The impact of high-stakes national testing on teaching and learning: An Icelandic example
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Research topic/aim: The paper reports an inquiry into the impact of the national tests in Icelandic and Science in year 10 on teaching and learning in years 8–10 in four Icelandic compulsory schools. The aim of the study was to shed light on to what extent and in what way the tests might have an impact on teachers’ conceptions, decisions and teaching organisation, and on students’ learning activities and outcomes.

Theoretical framework: A conceptual framework was developed to serve as a theoretical basis for the study and a framework to analyse the data and organise the presentation of findings. The framework comprises four main elements: 1) intended curriculum, corresponding to laws, regulations and the educational goals of the National Curriculum, 2) teachers’ conceptions, efficacy and professional values, 3) implemented curriculum representing the actual implementation of the intended curriculum, and 4) attained curriculum to embody the outcomes of student learning.

Methodology/research design: The research was a qualitative case study in four schools. Data was gathered with individual interviews with the head teacher of each school and teachers of the two subjects, classroom observations in their lessons, focus group interviews with students and an analysis of written material from the schools.

Expected conclusions/findings: The findings indicated that in years 8–10, the teachers were highly conscious of the importance of the national tests. There were indications that the ‘wash-back’ effects of the tests played a part in distracting the content and organisation of teaching and learning from the instructions of the National Curriculum. Most of the teachers found the National Curriculum difficult to implement within the given time limits, even though they endorsed its instructions. However, in their choice of curriculum content and teaching organisation, the teachers complied with what they observed as the demands of the tests rather than those of the National Curriculum and their own conceptions, in order to prepare their students as best they could for the tests. Despite this it is not clear to what extent the tests had a direct impact on the teachers’ implementation of the intended curriculum or to what extent it was modelled by a long standing teaching tradition that is influenced by a number of factors, among which is the long history of national testing in Iceland.

Some students in the four schools reported anxiety and stress because of the tests and the preparation for them. The use of older national tests as ‘practice tests’ seemed to enhance this.

Relevance for Nordic Educational research: National testing is a controversial and heavily debated issue. For the last two or three decades governments in various countries seem to have focussed on a combination of centralised national curricula, national testing and accountability as a means of reforming school systems and improving student outcomes. This has, for example, been the case in England and the US, and Icelandic educational authorities have in many ways followed that example. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden there has been a growing emphasis on more detailed national curricula and national testing.

The findings of the study are based on a small sample and do not support generalisations. However, they are expected to be a contribution to the ongoing debate about the value of national tests.