

Research paper

A Study of Greek Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Teacher Self-Evaluation

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Contextualisation

Evaluating one's own teaching practice is a complex activity. The paper that follows draws on Aristotelian thinking to examine the value and the complexity of self-evaluation processes, and the effect on teaching, teacher learning and development. It considers constraints to implementation in a context in which teachers are the sole evaluators of their teaching and the learning occurring in schools and highlights the significant role of the individual, professional and policy contexts in this practice.

Abstract: *This paper reports some findings of a qualitatively driven study, which investigates Greek teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards teacher self-evaluation. The value and meaning attached to the practice of self-evaluation are examined using an interpretative approach and methodological triangulation. Immersion in the context of one primary and six nursery schools provide insights into teachers' self-evaluation behaviour and the implications for teaching and learning. A randomised sample of 208 secondary and primary school teachers is used to enrich and validate case-studies findings. The findings indicate that the learning acquired via teacher self-evaluation derives from the interaction of teachers' beliefs, thoughts and dispositions about teaching and learning, with the professional and policy contexts, and frames teachers' sense of accountability. The paper argues that teacher self-evaluation activities are learning processes driven by will, thought and purpose. However, if teacher self-evaluation is practised only at implicit levels and in ignorance of what it is involved in its practice, it provides minimum chances for teachers to realise the full learning potential of the self-evaluation process and the impact on teaching practice.*

Introduction

The evaluation of teachers is a widely discussed area. The issues of power, politics, purposes, processes and outcomes that are incorporated in its practice make it an area of a never-ending concern. The fact is that self-evaluation, although it was conceptualised decades ago and discussed with regard to the opportunities for improvement, development and accountability that it could offer (eg, Elliott, 1975; 1983; McCormick, 1982; Adelman and Alexander, 1982; Clift, Nuttall and McCormick, 1987), its merits are still to be recognised. The emphasis of researchers has concentrated on the formative nature of self-evaluation and lately the merit of self-evaluation as a learning process is stressed (Mulford, 2001; Watkins, 2001; Reed and Street, 2002). Elliott (1983) has drawn attention to the learning potential of self-evaluation by emphasising that teacher self-evaluation is about the ways teachers construct and use knowledge. Teachers operate within systems which are powerful contexts that may impact to distort perceptions and actions. This study seeks to understand the interconnection among the personal and the contextual in the practice of self-evaluation and the implications for teaching and teacher learning. Teacher self-evaluation is explored in a highly centralised and bureaucratic educational system (Oliver, 1982; Stavrida, 1990; Mavrogiorgos, 1993) which paradoxically has transferred teachers the power to be the sole and only evaluators of the learning produced in Greek state schools. Was this a wise decision?

Theorisation and Conceptualisation of the Research

Teacher self-evaluation, defined by Airasian and Gullickson (1997, p viii) as “a process in which teachers make judgements about the adequacy and effectiveness of their own knowledge, performance, beliefs, or effects for the purposes of self-improvement”, should not be seen as an activity separate to teaching. It is a “mode of teaching which operates at the level of discursive consciousness”, it is “a form of moral / social discourse” (Elliott, 1994, p 6). Reflective enquiry is incorporated in the self-evaluation process, with reflection perceived as “active and militant...concerned with infusing action with a sense of power and politics...which reintroduces into the discourse about teaching and schooling a concern for the ethical, personal and political” (Smyth, 1991, p 109).

The study is based on Aristotelian thinking using the concepts of ‘phronesis’ and ‘proairesis’ and Aristotle’s conception of ‘virtues’ to approach the area under investigation and analyse its findings.

According to Aristotle, in both the conscious and unconscious levels, humans act based on the mental states named ‘phronesis’ (correct thinking) and ‘nous’ (mind) (Ross, 1993, pp 307-313). The point of difference among levels is that in the unconscious level the correctness of specific actions in specific circumstances is understood first and then general principles are extracted which are used after productive reasoning to deduce the correctness of other similar actions; this way, the practical and testimonial reasoning is cognitively understood not with reason but with a ‘kind of perception’ that Aristotle calls ‘phronesis’ (Ross, 1993, p 311). This means that teachers draw on their ‘tacit traditional knowledge’ when self-evaluating, that is, they use their ‘common sense’ of what is considered ‘good’ in specific contexts and time and what is ‘right’ for them (Elliott, 1983) since ‘phronesis’ refers both to what is ‘right’ for own self and what is ‘right for own self and others’ (Ross, 1993; Pelegrinis, 2001). This way, policy and ethics become central in the practice of teacher self-evaluation.

‘Proairesis’, described by Aristotle as “βουλευτική ὁρεξις τῶν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν (‘vouleftiki orexis ton ef emin’: Nichomachian Ethics, 1112a18-1113a14) is either a “desirable mind” or “intellectual desire” “originating from the individual” (‘ὀρεκτικός νοῦς’, ‘διανοητικοί ὁρεξις’, ‘ἡ τοιαύτη ἀρχὴ ἄνθρωπος’: *ibid*, 1139b4). ‘Proairesis’ concerns means, not ends, and looks more like a ‘conscious wish (will)’ as opposed to voluntary action as a ‘calculated wish’ (Ross, 1949; 1993; Elliott, 1983; Pelegrinis, 2001). In the context of this research, ‘proairesis’ as ‘preferred choice’ (Ross, 1949; 1993) means that the practice of self-evaluation is dependent upon teachers’ willingness and capacity to question and understand their own practice as this is shaped and framed under the specific circumstances the teachers are in.

Furthermore, in Aristotelian thinking personal virtues concern feelings and actions. From Aristotle’s description of virtues, some are of high relevance to the practice of teacher self-evaluation, these of ‘σωφροσύνη’ (sofrosene: wisdom), ‘μεγαλοψυχία’ (megalocochia: generosity of heart) and ‘ἀλήθεια’ (alethea: the truth) (Nichomachian Ethics, 1108a30-b6; Ethical Eftthemia, 3, 7). The generosity of heart when expressed in action reveals one’s claim for honour (respect), while the truth in social relations reveals what is considered truthful (for own self) (Ross, 1993, p 288). In this context, teachers’ actions are seen as reflecting teachers’ personal virtues to act wisely while being truthful and respectful to their own ‘selves’ and others. A wise, true and respectful action comes by the teacher judging her own situation after considering the limitations of her thought and the influences of the different elements surrounding her practice and taking into account the judgements of others. This enables her to make the best possible decisions under her particular circumstances.

Elliott’s (1983, pp 228-234) conception of three types of teacher self-evaluation: 1. based on tacit knowledge; 2. based on practical deliberation; 3. based on knowledge of technical rules

underpinned the theoretical and analytical framework of this research. Schon's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner, Kremer-Hayon's (1993) characteristics of the self-evaluating teacher, the standards of effective practice that Shinkfield and Stufflebeam (1995) discuss and the duties of teachers described by Scriven (1994) informed the study. The concept of teacher self-evaluation, as used in this study, is perceived as a wilful, thoughtful and purposeful process encompassing speech ('logos') to value or express the worth of one's own practice. This speech is expressed internally (monologue) or externally (interactive dialogue) and it is both a cause and effect of teacher learning. This learning is conceived as "both socially constructed and socially constructive" (Bredo, 1997, p 39).

Methodology

Teacher self-evaluation is a complex phenomenon which needed to be looked upon and analysed from different perspectives. The study aimed to understand this phenomenon from the point of view of the individuals under study while giving voice to a wide-spread sample of Greek teachers to define what teacher self-evaluation meant for them. The assessment of the merits of the qualitative and quantitative approaches and their value and fitness in the context of my research drove the methodological decisions I made. Committed to staying open to a variety of different and complex ontological and epistemological thinking and theoretical frameworks I adopted a naturalistic perspective and an interpretative approach and used methodological triangulation to examine thoroughly the practice of teacher self-evaluation in the Greek context.

One primary and six nursery schools were purposefully selected to examine the complexities of self-evaluation processes, the limits and constraints to implementation, the effect on teaching, learning and development. I used a "collective case study" which is an "instrumental study" extended to several cases (Stake, 1994, p 237). That is, the phenomenon of teacher self-evaluation was examined in the context of primary and nursery education. The methods employed for data collection were interviews, observation and questionnaires accompanied by field-notes, memos and documentary analysis. To accommodate multiple perspectives and give voice and justice to practitioners to present their conceptions of teacher self-evaluation, a mail survey was administered to case study schools (31 teachers) before fieldwork commenced and to a stratified sample of primary and secondary Greek teachers (204) working in state schools in seventeen randomly selected geographical areas. 112 teachers responded (nursery: 18 (52.9%), primary: 41 (60.3%), gymnasium: 26 (51.0%), lyceum 27 (52.9%)).

For the qualitative analysis of data grounded theory procedures were used, such as theoretical sampling, open, axial and selective coding and constant comparisons among levels, memos and diagrams (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The analysis moved from 'microscopic' to 'macroscopic' examination of data trying to reveal features, properties and dimensions of concepts yielded in the collected evidence -these concepts being the 'indicators' in my data (Strauss, 1987). In coding them both 'in-vivo' (that is, the actual terms found in data) and constructed codes were used. Comparisons among indicators for similarities and differences revealed categories which were continuously compared with old and new indicators to generate new properties for the coded categories and subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Memos were written on a continuous basis connecting my knowledge of the literature and the issue that stroke my attention; also diagrams were drawn to indicate interrelations and allow me to have a visual picture of gaps in data. During this process, conditions, consequences, strategies and interaction were identified (Strauss, 1987). An intense analysis around one category at a time followed, for instance, when 'clarification of understanding' appeared as a core category I focused on conditions and consequences associated with it; this led to drawing conceptual maps showing this relation. Strauss (1987, p 32) terms this process as 'axial coding'. When categories became distinct, I used 'selective coding' (*ibid*, p 33), that is, I coded

systematically around categories I found useful for the study. For example, when coding around self-evaluation purposes I concentrated around three core categories, 'define teaching/ learning needs', 'clarifying understanding' and 'accountability'. This coding process included formulating hypotheses which were tested in the field to see if they were sustainable. For instance, the proposition 'teachers' self-evaluation practice is based on moral concerns' was examined in several situations before making final assertions. My focus in analysis was on finding the main pattern or theme that could sum-up what was happening and how, and what things were associated with it as well as why it was happening. This focus guided integrating categories to achieve theoretical saturation and provide density to the analysed concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Quantitative data were subjected to statistical analysis using the p-value of Pearson's Chi square and the indicator of Cramer's V for noticed statistical differences to define the intensity or degree of association. For the scales measuring self-evaluation benefits, processes and purposes the reliability in the case of internal consistency (Traub, 1994) was checked using Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Spector, 1992; Norusis, 1992), while for checking the construct validity, Principal Component Analysis (Norusis, 1992) was conducted with the use of orthogonal rotation Varimax and the criterion of eigenvalue or characteristic root (Sharma, 1996). This means that the extracted factors (components) are linearly independent. To check the main effects of teaching experience and school /or specialty and their interaction on the extracted factors of self-evaluation benefits, processes and purposes, data were tested in processes of analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the help of general linear models (GLM) (Wackerly, Mendenhall and Shaeffer, 1996). For multiple comparisons of means the statistical test of Bonferroni was applied (Toothaker, 1993).

Findings

This study has identified two main purposes for Greek teachers' engagement in self-evaluation activities; these are: the development of understanding and accountability. Hayson (1985) has identified as two main purposes of self-evaluation the enhancement of understanding and the appreciation of one's own situation. Greek teachers self-evaluated because they wanted to learn more about their situation, but also to satisfy the sense of professional accountability they had developed. Teachers' self-evaluated for identifying strengths and weaknesses in own practice, for assessing pupils' achievements, for diagnosis (of student learning and teaching practice), for self-awareness (personal and professional), for learning. The target of such engagement was to enable teachers to understand, judge and decide what actions were appropriate to their particular experience, that is the self-evaluation process aimed to help teachers to define their teaching and learning needs and clarify their understanding of teaching and learning in their particular contexts. As such this engagement was learning leading to action. The self-evaluation activities for accountability purposes were externally driven. Teachers made public their efforts to self-evaluate to explain why some of their pupils did not make sufficient progress. In this case teachers self-evaluated for justification and / or protection.

The professional and policy contexts reinforced self-evaluation activities undertaken for the purpose of accountability. To take one example, a 'common sense' issue among teachers (especially experienced ones) was that by raising parents' awareness ('awakening parents') of their children's lack of progress, teachers were demonstrating accountability, or in their words this action provided a 'shield' from being judged incompetent. In another context, but serving the same purpose, was the common view that disclosing performance problems lowers a teachers' professional image. This kind of 'common sense' was a tacit learning outcome that was strengthened within years in the profession driving teachers' self-evaluation behaviour and framing the sense of accountability they exhibited. Eraut (1994) notes that socialisation into the profession accounts for the kind of 'professional consciousness' practitioners develop. To use the types of accountability suggested by

Becker, Eraut and Knight (1981), Greek teachers' sense of moral accountability was served through teachers' interests and beliefs about their professional status, while their sense of professional accountability overwhelmed their accountability towards their employer, which is the government.

Three elements underpinned Greek teachers' self-evaluation practice: will, unconscious and / or conscious thinking and purpose. Self-evaluation practice depended on teachers' disposition and on the needs of the situation teachers were in. Teachers clearly self-evaluated when they were willing and the situation provided the need. Teacher's capacity to frame adequately the learning situation and to critically analyse its components and the opportunities offered for action were identified as necessary for effective engagement in self-evaluation. Case-study evidence suggested that teachers' diagnostic and critical abilities were very important for the learning outcomes.

In this context, Greek teachers' practice of self-evaluation was shaped at two levels which were interrelated, and their interactions were fundamental to framing practice. At one level, there was the individual context which included perceptions, beliefs, capacities, interests, needs and expectations. The second level was the professional and policy contexts which incorporated external expectations, interests and needs. Tensions created between the two levels were detected which accounted for the degree of influence on different teachers', or groups of teachers', self-evaluation behaviour. There were indications in both the qualitative and quantitative data that school and teachers' speciality exerted influences on the conduct of self-evaluation. For instance, the influence of the professional and policy contexts was stronger on secondary and primary school teachers compared to nursery teachers. In the latter case, the individual context seemed to have a greater impact on the conduct of self-evaluation. Some examples of the impact of contexts were: secondary teachers' scepticism about the use of self-evaluation outcomes to promote students' progress because of competition from private coaching for tertiary entrance exams:

'...when pupils come and say: 'Sir we have learnt this in Frodisterio', what is left for you to self-evaluate?' (Mail survey, male secondary teacher);

The emphasis of primary teachers to raise parents' awareness ('awaken') and 'shield' their own performance by using self-evaluation processes for accountability:

'Parents need to be awakened by me...otherwise we have bad awakenings and you get blamed' (Tape-recorded Interview 2001, primary teacher C);

The use of self-evaluation outcomes by nursery teachers to justify and validate their teaching:

'I thought about the usefulness of my interference in pupils' work...maybe it is not right (to correct pupils' drawings) but I don't feel good if they present such nonsense to their mothers... their mothers might not be bothered but as a teacher I am...' (Tape-recorded Interview 2002, nursery teacher M)

To this effect, the practice of self-evaluation seemed to be both person-dependent and context-dependent.

Both sets of data indicated that most of the time teachers' self-evaluated unsystematically, spontaneously and tacitly. Case study evidence revealed that such self-evaluations were not confined to the limits imposed by the action of teaching. The main feature that defined them was teachers' inability to justify their line of thoughts and actions. Schon's (1983) term of reflection-in-action and Elliott's (1983) conceptualisation of unreflective self-evaluation based on tacit practical knowledge could characterise such evaluations.

There were occasions in which teachers tried to judge whether their teaching fulfilled external or internal requirements based on set rules and principles. Such engagement appeared to solidify teacher understanding rather than extending it:

'The curriculum asks of pupils to read by Christmas... There are certain rules... if you follow them, you achieve that' (Interview 2001, primary teacher K)

Such self-evaluation activity appeared to match Elliott's (1983) description of self-evaluation based on teachers' explicit knowledge of technical rules. Such rules could lead to actions of compulsion or ignorance (types of Aristotle's involuntary action). Self-evaluation activity could become an involuntary action if rules and principles were not questioned; consider the implications for primary teacher F's teaching and learning:

'You know what they did to me? They made a fuss saying 'Maria is in the closet'. I didn't believe them, I thought they were playing with me; she usually goes... Just before the bell, I found out she was really hidden in the closet... How can I teach them? They are monsters!' (Field note from staffroom observation, 2001)

Instances were also recorded in which teachers did not depend on exact rules to evaluate their own practice; these instances could fit to Elliott's (1983) description of 'self-evaluation as practical deliberation'. Such engagement depended on teachers' 'conscious wish (will)' to learn more about their own situation, this means the self-evaluation activity was an end in itself. The basic feature of such engagement was that teachers acted voluntarily when searching for the means that could help them understand better their particular situation. Their actions were 'actions-at-will'; such actions involve the use of 'proairesis' (preferred choice) (Ross, 1949; 1993; Pelegrinis, 2001).

An 'action-at-will' might change to an involuntary action and vice versa. The evaluation of own actions was not a stable activity with a definite course but changed depending on circumstances. The learning that teachers gained from evaluating their own actions (that is, the knowledge of the consequences they had developed about specific actions) seemed to account for this change. The example of primary teacher's NI actions illustrates the development of an action-at-will and the impact on the teacher's effective deliberation on own actions. The teacher reported that in the past she disclosed her teaching problems to colleagues; she acted-at-will (conscious will or 'proairesis'). When the collegial support that she expected was not forthcoming she became cautious in disclosing her teaching problems. Her decision to be cautious was based on the interpretation of what she had experienced and the evaluation of the consequences but was not what she wanted; she wanted collegial support. Fearing to act the way she wanted illustrates the fact that she felt compelled to keep her problems to herself, that is, it illustrates that she acted involuntarily. The teacher felt that making another decision was out of the possibility of accomplishment in her situation, this prohibited her to reconsider and deliberate effectively on her decision to be cautious; "effective deliberation must always focus on actions which fall within the agent's sphere of freedom" (Elliott, 1983, pp 230-231).

Greek teachers' engagement in self-evaluation was an activity grounded on 'logos' (speech) which was expressed internally (monologue) or externally (dialogue). Developing understanding via self-evaluation required time, experimentation and continuous efforts, as such it involved circles of reflectivity and reflexivity. To this effect misunderstandings could not be excluded (McLaughlin, 1999); indeed many such instances were detected, as in the case of nursery teacher A. Consider the implications for her teaching and learning:

'It took efforts of three years to realise that it was my mistake... that pupils needed to understand the direction of lines first to cope successfully with letters...' (Informal Interview 2002, nursery teacher A)

Teachers' persistence to learn about their teaching and their level of awareness of their own capacities and the consequences of their actions in their context seemed crucial in this respect. This can partly explain why 57.1% of the mail sample reported they felt stress when they self-evaluated. Feelings and beliefs play a crucial role in self-evaluation (Dadds, 1995). Case study evidence indicated that teachers' feelings, beliefs and knowledge of consequences had an impact on self-evaluation outcomes. For example, primary teacher L stressed that he persisted in teaching 'a few extra things' in history despite being aware that pupils were inattentive. Another example is from the case of nursery teachers who reported that they consciously minimised their efforts when required to teach the alphabet because they believed and felt that pupils were too young and not ready. The teachers defended their actions based on this belief. This belief excluded considering the possibility that their actions could have negative consequences for their practice.

Data from the case studies and the mail survey suggested the main disadvantage of self-evaluation practice is the subjective nature of personal judgements. However, self-evaluation practice was highly valued and the majority of teachers reported that they were willing to advance their self-evaluation practice by participating in formal self-evaluation training schemes if these would be introduced. However, they expected these to run on a continuous basis (eg, 70.6% of the mail survey sample). The high value attributed to self-evaluation related to the way teachers conceived teacher self-evaluation, that is, as inextricably linked to their duties. Teacher self-evaluation and teaching were sides of the same coin:

'I have to evaluate my practice to find out if my goals and targets are of use to pupils; how else am I going to know?' (Tape-recorded Interview 2002, nursery teacher K)

However, teachers seemed not to be fully satisfied with the effectiveness of their self-evaluation practice. 57% of the mail survey sample attributed a medium value to their self-evaluation effectiveness and 7.5% reported being dissatisfied. Statistically significant differences were noticed among novice and very experienced teachers (25+ years) suggesting that experience advances teachers' confidence about the way teachers self-evaluate. Airasian and Gullickson (1994) note that differences among novice and experienced teachers should be expected in self-assessments. Primary school teachers provided higher estimates compared to secondary school teachers. This might reflect contextual influences but might be also an effect of years of teaching experience since the sample of very experienced teachers consisted mostly of primary teachers.

In addition, one in three respondents (in both the case study and mail survey samples) could not determine in the questionnaire whether they had received sufficient training to carry out teacher self-evaluation. A further 17% of the case study respondents (in a short questionnaire examining perceptions) did not know if training in evaluation was important for their practice, while 24.1% reported that they found such knowledge unnecessary. Besides, the results of the attitude scales measuring purposes of the mail survey indicated that teachers attached a higher value to self-evaluation undertaken for improvement and professional accountability than for teacher development. Teacher development and accountability towards the government as self-evaluation purposes were perceived as different entities by the case studies teachers too.

All these findings raise concerns about the effectiveness of teachers' self-evaluation practice. First, because they suggest that professional development is seen as a personal activity and second, because they imply a confusion between what constitutes personal and professional identity. This scenario raises questions about the chances Greek teaching practice has to improve via teachers' self-evaluation activities. Evidence from the case studies and the mail survey suggest these chances are minimal. For instance, the mail survey findings concerning self-evaluation purposes indicated that teachers valued more teacher self-evaluation for

improving learning outcomes than for identifying teaching needs. This implies that teachers valued outcomes more than processes, which raises again the issue of the effectiveness of their self-evaluation practice. Authors have argued that sustainable improvement in schools and teaching practices requires a learning orientation in the evaluation activity which pays equal attention to processes, outcomes, conditions and interactions (Eisner, 1985; Reed and Street, 2002).

Teachers in this study have shown 'signs... (of having) little understanding of their learning processes (Watkins, 2001). The collected evidence suggests that self-evaluating for learning is dependent upon the contexts that shape and frame this kind of evaluation; it is the interaction between these contexts that determines the kind of learning that teachers develop via self-evaluation activities and the chances for improvement and development this learning brings along. In evaluation, both the purposes and the control of evaluation are important (Ball, 1990). The fact that Greek teachers were the sole evaluators of the learning occurring in schools seemed not sufficient to raise all teachers' awareness of effective ways to think about their own learning and care to promote their professional development. Both at individual level (eg, teachers to feel the need to advance their self-evaluation competency) and collective level (eg, by forming bodies to safeguard the occurrence of ineffective practices) teachers did not appear to seize the opportunity to demonstrate adequately the capacity (or willingness) for using their learning from self-evaluation for self-improvement. To this effect allotting power to teachers to evaluate their own performance without ensuring ways that support the effective management and use of this power seems not efficient to promote teacher learning and enhance teaching performance.

Conclusions

This study's evidence suggests that the interaction between the individual and the professional and policy contexts shape the conduct of teacher self-evaluation, for instance the absence of will and freedom of choice would make the practice of self-evaluation impossible. Understanding the interaction between these contexts leads to a deeper understanding of the self-evaluation process.

Data indicated that Greek teachers' engagement in self-evaluation was mostly spontaneous, unsystematic and tacit. This can explain why teachers although they valued the self-evaluation process did not feel satisfied with the way they self-evaluated. The paradox is that although teacher self-evaluation was regarded as inextricably linked to teaching and seen as a highly professional task, at the same time teachers perceived the self-evaluation activity as a personal, implicit process. The lesson learnt from this research is that self-evaluation is primarily a learning process and ought to be valued for that learning. Although this is widely accepted, in the Greek context it is far from being understood in real practice. Teacher self-evaluation if exercised in ignorance of what is involved in its use and without appropriate systemic support (eg, from the professional and policy contexts) has little chances of fulfilling its learning potential.

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