

Formative assessment in Finnish education—What it is, how it is practiced today and what its future is

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Abstract

This thesis covers the topic of formative assessment in Finland, what it is, how it is practiced and what is the current and future situation of it. There is a lot of theoretical background answering the question of what formative assessment is. In order to find out the current assessment trends in Finland, this thesis investigates the national core curriculum, a recent publication on assessment by eNorssi, and an on-going in-service education on assessment, organised by the National board of education. Some recent studies in Finland show that the assessment literacy of teachers may not be appropriate, so new materials and in-service educations are extremely necessary considering the importance of assessment in the school world. A clear focus is put on the formative assessment practices in the eNorssi and in the in-service education materials, but a problem lies on the slow change of the assessment culture.

Tiivistelmä

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman aiheena on formatiivinen arviointi suomalaisissa kouluissa. Tutkielma tarkastelee, mitä formatiivinen arviointi on, kuinka sitä harjoitetaan käytännössä, mikä on sen tämänhetkinen asema ja minkälaiset tulevaisuuden näkymät sillä on Suomessa. Aiheesta löytyy paljon teoreettista taustatietoa määrittämään, mitä formatiivinen arviointi on. Nykyisten arviointitrendien selvittämiseksi tämä tutkielma tarkastelee uusinta opetussuunnitelmaa (2014), hiljattain julkaistua eNorssin kokoamaa arvioinnin opetuslehtistä sekä Opetushallituksen järjestämän opettajien arviointikoulutuksen materiaaleja. Suomessa on julkaistu tutkimuksia, joista selviää, että suomalaiset opettajat kokevat epävarmuutta omasta arviointiosaamisestaan, joten edellä mainittujen kaltaiset koulutukset ja lisämateriaalit ovat enemmän kuin tarpeen. Arviointi on yksi tärkeimmistä opettajan tehtävistä, joten se ansaitsee tulla tutkituksi ja näin kehitettäväksi. Formatiivinen arviointi on saanut suurta huomiota maailmalla ja on myös keskeinen teema Suomen koulutusjärjestelmässä. Arviointikulttuuria ollaan muuttamassa, mutta muutos on hidasta ja osa oppilaista jää edelleen vaille sopivaa ja oikeudenmukaista arviointia.

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1. Introduction

The assessment system includes the action of obtaining information about the performance of a student in a systematic way, on which educational decisions are based. It includes making a judgement about student performance and providing a numerical or verbal value to it. (Mertler, 2017, p. 5.) School, and the assessment given during the school years affect significantly students' conception of themselves as a learner and as a person. Assessment is one of the key means of a teacher in supporting students' development in learning and growth as a person. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 47.) For that reason, assessment needs to be researched, developed and discussed.

In the national core curriculum assessment practiced by teachers is divided into two: formative assessment and summative assessment. The latter means the assessment done at the end of a unit, a course, or a school year, giving a grade for the performance of the student. Formative assessment is done during the learning process, by giving constant feedback on the learning progress. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 50.) The national core curriculum provides instructions on how to form and give summative assessment, but there is no guidance how to practice formative assessment even though it is stated that teachers much include it into their class. For example, the national core curriculum mentions that the teacher must create situations where the teacher and the student together can give and receive motivating and learning-improving formative assessment (2014, p. 50). What is formative assessment and what are its current views and prospects in Finland?

Formative assessment engages both the teacher and the student into examining the learning process. By identifying strengths and weaknesses of the learner and understanding the learning process of the student, the teacher gets tools to modify the instructional aspect of their teaching and the student gets information how to improve themselves and their learning. (Andrare & Cizek, 2010, p. 7.) The main purpose of formative assessment is to improve learning, and it is more of an assessment *for* learning rather than the assessment *of* learning. On the contrary, the main purpose of summative assessment is to audit or measure learning attainment. (Moss & Bookhart, 2009, p. 6.)

As the world around us is changing, the school world and assessment within needs to change with it. The main goal of assessment today is to build strong self-esteem and to guide towards social and co-operational skills. Formative assessment practices such as feedback, self-

assessment or peer assessment support the development of the student's self-knowledge. Flawed assessment can destroy the attempt to distribute knowledge and skills, and violate the self-esteem of a student permanently. (Ihme, 2009, p. 16-17.) According to the literature, changing the assessment culture has been a hot topic for a few decades already. Still, summative assessment practices are the most common ways to do assessment and the change seems to happen extremely slowly.

Assessment is a dominating part of teaching and, in principle, teacher must have eyes, ears and hands in everything, everywhere, all the time, to reflect if everything is on its place or if there is a need to interfere either critically or supportively. Nevertheless, the current state of assessment education in teacher education faculties is weak. The lack of knowledge causes negative attitudes and incompetence to practice fair, learning improving assessment. The deficiency in assessment skills causes anxiety to practice varying assessment methods. (Atjonen, 2017, p. 145-149.)

For the aforementioned reasons, this thesis is going to focus on the state of formative assessment in the assessment culture of the education system of Finland. The current situation of assessment practices in Finland is discussed by examining and comparing what is stated in the national core curriculum (2014), in materials from an in-service education project and in materials published by eNorssi, a national cooperation network. By defining the concept of formative assessment, examining what are the assessment practices expected to be acquainted by teachers and discussing the assessment trends and culture creates a picture of the situation of assessment in the education system of Finland. Because of the dominant part of assessment in the learning process, this topic should be widely researched and discussed to secure proper skills in assessing for every teacher.

2. Theoretical background

We are assessed in many things during our lives. We are assessed if we can drive a car or go into a university. Children's school career is defined by assessment from the beginning all the way to working life. Assessment at school defines the level of compatibility and moral features of a person while representing the ideological goals of the education system. The target of assessment is to notice changes in the student behaviour, meaning the learning outcome. The assessment criterion for a learning outcome is defined by the goals set in the core curriculum. In addition to the gathered information of learning outcomes, other information is needed in order to understand the phenomena which regulates the learning process. (Ihme, 2009, p. 88.)

Assessment at its simplest is comparing for example the process or outcome to the previously set goals. It can also be an on-going process of gathering information, modifying and interpreting it and seeing it as a basis for making solutions to the education system's questions. Every interaction at school includes assessment, meaning both the conscious feedback about learning and the subconscious messages from the teacher and peers. A big part of building the self-esteem and making concrete learning goals happens through assessment. (Ihme, 2009 p. 90.)

The education system in Finland reforms itself through reforming the national core curriculum. The recent core curriculums make a division between assessment during studies and the final assessment at the end of basic education, and the emphasis is in practicing more individualised assessment during the studies. The ultimate goal of assessment seems to be guiding the studying and learning as well as building the self-image of the student. To make this happen, assessment needs to be individual, diverse and truthful. Also dialogue with the student and their parents is a necessity as assessment is not practiced only by the teacher. (Ihme, 2009 p. 91.)

2.1. The concept of formative assessment

For recent years the research of assessment has focused more on formative assessment, but there lies a problem with formative assessment having quite a wide range of accepted

meanings. As Black and Wiliam (1998) do in their research article, this thesis will discuss formative assessment as a practice that includes activities which provide feedback to improve the act of teaching and/or learning. (p. 7). Formative and summative assessment should not be entirely separated in real-life situations. The concepts of formative and summative assessment are to be explained by comparing the practices and purposes with each other.

Summative assessment is the traditional way to assess, and most teachers and parents have a history of being assessed only by numbers. Even though summative assessment is needed for certification purposes, and it might increase motivation and give guidance to students, parents and teachers, it also creates competition between the students and makes the competition the main purpose of learning rather than personal improvement. (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004, pp. 13–18, as cited in Atjonen, 2014, p. 239.) Traditional objective tests in summative assessment that include single correct answers are relatively easy to create and check, and the results of a single student are not affected by the results of others. On the contrary to those who become motivated by the good results of summative assessment, many students are in fear of constant failure. Frequent negative assessment results create negative self-image as a learner and motivation to try decreases. (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 28.)

According to Bloom (1971, p.118), formative assessment has the purpose of improving curriculum construction, teaching and/or learning. When defining formative assessment, Frey and Schmitt (2007, p. 10) wish to make a clear distinction between “the formation of learning and the formation of behaviours or strategies that promote learning”, where the latter is found to be the best goal for formative assessment. A more recent description includes (1) the engagement of both the teacher and the student for understanding the student’s learning process, (2) identifying the student’s strengths and weaknesses, (3) improving the student’s achievement and (4) using assessment as a source of information for teachers to help to do instructional planning. (Andrade & Cizek, 2010, p. 7).

Furthermore, distinction between formative and summative assessment is challenging and might even be impossible. The terminology might cause confusion.

The simple but misleading distinction is that formative assessment is what teacher might do during a period of learning and summative assessment is what they do at the end of it. This time-based distinction is unhelpful as it ignores the purposes and contexts of the assessments, and crucially how they relate to the

learning process. (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, Stobart & Montgomery, 2010, p. 6.)

The purpose of assessment practice is more to determine the difference between formative and summative assessment. Consider a single test: if its purpose is to assist in improving learning of students, then it can be said to be formative assessment. If the purpose of the test is to give a result that is to be used to report the student's performance, it is summative assessment. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 6.) When categorizing summative and formative assessment, it is effective to observe the improvement of the performance of the student: if improvement happens based on the assessment, it is safe to call it formative assessment (Mitchell, 2018, p. 242).

Based on extensive empirical research it can be stated that the importance of formative assessment in educational practice is well grounded (Andrade & Cizek, 2010, p. 41). Researchers have encouraged teachers with the knowledge that effective formative assessment in classroom enhances students' success in standardised tests and that summative assessment methods can be utilized in classroom when practicing formative assessment. (Mertler, 2005, p.77 and Volante & Fazio, 2007, p.751 as cited in Atjonen, 2017, p. 145.)

The most common and most popular formative assessment practices include things such as self-assessment, peer assessment, assessment discussions and verbal feedback. According to Ihme (2009), self-assessment is a practice of assessment done by the person who is being assessed. The basic education act states that one goal of assessment is to develop the self-assessing skills of students. Self-assessment helps the student to create understanding of their knowledge and it gives information to the teacher as well as the parents. After learning to assess oneself, a child gets a feeling that he or she is capable to control his or her own performance. The conflict between the child and the adult disappears as the adult is no longer the one who has the right to define the child or his or her actions. Self-assessment helps students create a realistic self-image and recognize weaknesses and strengths. (Ihme, 2009, p. 97.)

Self-assessment at school happens through observing the work process towards the goals and the outcomes of the work. The student needs to recognize that learning progress and performance are different than 'me' as a person. The teacher should provide support so that the student can practice self-assessment while experiencing safety and participation from the teacher. Through this the student learns that assessment is no judgement of him- or herself,

but evaluation of the performance and the learning outcomes. An essential factor in self-assessment's success is that the student is fully aware of the goal of the learning, which can even be formed in cooperation. Thereby the students are able to compare their performance to the goal. (Ihme, 2009, p. 98.)

Verbal feedback is considered to be a traditional way of informing about the learning progress. The feedback includes a conclusion of a significant amount of information gathered from smaller observations as well as results from tests and other pieces of work. To be meaningful and appropriate, the starting point for feedback should be the need of information of the one who is being assessed. Information should be about the progress which is relevant towards the agreed goals. The feedback should have an enhancing impact on learning, and it should help reaching the goals of the student and the school. It is an efficient way to reinforce the positive effects of the other assessment methods that are used. For example, it can be used in assessment discussion after self-assessment to confirm the topics and assessment done. (Ihme, 2009, p. 102.)

Fundamentally, formative assessment means observing the students regularly and keeping them updated of their development. This can then lead to students and teachers to change strategies to improve their performance. When used appropriately, formative assessment combined with closely-related feedback are together a highly efficient method of teaching. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 249.)

2.2. Teachers' assessment literacy

In a review by Black and Wiliam (1998) on teachers' practices in formative assessment, certain weak features appeared frequently: classroom assessment practices usually encouraged for superficial learning, teachers didn't really review their assessment practices and consider what is actually assessed, and grading was emphasized rather than personal improvement, which causes competition and a message for weaker performing students that they lack capability to learn. These features of assessment practices focus mostly on recall, and not things such as critical thinking or improving students' understanding and developing their learning process. (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 18.)

Teachers' knowledge and capabilities regarding assessment have been studied relatively little. In the international scope it is acknowledged that the level of expertise varies significantly among teachers. (Atjonen, 2017, p.12.) Atjonen (2017) conducted a study about how assessment is visible in teacher education faculties' curriculums in Finland. The results showed that the concept of assessment is covered in a quite scattered manner in teacher education, and that it was mentioned in the curriculums only few times (Atjonen, 2017, p. 144).

In a study on teachers' views on assessment by Atjonen (2014), fairness was one of the most concerning aspects of assessment among teachers. Many reported to be unsure afterwards if their assessment decisions had been fair. Insecurity occurred mostly if the teacher was not fully familiar with the criteria, if the teacher was unable to use appropriate assessment methods or if there was a student with special needs. Teachers did recognize transparency in assessment practices as the best way to avoid unfair decisions. Transparency requires clearly defined criteria for success understood by both teacher and students, and on-going feedback in both ways.

Atjonen (2014) concludes that teachers were most satisfied with their assessment decisions when they had clearly clarified criteria, proper assessment methods in use, interaction with the students and proper grounding for their decisions with the information they had gathered. Even though the positive views were enhanced, and negative views could be improved by formative assessment practices, teachers seem to be stuck on preferring traditional, numerical assessment methods, and view alternative assessment methods invalid or inappropriate (Atjonen, 2014, p. 255). According to Roiha and Polso (2018), some teachers practice assessment in a very narrow manner, by for example emphasizing too much test results at the expense of an extensive picture of learning progress (p. 154).

2.3.Examples of practical ways to administer formative assessment into classroom settings

Too often teachers are unable to exploit the information gathered from assessment and there might be significant deficiency also in other competences of practicing assessment (Atjonen,

2014). Multiple pieces of work provide a framework for practicing formative assessment. Andrade and Cizek (2010) provide a general guide for the application of formative assessment methods in educational settings: the first key strategy is the act of making learning intentions and criteria for success clear and making sure they are understood properly. Other strategies include creating effective situations in classroom with discussions and tasks that elicit proof of learning, providing learning improving feedback, activating students to be responsible for their own learning process and activating students to become instructional sources for each other also (Andrade & Cizek, 2010, p. 36).

When applying formative assessment into classroom, a teacher must consider three things. The first thing to consider is defining the nature of necessary information. To do this the teacher must know the students, the best way of learning for him/her, and the previously set goals for him/her. The second thing to consider is the appropriate time for gathering the information. It can be before the lesson to figure out the students' earlier knowledge of the topic. It can also be during the teaching practice, where teacher gathers information from the interaction between him/her and the students, or the interaction between the students. The information gathering can also happen after the teaching practice by finding out if the students have met the set goals. The third thing is the method chosen to gather information. The methods can be formal and informal, including things such as portfolios, observations, inquiries, learning diaries or interviews. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 243.)

As a specific example of administering formative assessment in the classroom, to evaluate the pre-knowledge of students before beginning a new unit, the teacher can ask a few simple questions related to the new topic. Based on the information received from the answers, the teacher can modify the upcoming instructions to be more in-depth if the students seemed to be familiar with the topic, or include more basic concepts if the topic seemed to be foreign. (Greenstein, 2010, p. 46.)

2.4. Benefits of formative assessment

Assessment needs to be fair, and to determine fairness of assessment, two views of it can be taken into consideration: equality and equity. Equality ensures identical opportunity for

everyone to perform capability. It requires similar assessed content, assessment method and scoring, and enables comparison of the students. Equity on the other hand ensures each student the most suitable way to perform capabilities and be assessed regarding to each's special needs. Providing personalized opportunities to everyone prevents comparison of the students but makes assessment more meaningful. (Atjonen, 2014, p. 242.) On the other hand, traditional pencil-paper tests do not provide equal opportunity for everyone, as for example the pressure of a test situation might affect someone crucially. The use of formative assessment including varying assessment methods enables students with individual needs different situations and allows for chances to demonstrate competence. (Atjonen, 2017, p. 143.)

Thanks to formative assessment, the role of the students has strengthened in the assessment process. The assessment process is more interactive, and the teacher is required to be more aware of the need to observe students. On the other hand, the teacher needs to guide the students to understand the connection between the assessment and the intention to learn. (Atjonen, 2017, p. 149.) The change in the assessment culture requires consistency in engagement in learning, which emphasizes that such change cannot occur if there is no specified support for teachers to comprehend the true meaning of the change. The change means that the teacher is not the only one responsible of learning anymore, but the responsibility is shared with students. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 22.)

In addition to the outcomes of learning being assessed with summative purpose, formative assessment enables the process of learning to be assessed as well. It helps to see if the student has acquired deeper skills and desire to learn the subject. This can be helpful especially when thinking about the possibility of further studies: assessment of learning process gives information about things such as student's motivation. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 25.)

Another advantage of using formative assessment is that students get a possibility to take role in the process of their learning results to be assessed with summative purposes. For this to be possible the students need to be acquainted with the criteria their work is judged with to exclude the mystery and worry which are often related to the assessment procedure. Criteria provides information about what they have achieved and what there is still to achieve. To make summative assessment to have also formative purpose, students need to acknowledge the purpose of assessment and how it can assist to give awareness on their strengths and parts

that need improving. This also enables students to recognize their longer-term goals and teachers to collect feedback to use in their instructional planning. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 26.)

3. Methods and materials

This thesis is a close-reading of chosen materials. The materials are examined and compared with each other and with the literature. The national core curriculum, materials from an on-going in-service education and material from an assessment guide provided by eNorssi will be used as the materials. The most recent version of the national core curriculum for basic education (grades 1-9) was established in 2014 and it was introduced to grades 1-6 in 2016, to 7th graders in 2017, 8th graders in 2018 and will be introduced to 9th graders in 2019. The national core curriculum provides guidance to instructional planning and its aim is to ensure the equality of basic education for everyone everywhere. Based on the national core curriculum, a local curriculum is established. (National Board of Education, 2014, p. 9.) Teachers are expected to revise their teaching practices based on the framework given in the curriculums. Therefore, the guidelines for assessment provided in the national core curriculum are noteworthy information when surveying the state of formative assessment in Finland.

As the aim of this thesis is to map out the assessment practices, and especially the use of formative assessment of teachers in Finland, materials from an in-service education focused on assessment were chosen to be examined. This particular in-service education is organized in Kainuu by the Board of education of Finland, and altogether 15 class teachers and subject teachers attend each of the four contact instruction days. The educator is Najat Ouakrim-Soivio, who has conducted extensive research on assessment in Finland. The aim of this in-service education is to produce new material in addition to increase awareness and skills of the teachers. (Ouokrim-Soivio, 2018.)

eNorssi is a cooperation network used in teacher education. Norssi-schools act as training schools for teacher trainees in Finland, and they do considerable amount of research and experimental activities to test and develop the Finnish school system and the core curriculum. With the increased attention aimed on formative assessment, eNorssi has published material called “Learning-improving assessment”. The material includes going through the concepts of formative assessment, or as they also call it “interactional assessment”, guidance on how to practice formative assessment and ready-to-use assessment forms to be utilised in classroom. (eNorssi, 2018.)

4. Analysis

The literature on the topic and the materials consisting the national core curriculum, the in-service education and the eNorssi publication have provided a broad insight of the assessment trends of today, the practice of formative assessment in everyday classroom and a definition of the concept of formative assessment.

4.1. Formative assessment in the national core curriculum

Assessment, or directly translated “assessment of learning”, is covered in chapter 6, pages 47-60 in the national core curriculum. The topic is started by introducing the general principles, values and goals of assessment. Then a distinction is made between assessment during studying and final assessment given at the end of basic education. In addition, there is a guideline for the certifications provided during and after the basic education and instructions for basic study programs differing from the national basic study program. I will be focusing on pages 47-52 as they are about assessment practiced during studying which is relevant to the topic of this thesis.

According to the Basic Education Act, the goal of assessment is to guide and encourage studying and to develop students’ self-assessing skills. The assessment of learning, working and behaviour should be versatile. These are the starting points for basic education assessment, which focuses on learning improving assessment. The importance of appropriate assessment is significant because of the effect school has on the self-image and -conception that students form of themselves as a learner and as a person. Especially feedback provided by the teacher has a big impact. Versatile assessment and giving guiding feedback which is based on the assessment are key ways to support the whole development and learning process of students. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 47.)

It is stated in the core curriculum that the biggest part of assessment during the studying process is formative assessment. The teacher is required to observe students’ learning process and interact with them. The teacher must create situations where students can demonstrate their skills and where the teacher can give learning-improving feedback. A short description

of what learning-improving feedback should be is included: qualitative and descriptive feedback that analyses and solves the problems of learning with an interaction with the student. It also needs to consider students' different ways of learning and provide information for the students to acknowledge their progress and find new ways to reach goals. The aim of the feedback is to make the learning process transparent by helping students to understand what they are meant to learn, what they have already learnt and how they could improve their learning and performance. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 50.)

4.2. Assessment introduced in the in-service education materials

In the first meeting of the in-service education the materials include two PowerPoint-slideshows. In the first part of the materials there is information about what affects the assessment practices of a teacher, and the participants are asked to consider their own preferences in assessment. At first the materials go through basic ideas of assessment, and state when and how assessment should be practiced. The materials also create an important justification for the question of why a significant amount of time and effort should be put into planning and practicing assessment.

More practical guidance on how to practice formative assessment is presented in a later part of the materials. The feedback that a teacher provides to students should be unambiguous, clear, and it should be given as quickly as possible after a student's performance. The feedback should include comments of what went well and what needs to be practiced. It is better to give personal feedback rather than generic comments in front of other students. The feedback is based on facts, not opinions, and also positive feedback requires reasoning. Learning-improving feedback requires a dialogue so that also the receiver of the feedback can give a suggestion to improve his or her performance. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

The materials also encourage teachers to improve teaching and assessment by taking the observations of the students' learning process into account when modifying instructions. Teachers are guided to follow a certain pattern of developing assessment: planning, putting the plan into practice, checking the result of the assessment done, and developing it based on the result and going then back to the step one of planning. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

During the second meeting of the in-service education the focus seems to shift towards more practical sides of assessment. The goals of the meeting are mentioned in the beginning of it: To reinforce the skills to practice assessment and to increase the knowledge regarding to it. Another goal is to increase the transparency of assessment to all parties, including the students and their parents. The materials go through the basic principles of self- and peer-assessment, giving feedback and assessment discussions. It provides guidance on how the aforementioned can be practiced in everyday classroom. Materials also discuss the things that are stated in the most recent core curriculum, and the goal of assessment itself, that is, what is meant to be assessed. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

The materials include direct extractions from the core curriculum. For example, the definitions of the concept of learning and the content of an assessment discussion are gone through. Adding the core curriculum in the in-service materials is important as it guides teachers to understand what is expected of them. The core curriculum can also be quite foreign for in-service teachers as they receive varying amount of guidance on the changing curriculum from the municipality they work in. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

More in-depth instructions to give feedback is included. The materials introduce the four stages of giving feedback. The first stage is commenting the persona of a student, as ‘you are hard-working’ for example. This kind of feedback is rarely helping the learning. The second stage is the most common way to give feedback. It is the practice of assessing the task/outcome with a mark of right or wrong. The third stage is the commenting of the learning process by reflecting what happened during the progress. This is an efficient way to enhance learning and self-esteem. The fourth stage is assessing the self-regulation, as whether the student has carried the given task through even though interest to do so has disappeared. This stage guides to the direction of self-assessment: how can I control and guide my actions towards my goals? (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

Students’ self-assessment skills have been divided into three: reflection, self-assessment and metacognition. In reflection the student observes his or her feelings, thoughts, learning and ways of acting. Self-assessing is the structured assessment of own action based on the self-reflection done earlier. Metacognition means the cognitive understanding of one’s own actions, based on the reflection and self-assessment. It is important that the student understands the meaning of self-assessment. The goal of it is to guide learning and help to set

up goals. It teaches the student what he or she already can do and what needs to be practised. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

With self-assessment, the significance of peer assessment has risen due to the new and changed ways to practice assessment for group work. The purpose of peer assessment is to support student's commitment to mutually set goals. It encourages the student to take responsibility of their own and others' learning, working towards the goal and finishing the work. An example form of peer assessment is provided in the materials. There the assessed parts of work are written clearly to make sure the student understands what is to be assessed. The instructions of the form tell to give a grade to the assessed parts of work, but it might be problematic as it gives an image that the student is actually giving grades. It would be useful to have a criterion for the assessment, so the subjectivity lowers, and the justifiability increases. While doing self- and peer assessment, students need to be sure of what they are assessing and why they are assessing. The assessment needs to happen at a right time, it needs to be put into understandable language and the outcome of the assessment should be utilised efficiently. (Ouokrim-Soivio, 2018.)

4.3. Assessment in the eNorssi publication

The materials collected and put together by eNorssi can be said to represent the current trend in assessment practices in Finland. Based on the general pedagogical discussion and the alignment of the core curriculum, eNorssi has collected information, instructions and examples of formative assessment that teachers can use in classroom. There is material created by different Norssi schools all over Finland. The focus is on the interactive side of formative assessment, and its importance is well-grounded with the facts of its effect on improving the learning progress, supporting student's self-esteem and increasing trust between teacher, student and parents. (eNorssi, 2018.)

The focus of the instructions that the materials want to provide for teachers is on developmental discussions, giving feedback, and on the self-assessment of students. Feedback is one of the most important parts of assessment. Its purpose is to guide and support, and students perceive even the smallest feedback from the teacher to be important. It is

emphasized that even small gestures such as nodding, or a smile are recognized as feedback. Students require varying amount of feedback, as some are content with a short comment that everything is going fine and some need more of supportive and constructive feedback. It is important to notice that giving feedback in class can be very short as there might be several simultaneous interaction situations with others. Along with the learning-improving effect, feedback should challenge students to think themselves. (eNorssi, 2018, p. 8-9.)

Other emphasized part of formative assessment in the eNorssi-materials is self-assessment. With the help of assessment received from others and self-assessment, the students can deepen the concept of themselves as a person and as a learner. In self-assessment students can tell about for example their learning techniques and learning progress. Students can be given a chance to describe their performance in a particular task or in one subject. Students also need to be given the chance to describe their general thoughts on learning and studying. It gives important information about the students and strengthens the personal relationship between the student and the teacher. (eNorssi, 2018.)

The eNorssi publication uses the school of Viikki as one of the examples. First, they have listed a plan of the school's formative assessment practices during the school year. They have listed things that parents and students should be aware of: the learning goals, assessment practices, ways of working and how the progress of learning during the process is informed to the parents and students. They have also an example of a self-assessment form for fourth-grade students. The form includes questions regarding working and skills in different subjects. The student assesses his or her own working by putting a mark on a scale between "I can do it" and "Still practicing". The student is asked to their list own strengths and weaknesses. There is also space for future goals which are set by the student and the teacher together. The self-assessment form is meant to be used in an assessment discussion with the teacher and a parent's signature is required so the parents will be informed also. (eNorssi, 2018.)

4.4. Current assessment trends

Already for years the research on assessment has started to focus more on the interaction between assessment and learning and concentrating less on the restricted testing methods of

performance which reflect only little on the real learning experience (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 2). The importance is noticed in the idea that via formative assessment students take more active roles, develop their understanding and build more advanced skills which enable them to understand meaningful links between patterns. Memorizing facts does not support the capability of applying learning to bigger contexts. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 20.)

Formative assessment's benefits have been researched extensively, and its effect on the learning improvement can not be questioned. From a pedagogical point of view, the most valuable function of assessment is to improve learning. (Atjonen, 2017, p. 148.) Formative assessment enables teachers to assess their own instructions while that instruction is still taking place, and to provide feedback for students while they are still receiving that instruction. (Mertler, 2017, p. 13). One of the main goals of formative assessment is to give information on which changes and developments of the instructional planning can be based. In Finland, the teacher has the freedom to adapt the curriculum's guidelines into the instructions in a way that is most suitable for the class.

In the eNorssi-publication the importance of feedback is emphasized. Accurate, specific and personalized feedback about the current level of student's learning progress helps to build student's self-awareness and self-esteem. The publication offers many ready-to-use self-assessment forms for teachers. The meaning is to develop students' skills in self-assessment and improve the quality of feedback. As the publication offers real-life assessment practices of schools around Finland, it is easy to pick up some relevant tips to utilize.

In the in-service education materials, the most practical things that are emphasized are feedback, peer assessment and self-assessment. The materials provide quite detailed information on how to include formative assessment methods into everyday classroom. There are also sections of the core curriculum included. This can be in the name of repetition or for some teachers it might be entirely new information if they have not familiarized themselves with the most recent curriculum. The core curriculum's contents are also there for argumentation for the included topics of the materials, to tell what is expected from teachers.

The topics of the eNorssi publication and the in-service materials seem to focus a lot on the contents of the national core curriculum. According to Ihme (2009), the national core curriculum has the mission of modifying the education system to address changes in the outside world, which include things like globalisation and emphasizing people as individuals.

It is clear that the national core curriculum is highly valued as a guide book of what should be done in class.

5. Discussion

Unlike formative assessment, assessment literacy of teachers in Finland is not so widely researched. However, conducted studies have shown that teachers lack competence for example to use and develop suitable assessment methods and to exploit the information gathered from assessment in instructional planning. (Atjonen, 2017, p. 148.) The benefits of formative assessment have been acknowledged by researchers for some time already, but the old behaviour patterns are difficult and even frightening to change. There also lie dangers in adopting formative assessment to teaching with insufficient skills and knowledge.

5.1. Formative assessment literacy of teachers and changing old habits

According to the national core curriculum, teachers practice a wide range of assessment methods in everyday classroom settings, including both formative and summative assessment. Based on the study by Atjonen (2017), teachers feel incapable to practice fair assessment. It seems that teachers do not feel fully equipped to practice appropriate assessment even though it is strongly emphasized in the curriculum. In Jakku-Sihvonen's (2002) article it is noted that there exists a problem with the consistency of the grading criteria, and same grades were given for varying performances in different parts of Finland. (p. 15). It is concerning, as many further education possibilities of students are determined by the grades achieved in basic education (Atjonen, 2017, p. 143).

The occurring problem could be the lack of practical instructions on how to practice formative assessment. Atjonen's (2017) study on the inclusion of assessment education in teacher education programs in the universities of Finland shows that there seems to be a significant deficiency of teaching the practice of assessment. Assessment is mentioned only a few times in the descriptions of teacher education curriculums and a course focusing on the assessment skills is provided only in a few teacher education faculties. (Atjonen, 2017.)

The weak focus on assessment in teacher education seems bizarre as the diverse assessment practices that require an extensive basis of knowledge are highlighted considerably in the core curriculum. As mentioned in Ouakrim-Soivio's (2018) materials of the in-service education, teacher's assessment practices are shaped by the teacher's own experiences of being assessed,

teacher's own views on assessment, the education received in teacher education and possible in-service education, and by how the assessment is defined by higher quarter such as the Finnish National Board of Education. As education provided in teacher education faculties might be inadequate, much of the teachers' assessment practices are determined by their own experiences and philosophies. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

As mentioned above, the teachers' history with assessment affects the assessment they practice in their teaching. Formative assessment is a relatively new concept, and it was introduced with a broader recognition in early 1970s by Benjamin Bloom and his associates (Andrade & Cizek, 2010, p. 5). More extensive studies on the topic have been conducted since the 1990s. Teachers in Finland work until they are around 65 years old, so many teachers have gone through the basic education, teacher education and even in-service education when the concept of formative assessment has still been more or less foreign. Old habits can be difficult to change, considering also the assessment practices. Teachers who have stayed in their position for a longer time might find it irritating and distressing to adapt new approaches to their teaching, and the process of adapting new assessment approaches into classroom requires throughout planning and commitment (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 7).

Making a distinction between summative and formative assessment when thinking about the assessment literacy of teachers is not fully possible nor needed. Teachers might find it difficult to assess their own assessment skills in regards of formative assessment, even though they might practice effective formative assessment with for example well-explained feedback. Teachers are usually more acknowledged of their skills in summative assessment practices. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 6.)

Finally, it is important to emphasise once again that making a black-and-white distinction between summative and formative assessment is not tenable. All kinds of assessment may, in one way or another, help learning in the hands of proficient pedagogues. (Atjonen, 2014, p. 256).

According to Mitchell (2018), it has been proven that teachers who are educated to practice formative assessment are more eager to modify their instructional planning to improve their students' skills with the contents to be learned. It is also confirmed that without formative assessment, teachers tend to have false perceptions of students' performance. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 246).

5.2.Possible benefits and drawbacks of practicing formative assessment on daily basis

Plausible key features of formative assessment practices in everyday classroom situations are determined by Gardner et al. (2010). The first feature is that decisions about the pace and content of teaching are affected by information collected about the ongoing process of learning. The second feature is the act of asking questions that allow students bring out their ideas, skills and attitudes. The third feature is the act of providing feedback that helps and engages with further learning. The fourth feature is the possibility for students to take an active role in their learning and in deciding the goals that they work towards. The fifth feature is the act of making the criteria applied to their work clear and understandable, so that students can practice self- and peer-assessment. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 20.)

As mentioned in the in-service materials, self-assessment is extremely helpful when it is utilised in an assessment discussion. The discussion is meant to help to guide and support learning, motivate studying and understand the learning process and to give information for both the student and their parents. Assessment discussions support the development of self-assessing skills. Collective assessment discussions for the whole class with positive feedback show students how each one of them can achieve goals in different ways. With older students the collective assessment discussions guide students to practice peer assessment with each other. Assessment discussion can be turned into a learning experience when the meeting is structured beforehand and the student is informed of its themes and possible questions. The student can then be prepared for the discussion. (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2018.)

Even though the benefits of formative assessment have been studied quite extensively, there is no evidence of the effects of a teacher using only a few assessment practices with formative purposes in the classroom. Usually the teacher might start by for example asking questions in class or giving feedback because it might be too unbearable to change assessment practices to formative only. It has been studied that if a teacher practices formative assessment inadequately without a full understanding, it might even have a negative effect on learning. (Gardner et al., 2010, p. 22.) One example in Smith and Gorard's (2005) study is that when the teacher left out grades on students' work and included only insufficient feedback, the

students made less progress. After developing the quality of feedback, the students' performances improved. (As cited in Gardner et al., 2010, p. 22.)

Poorly constructed feedback can have a negative impact on student's motivation and self-esteem or be unclear and misleading. Its advantages can be wasted if the feedback is given too late, is too normative, or is unclear and therefore not understood. In those cases, time-consuming practice of giving feedback should be replaced with something more appropriate. Practising formative assessment has some other risks also: assessment may not fit together with the aimed learning outcomes or it might be only partial so that a part of the goals is not assessed. Assessment might also centre too much around problems, when finding the weaknesses of the students is emphasized too much and takes the focus off from teaching new learning strategies. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 248.)

A combination of assessment methods, practiced regularly, appropriately and progressively in time, produces a safe and hopeful view of the future for a student. However, assessment can have many problems. The pressure and demands that is put on schools and assessment, it may feel like everything at school is about assessment. For all parties involved it is relieving to state that assessment is not judging. Also, practicing assessment takes a significant amount of time, and it might become irrelevant when compared to the benefits it brings considering its aims. It is useful to consider strictly which assessment practices are beneficial to use, so that students would retain the peace to learn. (Ihme, 2009, p. 106.)

An ideal case would be an assessment situation which at the same time is a learning situation in which positive learning experiences are reached. In such a case the assessment itself is not emphasized too much and the student experiences the situation useful for learning.

Assessment practices are usually bound into one specific situation, such as a final test, and there is no observation of where and how the learner ended up in the situation and what consequences assessment might have considering the future. (Ihme, 2009, p. 106.)

The best effect of formative assessment is received when different assessment methods are combined into an assessment process which supports the development of a student. An example of this kind of combination can include group assessment, self-assessment, assessment discussion and verbal assessment. (Ihme, 2009, p. 105.) The process begins with peer assessment and assessment as a group based on work done together. After that, a student practices self-assessment and assesses his or her own performance on the task. An assessment discussion follows, where the information from peer- and self-assessment can be utilized as

the teacher and student have a conversation about the student's performance. The assessment process finishes in verbal assessment discussion, where the teacher constructs a written confirmation of the topics that were discussed earlier. The written assessment provides information for the parents also.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, one could state that the assessment practices of teachers in Finland should receive more attention to be improved. Studies by Atjonen (2014; 2017) and Jakku-Sihvonen (2002) have concluded that teachers themselves feel insecurity and incapability to practice appropriate assessment in different situations, and that teacher education faculties provide very varied amount of education on assessment, from some to almost none.

The concept of formative assessment is relatively new and even though it is stated in the core curriculum that it needs to be included in the assessment practices, many teachers do not have an appropriate level of knowledge and skills to adapt it into the classroom. The practice of formative assessment is also more time-consuming, requires more effort in planning and organizing, and demands capability to utilize the collected information. Some in-service education can be available, but the views of older teachers can be challenging to change.

On the other hand, summative assessment is highly valued as numerical assessment provides chances to evaluate the performance of the school, the teacher and the student by administrative level, by parents and by the students themselves. Even though the benefits of formative assessment regarding to learning progress are immeasurable, it is difficult for many to change their understanding of assessment.

If considering the materials of eNorssi and the in-service education, one could say that the level of assessment literacy is not expected to be very high. It is true that the materials of eNorssi are available for everyone, but they are directed to trained teachers. The contents of both materials start from the very beginning, including much information and justification for the topics from the national core curriculum. It is quite surprising how much emphasis is put into defining basic contents of assessment methods such as feedback, which one could imagine being covered already during teacher training.

My initial plan was to focus on formative assessment practiced by language teachers. Quite soon it became clear that there are no studies focusing directly on assessment of language learning and teaching, so this thesis discusses formative assessment practices on all subjects and grades in basic education. Information about formative assessment practices can nevertheless be utilised in language teaching as well. As an idea for my upcoming Master's thesis, the focus could be on language teachers' use of formative assessment in Finland.

As assessment can have a significant effect on student's self-esteem and future education decisions, assessment practices should be as fair as possible. The national core curriculum emphasises the importance of student participation in the assessment process, as students are assessed throughout their whole school career all the way to working life. With formative assessment practices students become an active part of the assessment process. According to the curriculum, one of the biggest missions of assessment is to support and build students' self-esteem in addition to learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have good skills in practicing assessment. Every student deserves an equal chance to get good, fair and supportive assessment.

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