doing) and *reflection on action* (after the event/activity). According to Schön, the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before himself, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (Schön, 1983, p.68). The reflection is about the way we construct new connections and it becomes the main element of learning and a personal and professional development intended as an intention finalized to attributing a meaning to experience. At the end of this reflection the main element to one's identity and to a personal identity is «approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves putting together personal beliefs and values into a professional identity» (Larrivee, 2000, p. 293).

3. Assessment as an on- going process

The evaluation activity is a major moment in the scholastic life, for students and teachers as well (if looked in an formative way) we can talk about the student's learning; or about the learning process in it's whole. It can also have different purposes:
- Diagnostics, when intended to verify the level of pre-knowledge and the drive in learning development;
- Summarized, where the times of evaluation are certified or whole judgments;
- Formative when the learning process is directed on to on-going improvement.

The assessment can provide an opportunity for learning, training and ongoing development when configured as assessment for learning (AfL), ie as learning itself (Stiggins et al., 2004; Black, et al., 2003; Black, William, 1998). Black and Williams that forged the term, defining it as «all those activities, undertaken by teachers and/or by students, which provide information as feedback in order to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged […] they can become more reflective and can manage their learning in order to seek out and gain new competences and skills» (Black, William, 1998, pp. 7-8). To summarize we can say that AfL supports learning for learning, supplies valuable feedbacks that motivates people to carry on their learning, encourages self evaluation and valuation amongst colleagues as essential elements in a process of individual and group development. Read in this way, teacher assessment is able to support the development of a teacher's competence.

4. The Personal Development Plan: an instrument of reflection, valuation and development

The Personal Development Plan (from now on PDP) is defined as «a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development» (Guidelines for Progress Files, Quality Assurance Agency, 2001).
Within the research realized, the PDP is a processed-instrument of assessment co-constructed with the teachers and the adopted bottom-up prospective has allowed to perceive the PDP not as an instrument or external process, but as a development opportunity. The achieved PDP is characterized as a cyclic instrument that foresees four phases:

- Self audit;
- Development plan;
- Diary activities;
- Revision and report.

Self audit. In this phase the subject carries out a self-analysis of his/her own competences in order to define his/her own power points and the competences needed to improve it. At this point at the subject is asked to pinpoint and describe one or more examples (tangible proof) whereby he/she thinks to have developed his/her competences.
Development Plan. On the basis of the identified competences by the subject, a development plan is drawn up (even through a tutor/supervisor's support) a plan that recognizes the possible improving areas, the developing and the critical ones or the opportunity to gain one's own developing aims.
Diary activities. Through the diary the subject takes notes of the activities that he/she thinks are important to reach the aims'development. While recording those activities one reflects (in action) on the competences gained through the activities themselves. At this point the tutor/supervisor carries out a coaching and an on-going monitoring .
Review and report. The last phase allows to highlight the gained results, the improvements and to reflect on the experience (on action) considering the whole process and not only the single activities.
The outturn of the final report and the revision is edited by the teacher and the supervisor/tutor in order to vouch for self and hetero valuation. The report represents the basis to edit a new development plan as well. This last feature highlights how the PDP can be an instrument-process that fully inserts itself in a theoretical and conceptual framework of a lifelong and lifewide learning accompanying and supporting the subject in its learning throughout his/her whole life. It stands out how the careful consideration together with the autobiographical writing and the self-evaluation represent the three main factors essential to the editing and the management of PDP and how they characterize it as an instrument-process. At the end the PDP isn't only the acquisition of specific competences and abilities, but it means the interpretation of a methodology of self-analysis, a reflection about the translation of the undertaken routes and the ones to be undertaken. The reflection implies the need of editing a knowledge "inventory" as well as the already existing information due to recall the experiences analyzing behaviors and emotions and to establish what one knows and which are the resources that one can draw upon. This characteristic is highlighted in the self-audit phase of the PDP where it's asked to achieve an inventory on one's competences through previous experiences. This analysis and reflective activity supports the next phase of planning process in order to end up with a wider global vision during the phase report.

5. Conclusion

Becoming an effective teacher takes a continuous effort. To avoid the risk of loss of enthusiasm or static practice, teachers need to focus on their own professional development, to have time to reflect on their practices as an

individual and in a group as well, to have power about their assessment as assessment for learning, to have useful instruments and methodologies to reflect and to improve constantly their personal and professional profile. In this essay we would like to give some reflection prompts, without being exhaustive. Another important element to define, implying the whole text, would be the profile of a capable teacher in terms of competences. This procedure, obviously, calls for collaboration/cooperation between teachers (this way has been used in defining teacher's competences from the research where some hints have been given) "where the chance of success of any reform depends on the level of collaboration between teachers […]. If teachers […] feel that this don't belongs to them […] it's improbable that any kind of innovation will succeed. (OCSE, 2005, p. 15).

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