Because every pupil counts: the success of the pupil monitoring system in The Netherlands

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The National Institute for Educational Measurement in The Netherlands has developed a pupil monitoring system for primary education to assess pupils' learning progress on a longitudinal basis. If pupil development is unsatisfactory, pupil monitoring system material can be used to locate and tackle the problems. This article describes the system, the set-up of the longitudinal calibration, the psychometrics used and the educational procedure for structured action. The pupil monitoring system comes with a software program and this article also explains the possibilities of the program, the information it provides to the teacher and school, the role of the computer and the advantages of working with the program. Experience of working with the system is discussed as well as the modifications and improvements that may be necessary in the future.

KEYWORDS: Elementary education; assessment/testing; evaluation; quality; software.

INTRODUCTION

An important feature of the Dutch educational system is the concept of freedom of education. For instance it is up to Dutch schools to decide which school-books and tests they wish to use. The tests referred to in this article have been developed by the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO) and are published and sold on a semicommercial basis. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science contributes substantially to funding the development of these tests, while the schools decide on whether to purchase and use them. Around ten years ago CITO began developing a system that made it possible to monitor pupils' development during the entire primary school period (four–12 age range: the pupil monitoring system). At present 80% of Dutch primary schools use one or more parts of this system.
Present education policy aims to cater for the educational needs of more pupils in mainstream primary and to refer fewer children to special education. This obviously affects both sectors, which need to work collaboratively to ensure the optimal development of all pupils. This co-operation between primary and special education schools requires new school-books, teaching methods and instruments: CITO’s pupil monitoring system is one such instrument (Van Delden, 1994).

**DISCUSSION**

**A pupil monitoring system**

To ensure the optimal development of each child, development progress must be checked on a regular and reliable basis. Only if a teacher is familiar with the child’s grasp of instruction material can an education be provided that is suitable to the aptitude of the pupil! This implies that the school, or in this case, the teacher must keep tabs: what progress has each child made in achieving the goals set? Monitoring is an essential precondition for good teaching. Combined with school self-assessment, monitoring progress is ‘the best policy-relevant response to a policy aimed at improving primary education standards’ (Scheerens, 1997).

It is obvious that teachers monitor day-by-day the development of their pupils. However, there is not always a systematic way of working that can be used by the entire school. Pupils are often not assessed according to the same standards, with teachers having different assessment methods. In the past this was also due to the absence of reliable instruments to provide teachers with the pupil information they needed.

Thus CITO developed a pupil monitoring system to help teachers obtain reliable data systematically on their pupils’ learning progress.

**Features of a pupil monitoring system**

Not any random collection of tests may serve as a pupil monitoring system. Such a system is characterized by a number of specific features (Gillijns and Moelands, 1992). In general it may be defined as several measuring instruments used for the continuous evaluation (Janssens, 1985) of the educational performance of individual pupils and classes of pupils. Continuous evaluation means identifying progress over longer periods of time, that is a few times a year at the most. The idea of pupil monitoring systems was described in detail by the Dutch Primary Education Advisory Council (ARBO) in a 1988 white paper *The Collaboration of Regular and Special Education*. Here it is defined as ‘a concrete means for identifying discrepancies between progress and the targets and subtargets set by the school and for registering this progress’ (p. 64). Such a system includes the following elements:

- an indication of longitudinal learning lines, in principle covering the eight years of primary school, with concrete end- or subtargets for the various teaching areas;
- a concrete set of monitoring instruments;