

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Educational assessment has always been present within the educational process, but the way we have related to it has continuously changed as educational assessment is constantly constructing itself – both from within and in relation to the other elements of the educational process.

Socially, schools represent the institution which fulfils a key-role – its main purpose is to educate, and education has the force to generate knowledge, value, and evolution. Educational assessment meets these characteristics both intrinsically and extrinsically, in relation to everything it interacts with.

The impressive capacity of the educational assessment to adapt itself to the present time but also to look towards the future is also evidenced by it claiming its presence in the processes of both teaching and learning as well as in the assessment process itself – all assessment subjecting itself to its own rigours.

Keywords: social assessment, educational assessment, formative assessment.

Introduction

Educational assessment distinguishes itself most through its ability to adapt and evolve. Educational assessment is influenced by when and where it is being performed. Its historical and national character is taken into account when it comes to analyzing a certain concept, its social dimension being obvious.

The trajectory of the educational assessment is one more proof that we are living in an era of perpetual transformation, the movement of parts generating change to the whole and vice versa. As a method of the teaching-learning process and as a natural occurrence within the internal operating mechanism of each element of the educational process, educational assessment illustrates the genuine connection between the elements of the social system which is present both on a micro and macro level.

Social Assessment – A Feature of Everyday Life

Societal evolution is a prerequisite to change from within but also a natural consequence of its reorganisation and rearrangement on other levels, in accordance with temporal circumstances. As central institution of society, schools make no exception to this rule, the educational process – together with its elements – being, in turn, in constant metamorphosis.

Schools operate in a broad and complex social context. The social context impacts schools through: educational aims, educational content proper to each school subject, how the educational system and the educational process are organised, how to understand and apply assessment,

etc. – which all lead to new requirements in terms of operating, analysis, and interpreting.

All societal subsystems function under interdependent relations – which presupposes the continuous adaptation of their structures and functions in order to maintain a dynamic balance. The same type of relation (bilateral) exists between schools and the society they are part of. As a whole, changes in society may be found and are reflected also onto schools and any change to the educational plans has consequences onto society which is viewed as a macro-system.

Approached from a different perspective, schools are the institution that provides a social service. Schools provide meaning, they form and develop skills and abilities, rules and values that are socially acknowledged and accepted. Schools have their own internal alchemy of development, they produce their own rules and values, have their own system of organisation and, most importantly, schools are the institution in charge of education. According to Văideanu, "education has become the social subsystem that accompanies and feeds the development of all other subsystems. Development, as a whole, goes through education" (Văideanu, 1988, p.19). Therefore, it can be stated that nowadays the effort that goes into the development of society depends, generally, on the scale of investments in education and culture. It is only developed societies that acknowledge the role and value of education. Treating education as a national priority is a must-do, a responsibility of the current generation for the ones to come.

Assessment is a part of our everyday life as each person may find themselves, throughout their life, as both assessor and assessee. Relating to certain standards, more or less formal, comparing obtained outcomes with

expected ones, taking into account certain reference points in all that we do implies assessing. This is a must for each of us since we all need "reinforcements or judgements". (Cucoş, 2008, p.383). In order to be sure that the way in which we build or design anything is the best one – unless we are imposed a certain assessment form – we find ourselves in need of asking for some ourselves. Both success and disapproval or criticism are outcomes of assessments – by motivating us though, each in their own way.

People feel the need to assess. Regardless of age or level of culture, assessment is a feature of our everyday lives. Willingly or not, we assess our fellow people, things, thoughts, aspects of the seizable or of the ideatic realms. Assessments may be exteriorized in the sense that we may share our judgements or they may be internalized, therefore not shared with others.

The Adaptability of the Educational Assessments

Unlike social assessment, educational assessment focuses on education – an element of the social system. Social assessments benefit from a specialised terminology, a set of theories specific to the field, "conceptions and perspectives which have determined specific assessment strategies, types, and modalities in keeping with the growing awareness on the role of assessment in education and in the educational process" (Ungureanu, 2001, p. 7).

Assessment in education has long focused on students, on their results, traditionally following the teaching-learning duo which was seen as more important. Given this, the role of assessment is to record "how much" and "how" the taught concepts were acquired. Often times, the more students got closer to the model provided through teaching the more their

performance was validated, irrespective of how the knowledge was acquired – thus not sanctioning the preponderance of mechanical memorizing, for instance. Each teacher would set themselves as a point of reference and their perception of the concepts studied would become appropriated or "appropriate-able" to others too. Generally, copying a self-declared model would be the goal of the educational approach and assuming any divagation being too risky for the initiator.

Traditional assessors were tributary to routine. Each generation of them would mostly follow the same steps, their goals escaping the impact of time or the natural evolution of society. The template employed in the teaching phase had to be recognized in the assessment stage, any intervention from students on the concepts taught or any reinterpreting of said information being, more than often, discouraged. Acquiring any lesson would be done by studying and getting acquainted to the teachers' style of assessing and getting a good mark would mean the strict observance of the teachers' guidelines.

Alternative educational systems are deviating from all rules of traditional education and are bringing upon change, both in form and in content. Whether it is the Montessori, Waldorf, Curative, or the Freinet approach, the Jena Plan, or the Step-by-Step model – alternative pedagogies propose something different and the creativity and originality of the initiators reconfigure the concept of schools (also affecting assessment).

Assessments impress through their unbelievable flexibility, their evolution within the educational process – from a secondary position to becoming the main feature, their place next to teaching and learning (their mission being of concluding the intervention process upon students) for assessments to eventually change their place and role as nowadays they are

naturally an integral part of the teaching-learning process and so much more. Ungureanu (2001, p.7) captured the metamorphosis of assessments saying: "assessments were slowly but steadily and legitimately going to rise from the initial stage of subsidiary operation and also consecutive to teaching and learning as privileged operations to a position at least equal if not superior with major implications in terms of quality of the whole educational process".

Assessments as Element of the Teaching-Learning Processes Too

In modern didactics, assessments are omnipresent in the educational process. They have the force to influence both teaching and learning therefore the whole educational process is impacted by assessments. Expanding their scope has become possible due to the shift from the traditional central subject of assessments – namely to check and assess results – to assess the elements that made the respective results possible which means that not only the student but also the educational goals, contents, the actual teaching-learning process, methods and procedures used, material resources and inter-human relationships – everything is subject to assessment in order to optimise the whole educational process.

The current trends in approaching assessments bring into discussion not just the cognitive aspects but also "the affective and the psychomotor aspects of teaching" (Cucoş, 2008, p.44). Students' emotions and feelings are also influenced by assessment as we become interested in students each as a complete individual. In this respect, R. F. Mager has developed a technique of building operational objectives based on taking into account performances as final behaviours, noticeable, and measurable at the end of

each teaching-learning sequence. It is believed that solely students' behaviour may endorse the presence in their own system of values of information, knowledge, skills, abilities, etc. and the way these are internalized is reflected in one's behaviour.

Irrespective of the type of education – be it traditional or alternative – teachers are subject to assessment too as their actions generate the other actions. Teaching and learning have always been connected, the success of the first creating the prerequisites for the success of the former – as learning is the second essential function of the educational process. Seen more and more as a matter of organising and leading learning, teaching cannot and must not neglect the value of communication but it is not deemed acceptable to confine it to only that. Teaching, not followed by learning, is meaningless. It is only teaching that generates learning, student participation, enthusiasm, and activism that may be deemed valid. Therefore, it is natural to assess how teaching is being done as teaching is a crucial process to education. Assessment is no longer explained as the process that automatically manifests itself after the performance of the other two critical functions of the education process (teaching and learning) but it is inserted in the structure and mechanisms of each of them.

Teaching is not limited to the teachers' activity performed mainly in the classroom, with their students. Teaching begins long before the actual moment and ends much later. At all times, assessment is necessary, it is constant, and it becomes self-assessment. Planning, designing, carrying out the lessons, preparing the relevant teaching material, providing the learning means indispensable to each lesson – all of these are connected to assessment, modern education encouraging and requiring a systemic, relational approach.

Assessment is required at every step within the education process. This is not an exaggeration, it does not imply overstepping its attributions, but it is a completely normal approach of the educational reality. Both within the modern didactics and the alternative pedagogies assessment is constantly reconfiguring itself. Rippley R. considers that the transactional approach reflects best the complete infiltration of assessment in all subsystems of the educational process and assessments themselves are subject to assessment.

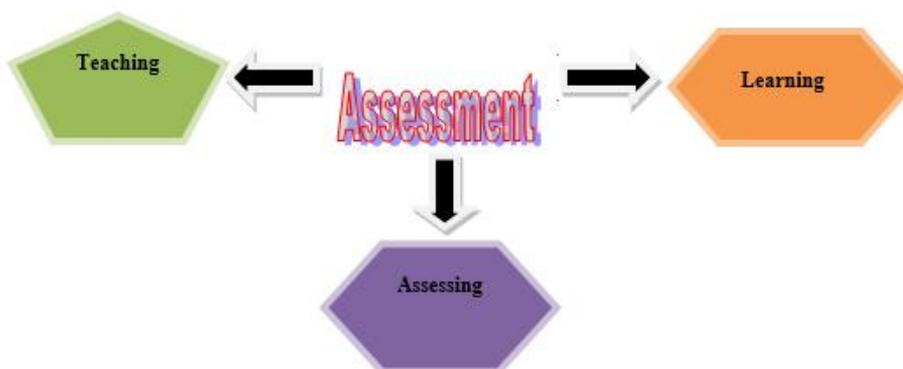


Figure 1. The Influence of Assessment in the Educational Process

Dorel Ungureanu (2001) states that, according to Rippley, transactional assessment has positive effects such as: optimizing formative assessment, constantly improving the performance of the educational process, encouraging a dynamic attitude and an effervescent behaviour of the educational agents, that positively influence human relationships, communication, etc. The formative effects of the transactional assessment are obvious, as the educational system as a whole is being restructured.

Learning – both personal, in general, and educational, in particular – has always had and will always require assessment. The concept of learning is related to that of change, of acquiring, of novelty, which certainly implies the presence of a valuing opinion, and "estimating and assessing are valuing actions that intervene in all human endeavours" (Cucuş, 2014, p. 417).

Learning accompanies us throughout our life and the need for verification, control, and safety with regard to the fairness we all employ when constantly constructing our knowledge and value is imminent. We all wish to see if we have got right whatever new concept we were introduced to, if and how we managed to get to the core of things, we all need to be corrected, supported, repositioned on the right path given the new reality we are facing. Regardless of age, people need, require, and provide assessments to their fellow humans.

The typology of assessment pertaining to education is vast and the complexity of the educational reality has generated many a discussion. Focusing on the implications of assessment in the educational process we believe that the formative assessment is the most relevant due to its constant influences over the entire educational process, respectively over its agents. "Formative assessment is a type of assessment centred around the on-going learning curriculum, namely precisely on the learning process, without ignoring the learning outcomes given it records and corrects promptly and efficiently any process that might damage the product" (Ungureanu, 2001, p. 25). Feedback, by always accompanying learning, renders it possible to constantly position itself within the confines of fairness, any attempt of deviation being opportunely corrected and removed.

Formative assessment is present especially at a micro level, at lesson level, each student benefiting from its existence. Any new acquisition (whether intellectual or practical) is filtered through this type of assessment as learning afferent to each sequence of a lesson is monitored. Customised, assessment becomes formative and the high though short-term frequency imposes a certain rigour to the learning process, determines the development of cognitive processes.

Constantly observing the students' activity, their performances, skills and conduct is a form of assessment that, if done properly, provides insightful information. "These actions contribute to getting a picture of students or of the success of a lesson itself in accordance with the data collected through various systematic methods" (Ionescu, Radu, 1995, p. 262). Moreover, oral, written, and practical assessments are ways in which assessment may influence academic achievement.

Teachers teach students to learn, constantly managing their acquisitions, they pay attention to the mechanisms and stages learning entails, allowing students time to process the information, otherwise assessment would apply to teaching and not to learning. Teacher-student communication, high participation, complete involvement of the two poles of the educational process ensure success and achievement of the desired educational performance.

However, we should prevent confusions related to the place and role of learning, of teaching, and of assessment within the educational process. They each have their own specificities and relevance. It is true that assessment occurs and regulates on the fly both teaching and learning, its main purpose being to add value to both these key processes of the educational process, but its effects remain positive as long as it is correctly

involved in the educational process. Any exaggeration affects the educational balance. Teaching and learning are complex processes that require their own pace to unfold and the intervention and infiltration of assessment from within require pedagogical tact in order to generate the expected outcomes. Teachers, aware of their responsibility, incorporate assessments at the right time.

Formative assessment enables and allows for having control, for real-time observance of the physiognomy of the educational micro space, facilitates getting a sense of the lesson as it is carried out, and the reversed connection provides data of improving effects upon the whole. Aware of the reality, teachers instantly rebuild the didactic strategy and adapt the scientific content in their ongoing quest to upgrade the product.

The existence of educational pluralism is natural in a modern and open society that is capable of accepting and provoking change and assessments – of an incredible remodelling capacity – illustrate the high adaptability nature of the educational process.

Conclusions

Considering that education is the social subsystem that influences the development of the other subsystems and knowing that assessing is an omnipresent element, we highlight the social dimension of assessment, its capacity to become part of all the elements that make up the social space where the need for assessment is a certainty. Educational assessment operates beyond the boundaries of its own system, adding value by that fact that assessing is constantly associated with the want of doing things better.

Through its social dimension, educational assessment illustrates its permeability, its openness providing itself with the opportunity of

constantly rebuilding itself, of being alive and relating to the elements of its own system (teaching and learning) generates the same invigorating and positive flow on the inside as well.

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