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#### THE ASSESSMENT CULTURE IN ROMANIAN SCHOOL - BETWEEN INNOVATION AND TRADITION

Mihaela Voinea (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Transilvania University of Brasov, 29, B-dul Eroilor, Brasov, 500036, Romania, mihaela.voinea@unitbv.ro

#### Abstract

School assessment is still a hot topic in education, because the evaluation of students' competences is a process with a major social impact (especially on the labour market). In the digitalized world, school evaluation must be rethought in a new way: to become an innovative, personalized and pragmatic assessment. This article is focused on the study of the assessment culture in the Romanian school – teachers' and students' beliefs about school assessment, values and behaviours regarding school assessment. The theoretical premises of the research are to be found in the studies and theories of school assessment and in the model of the national culture – Hofstede.

Are teachers prepared to implement a new culture of assessment? Can students, parents, managers and social community adopt a new mentality of school assessment? In this case, the key factor are the teachers who are the agents of change in behaviours, attitudes and values of school assessment, according to the new social and economic trends.

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**Keywords:** Assessment, culture assessment, teachers' beliefs.

#### 1. Introduction

School assessment is still a hot topic for all actors in education, especially because of the social stakes implied. Since the 1990s, standards-based assessment has become more present in many education systems as a result of changes in society and concerns for quality assessment. In our education system there are performance standards for the end of school cycle, training standards, occupational standards and so on, as an expression of the adaptation of the social system to the requirements of another type of economy, specific to the knowledge based society.



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Evaluation, like other defining process for the educational process (teaching and learning) must be redefined from the perspective of the new demands of the knowledge based society, but also in terms of the specific psychological profile of present day generations of students.

Nowadays' generation is characterized by the specialists in social and human sciences as the "Homo zappiens" generation, which has grown up using modern technology (mobile phone, computer, iPod, MP3 player) since early childhood. This has induced major changes in playing, networking and learning, sometimes creating huge discrepancies between generations, especially between parents and children, children and teachers. This is because "Homo zappiens is digital and school is analogous" (Veen, Vrakking, 2011, p.11). If teaching and learning use the resources provided by technology, evaluation as part of the educational process must also benefit from the same resources, in order not to create a gap among teaching-learning-evaluation. Today there is more and more talk about learning assisted by evaluation, about the formative role of learning, about the integration of evaluation in the normal course of learning and teaching. Precisely for this reason we should turn increasingly more to Web-based assessment tools, specific to the XXI century.

Recent studies on the impact of using web tools in education (Starkey, 2011, Kingsley, 2015) highlight the impact of their use on higher cognitive processes (development of creativity, critical thinking, decision-making capacity, achieving transfers), on motivating student learning and even on developing social competences. Digital evaluation is more motivating for students and reduces the tension, the anxiety felt by students in the traditional assessment.

However, a careful analysis of the assessing practices reveals that innovative trends in evaluation are present as 'islands' in the education system, that they are more visible in the primary school, and that they exist alongside traditional representations and behaviours.

Of course, innovative trends are not without risks, such as "the digital segregation" (Stoica, Mihail 2007), the differences in access to digital assessment depending on the area of origin (rural / urban) or on the teachers' competence to use technology tools.

These risks / limitations of the digital assessment can be undertaken because of the advantages that the use of technology assessment entails. The new culture of authentic assessment must be learned and acknowledged both by teachers and by students and parents. The agents of change in the sense given by M. Fullan (1993) remain the teachers.

## **2. Elements of the Assessment Culture in Romanian School**

The need for a new assessment culture, as shown above, involves the implementation of an "alternative evaluation, based on assumptions taken from the cognitive psychology of learning, the theory of multiple intelligences, the correlation of evaluation with teaching, thus giving the student an active role in evaluation and engaging him in self-evaluation, including "authentic" requirements taken from the real world" (Potolea, 2003, p. 234). The new assessment culture must be understood and promoted primarily by teachers in order to bring the desired changes into the evaluation system.

A first step in this approach is the identification of the elements of the (teachers') assessment culture that underlie the evaluation behaviour. The most important role is the teachers' one, who because

of their beliefs about assessment, about the efficiency of the evaluation methods, about the role and functions of evaluation will entail changes in parents' and students' mentality.

Recent research highlight the existence of a variety of pedagogical beliefs: In general, research conducted on teacher beliefs regards the following areas: beliefs about teaching (teaching goals, teaching methods, teaching contents, etc.), beliefs about assessment, about students and their learning, beliefs about the educational relationships established within the classroom context, beliefs relating to personal and professional development (Calderhead, 1996).

Knowing teachers' and school managers' mental structures is necessary to produce the desired changes in the education system. John Hattie stresses the importance of how teachers think in order to produce the desired changes. "We have to move from designing evaluation as 'someone's assessment' and 'assessing in order to...' to an approach where evaluation is understood as feedback for teachers" (Hattie, 2014, p.334). Teachers have some mental structures that allow them to ask for feedback about their impact on student learning.

The assessment culture, by analogy with the definition of culture given by Hofstede et al. (2012) refers to all the values, mentalities, customs, traditions, perceptions concerning evaluation (measurement, assessment, decision).

"The assessment culture consists of a coherent ensemble of concepts, principia, evaluation models, quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodological options, etc. leading to radical changes in mentality and in the instructional and evaluative practices" (Manolescu, Frunzeanu, 2016, p.81)

We see from the above definitions that this assessment culture is a complex ensemble of cognitive, affective, and social components which impact on all those involved directly or indirectly in assessment.

At the level of the Romanian education system, we can notice a growing interest in identifying elements of the assessment culture embodied in studies that aim, directly or indirectly, at this dimension of the educational process. One of the countrywide studies, concerning the impact of the education reform (Vlaseanu, 2002), showed that assessment in primary school called for major changes (a special assessment period, the introduction of performance descriptions) that generated, at that time, many discussions and concerns from all the stakeholders of education. Today, many of the fears or cautions about assessment have since disappeared, as a sign that teachers and even students and parents have learned a new culture of evaluation.

Traditionally, evaluation is identified with the action of testing, controlling, and identifying errors, penalties, hierarchy. Knowledge is especially valued and measurement (as defining operation for evaluation) is a key-operation. Associated to this meanings, there have appeared representations like "red pencil terror", "when I hear about assessment, I take out my red pencil", evaluation as test / control. Gradually, however, with the new theories about learning, especially along with the constructivist pedagogy, assessment tends to be redefined in terms of its regulating role on learning, formative assessment gaining more place in practice. The paradigm shift concerning the assessment is obvious in the assessment at primary school level where, since 1998, behaviours indicating an elitist evaluation culture, based on performance and competition, have disappeared (Stoica, 2003; Manolescu, Frunzeanu, 2016). Such signs and symbols of this evaluation culture, like notes, crowns, awarding as an event reserved only for some students (the best ones!) have been replaced with qualifications and diplomas in

subject matters where every child is promoted according to his interest / abilities. Social skills have begun to be valued (diploma of “best mate”, “the most friendly colleague”, etc.), along with the cognitive ones.

The optimizing role of assessment in primary school continues to assert itself along with the introduction of national assessments for forms II and IV.

In Article 73 of the National Education Law 1/2011 it is stipulated the organization and conduction, at the end of the second form, of an assessment of basic reading and writing and math skills, based on a methodology developed by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports. This assessment focuses on competences and it is based on the national standards of assessment for each subject. The aim is to guide and optimize learning, to provide students real with feedback on their progress and performance.

The results of evaluations are used to develop individualized student learning plans. According to them, the teacher will conduct during III and IV forms either remedial education, or improvement and development of certain skills of the students. This vision is likely to give continuity, completeness, coherence, consistency and efficiency to the teaching process, ensuring the optimal conditions for teaching and individualized learning, for systematic use of student-centred teaching and learning strategies.

The results of the evaluations and the individualized plans of learning are communicated to parents and become documents of the student's educational portfolio.

These changes in the assessment imposed “from outside” are likely to support the education actors' efforts in changing attitudes and behaviours related to evaluation. The fact that at primary school level there is a modern culture of evaluation is not an accident. At this level, the reforms have been ample and forced behavioural and mentality changes (such as the emergence of digital textbooks, the preparatory form, the introduction of the new subject matters such as personal development, the evaluation report, etc.).

### **3. Purpose of Study**

Our aim is to identify elements of the assessment culture in Romanian school (teachers', students' and parents' beliefs regarding school assessment).

### **4. Methods**

In this study, there were used questionnaires for teachers, students and parents regarding the roles, methods and values of school evaluation.

We conducted two focus groups with two categories of subjects: 20 teachers (10 teachers with less than 10 years of experience and 10 teachers with an experience of over 10 years in the field). A number of 220 participants were included in the study: 100 students from primary school, 80 teachers from primary and secondary school and 60 parents.

## 5. Findings

The results collected stress the idea that the assessment culture in Romanian school is a mix between tradition and innovation. At primary school level an innovative culture of assessment dominates while at secondary level the assessment culture is more traditional. Students from primary school have a positive perception on assessment. Even if during the national assessments most students (53%) say they have "emotions" they do not perceive evaluation as a "test" but rather "as a regular assessment, we have to show what we know". Instead, teachers and especially parent shave a traditional behavioural pattern, wanting "to know where they stand in the student / child hierarchy in class / school".

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaires show that the majority of respondents (teachers, students and parents) consider school evaluation the main tool of differentiation. One of the most important roles of school assessment is the certification (through exams). The emotions generated by assessment are dominantly negative (fear, anxiety, and stress). Even if there are opinions that recognize the positive role of assessment for learning, they are more frequent among subjects at primary school level.

**Table 1.** Students' perception on school assessment

Perception on assessment	Teachers' perception	Students' perception	Parents' perception
Assessment – as selection/ hierarchy	52%	54%	72%
Assessment as checking	48%	62%	65%
Assessment as optimisation of learning	53%	43%	36%

The questionnaire addressed to parents show that parents usually have a 'mediated' representation on evaluation: on the one hand, they perceive assessment through their children, on the other hand, they relate to their own experience in being assessed. Most parents perceive evaluation as a moment of "accounting" and appreciate "objectivity" and "fairness" in evaluation. Although they declare that they encourage children to "learn for life", in fact, most "help" them obtain the best possible grades, getting involved in doing homework, requesting consultations with teachers, etc. In other words, parents remained tributaries to a traditional conception about evaluation.

The results of the focus group held with teachers showed that teachers with more than 10 years' experience consider assessment the main element of differentiation, selection and adjustment of teaching. "The pupils' assessment is an evaluation of the teacher" is one of the expressions representative for the group of teachers. Exigency, objectivity and alternation of the methods of evaluation are other things appreciated by the group of experienced teachers. Some show a "nostalgia" for grades that "expressed more clearly what students know".

Teachers with less experience appreciate that the assessment today is "friendly" by using qualifications and by highlighting each child's interests. They, too, appreciate exigencies ("it is important to be exigent in order to form correct habits", RP - 2 years' experience) and are more open to use modern forms and methods of evaluation.

## 6. Conclusions

From the research carried out, even if on a limited number of subjects, we can conclude that in the Romanian education, particularly at primary level we can talk about a new assessment culture evident in the teachers' behaviour, resulting in the more frequent use of modern methods, instruments and techniques of evaluation (projects, portfolios, formative assessment, and digital evaluation). Even if certain elements of conservatism coexist with the innovative elements, the latter ones dominate. An important role in the formation of a new assessment culture was held by the changes imposed by the evaluation reform, which have gradually brought about changes in teachers', pupils' and parents' mentality and behaviour.

Another practical conclusion that emerges from this study is related to the teacher training for a culture of evaluation, the investigation of their own beliefs about assessment, of their values, style of assessing behaviour which lead to a more refined teaching behaviour, with a positive impact on students.

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