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**STUDENTS' BACKLASH AGAINST TEACHERS METAPHORS
USED IN THE EVALUATIVE PROCESS**

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Abstract

Evaluation is probably the most active component of the learning process from the perspective of the anxiety-generator potential that can be triggered in a learner. Metaphors used by the teacher as figures of speech in educational language preclude, accompany and follow up the assessment activity becoming either a triggering or an inhibiting agent of the learner's anxiety. Depending on the evolution of this process various effects of the language used are produced in the other participant in the educational act, i.e. the learner. Cathartic discharge or emotional vent-out, metaphors used by the learner are the perfect picture of the confrontation that has just taken place. The aim of this paper is to identify the errors made by teachers in the evaluation process and to analyse the students' responses to situations that they see as conflictual, the evaluation war, as many of them perceive it. I analysed the opinions, perceptions, attitudes of 625 school students, aged 10-14 years – 332 girls and 292 boys, grades 5 to 8, using focus groups and in-depth interviews. The research questions were the following: 1) What are teachers' errors in the evaluation process? and 2) What are students' reactions to teachers' errors and how do they develop defence mechanisms? Results revealed six types of errors and among the reactions identified were on the one hand, neuro-vegetative manifestations and extreme psycho-behavioural disorders, and on the other hand, adaptation through affective, motivational and volitional mobilisation, or a backlash that can lead to back fighting.

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1. Introduction

Teachers and students alike would agree that the relationship between them is paramount to academic success and personal development of students in their school years. Teacher-student interactions and their effects on learning have rightfully been a constant preoccupation of educators. According to Hamre et al. (2012), it is not enough for teachers to learn about effective interactions between teacher and children, they actually need skills involving identification of effective interactions with a high degree of specificity in order to be most likely to transfer the coursework into changes in their practice” (p. 98). It is a known fact that teachers indeed make a difference in students’ attitude to learning and motivation in general. In particular, it is the affective element that teachers bring into the classroom that influence students’ learning process. Students perform better when they know that their teacher believes in them and is willing to work with them. Children need teachers who make a passion out of their job, teachers who can inspire and ignite them. Children who consider school useless perform worse, they lack motivation and a sense of direction. Therefore, teachers’ affective behaviour in the classroom is extremely important. Teachers who can show interest in their students’ needs and who can display empathy towards children are the most likely to have successful students. An essential component of the relationship between teacher and student is their interaction with reference to evaluation, both summative (in tests) and formative (in class questioning). Unfortunately, we often come across short-circuits in this process and these are reflected in the language used by both teachers and students. Therefore, an analysis of the faulty interactions as perceived by students can give us valuable insights into these mechanisms.

1.1. Constructivist approaches

As a theory of learning, constructivism considers the learning environment as a type of small-scale society, a community of learners collectively taking part in an activity, discourse, a process of interpretation, justification, or reflection (Fosnot, 2005, p. ix). A constructivist approach to education would then entail that knowledge is individually constructed by the student himself and learning takes place in a social environment, i.e. the classroom, through well-chosen and constructed learning experiences designed by the teacher. There exists a powerful relationship between the learning environment and the learning process. Thus, a constructivist teacher would encourage respect and acceptance of others’ opinions, even if they may be divergent, in this way fostering independent and creative thinking. Meaning is achieved through a process of negotiation between individuals. Teachers establish relationships and actively reflect on their actions, making efforts to model and construct explanations, in a carefully adapted discourse (Fosnot, 2005, p. 280). Nowadays teachers have come to understand that learning is not only about mastery of concepts and ideas, it is more about interaction, growth, and development (Fosnot, 2005). As long as a teacher regularly interacts with a student in a collaborative way, he/she will be able to understand how a certain learner acquires knowledge and thus can better address the learner’s needs.

1.2. Evaluation anxiety

According to Sieber, anxiety represents a “vital adaptive mechanism that forewarns man and higher animals of possible dangers and triggers innate and learned coping responses” (1980, p. 17).

Among early studies of anxiety and learning, Mandler and Sarason (1952) identified the following components of evaluation-related anxiety: a) anxiety responses ‘relevant to the task’, which can reduce anxiety and contribute to the completion of the task and b) anxiety responses ‘irrelevant to the task’, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and heightened somatic reactions. Later, Liebert and Moris (1967) set forth a two-factor model, dividing test anxiety into two components: ‘worry’, and ‘emotionality’. On the one hand, ‘worry’ involves the cognitive elements of the personal experience with test anxiety, such as negative expectations or the individual’s cognitive concerns about the evaluative situation. Emotionality entails physiological, autonomic reactions that might take place under conditions of testing stress. However, more recent researchers (Wine 1980) propound a cognitive-attentional model designed for researching test anxiety. This approach considers test anxiety as a multidimensional construct, which cannot be studied one-sidedly. Moreover, it also aims at separating the construct of test anxiety into cognitive, affective and behavioural elements.

2. Problem Statement

Beyond the extremely complex roles and functions of evaluation in the learning process, widely debated in specialist literature, beyond all theoretical perspectives propounded by evaluation theory, in the practice of evaluation process within the classroom there arise a series of phenomena, factors or pervert effects that precede, accompany and follow the very act of evaluation. Teachers’ free expression of ideas and conceptions on evaluation, in the studies they made, and research performed there are detailed observations on interpersonal connotations that come into play or that are affected by the evaluation process. However, it is fascinating to analyse students’ reactions and opinions (the subjects of evaluation).

EVALUATION IS WAR could be the conceptual metaphor for all verbal and non-verbal expressions, verbalised or only thought out, for all overt or covert behaviour manifestations, expressive or symbolic of both parties involved in evaluation: teacher and student. Most studies focus on the anxiety produced / induced to the student in the act of evaluation, on a certain fear more or less felt by the student. Other studies focus on negative effects on self-esteem, on student demotivation or even jadedness. It can be rightfully stated that during evaluation, just like in the case of other components of the learning process, the teacher has a power precedent over the student (Iordăchescu, 2013). He is the utmost decision-maker, he possesses all the levers of control, he calls the shots (“I make the rules here!”). The teacher decides, sometimes discretionarily, when he performs evaluation, where he does it, how long it takes and how it is organised. He is the one who establishes the contents, sometimes incongruous with what he/she taught (“Teacher, you never taught us this!”), which are the performance criteria against which evaluation is made. Most of all, he is the one who, at the end, measures, passes value judgements on what he measured, and sticks a label against that learning outcome. Awful enemy to the poor student, don’t you think?

As if the anxiety potential of the evaluation proper hasn’t been enough, in certain situations it can be enhanced by a series of errors and mistakes which certain teachers make with a sometimes devastating effect on students’ performance and behaviour.

3. Research Questions

Starting from the assumption that it is the teacher that makes certain mistakes in the evaluation process, I undertook a study of the effects of such mistakes on students' performance and behaviour and how they can cope with the anxiety potential of evaluation.

3.1. Research question 1

What are teachers' errors in the evaluation process that affect students' performance and behaviour?

3.2. Research question 2

What are students' reactions to teachers' errors and how do they develop defence mechanisms?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to investigate teachers' errors in the process of evaluation and how students develop defence mechanism against what they perceive as a war against them, in which they need to find the best weapons in order to defend themselves against the negative effects of the anxiety that evaluation creates, especially in the case of faulty evaluation procedures. Evaluation per se is a stressful activity and students may perform below their capacity under stressful test conditions, therefore the aim of teachers should be to diminish the anxiety potential of tests, and not to enhance it.

5. Research Methods

The investigation I carried out involved a number of 625 school students, aged 10-14 years (enrolled in lower secondary state school system). The population had the following characteristics: 332 girls and 292 boys, grades 5 to 8 – the 5th graders having completed a national evaluation exam in Maths and Romanian/mother tongue and 8th graders preparing for a national evaluation which will determine their admission to upper secondary school.

5.1. Research method 1

One of the research methods I used was the focus group, in order to record pupils' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards testing and evaluation in general. During discussions, I focused on what students perceive as teachers' errors in evaluation, including tests and formative evaluation in the classroom. In particular, the focus group was used to collect answers for the first research question.

5.2. Research method 2

Another research method used was the in-depth interview, as I considered that the focus group took in general less time than an in-depth interview, and during the latter I could talk individually and reach deeper into the workings of pupils' various reactions to the effects of evaluation errors committed by different teachers. The second method was more useful for the research question 2, as pupils had the chance to describe into more detail their reactions.

6. Findings

6.1. Types of evaluation errors

As a result of the discussions with pupils, I classified the errors described by students into six categories. The specific expressions used by the students were also recorded accurately:

1. *The teacher uses evaluation as a means of punishment for undesirable behaviours*: “last time you upset me really badly, so today I will give you a test paper”, “you’re too talkative – take out a sheet of paper, you’re taking a test now”, “you ran on the corridor, you pushed one another, now come to the board and I will question you from our current lesson”, “you deserve an 8, but as you have been disrespectful, I will give you a $2 - 8 + 2 = 10$, so your grade is 5”.

2. *The teacher uses evaluation in order to hide his own lack of motivation for teaching*: “today I don’t feel like a new lesson, so I will give you a test”, or his own inability to answer students’ questions: “I’m sick of your questions, we’ll now take a test”.

3. *Tests are unpredictable in terms of contents and timing*: Very rarely do teachers let the students know when they will be evaluated. “Term papers are scheduled; individual classroom questioning and test papers are not.” “When we were announced we were going to take a pop quiz, I started sweating”, “at the beginning of the lesson, she asked each of us a question and afterwards she gave us grades”, “she said next time we would take a test, but we didn’t”.

Surely, an aspect that can be both cause and effect of the above situation is bad classroom management (especially time management), given the fact that Romanian teachers always complain about lack of time: “I didn’t have time to correct all your term papers”, I don’t have time to fill in my personal grade book”, I didn’t have time to cover all prescribed contents, so we’ll squeeze in this lesson”

4. *Predominant focus on product to the detriment of process*. We have all personally heard of or experienced true psychological tragedies and injustice felt by students who have correctly performed test tasks, sometimes in an innovative manner, but who, due to simple calculation error or inattentiveness, could not reach the final correct result. As a result, teachers did not credit anything of the process, and awarded not even a fraction of the score: “I only messed up the last operation, everything else was correct, but I didn’t get any points for that”.

5. *Error hunting*. Teachers sometimes fall into the temptation of error hunting. They may try to baffle the student through evaluation, to put him/her in the spot, to underscore the mistakes and what was wrong, overlooking the positive aspects, and assigning the learning acquisitions or student success to chance, or even worse, to cheating: “the first two subjects are full of mistakes, but the third one is correct – you surely cheated from your desk mate”. This type of comments are painfully perceived by students and this is reflected in their statements: “He/she has long been on the lookout to catch me off-guard”, “he bears me a grudge, and wants to cuff me”, “he can’t stand it when I respond correctly”, “seeing that my answers were right, he continued questioning me until I got one wrong”, “my paper was all red with corrections”.

6. *Verbal irony, sarcasm and verbal abuse*. The teacher student interaction in the evaluation process (both formative and summative) can be interspersed with teachers’ repeated instances of verbal irony, sarcasm and verbal abuse, which in turn can be fought back by students, using the same verbal expressions.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, irony represents “the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning”, whereas sarcasm is “a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain”. According to Casarjian (2000), verbal abuse is represented by “teachers’ verbal attacks on the students’ character or ability” (as cited in Brendgen, Bukowski, Wanner, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007, p.27). It may come under the shape of teasing, ridiculing, name-calling, or shouting at the child (see Casarjian, 2000; Garbarino, 1978; Schaefer, 1997), threats (Krugman & Krugman, 1984; Shumba, 2002), shaming and public criticising (Schaefer, 1997).

Examples of irony provided by our subjects would include: “Congratulations on your performance!” (when students performed badly in a test), “You’re on the first place in school ... backwards!”, “Well done, my champions! ... The most undisciplined in the whole school!”

Sarcasm instances are often verging verbal abuse: “You’ve just discovered America!”, “Are you Turkish?” (You don’t understand Romanian). “I’m absolutely sure you forgot your homework assignment at home, what about your head?”, “Did your last neuron get drowned?”

Examples of verbal abuse are much more frequent, unfortunately, and more painfully perceived. “You’re a bunch of dumbbells!”, “Your head is burning with science!” (ridiculing), “If you’re so smart, why don’t you come in front of the class and continue teaching yourself?”, “filthy/stupid cow”, “I’ll do my best to make you retake this grade!” (threat), “you’re the stupidest student I’ve ever had!” (public shaming), “Your handwriting is awful, it looks as if you’ve written with your feet!”.

6.2. Students’ reactions to evaluation errors

All the situations described above, corroborated with other disruptive elements of evaluation, deriving from pervert effects of the very functioning of the human psyche round off a terrifying picture, affectively and emotionally laden, capable of shattering even the strongest personality constructions of pupils. Many of them feel constantly under attack, hurt and consequently display fear at various levels of intensity and even undergo various disorders associated with this picture. Unfortunately, in many cases, not only is the students’ performance influenced in the evaluation process, not only is their trust in the stability and objectivity of the educational system completely crushed, not only do they lose confidence in teachers and interest in learning, but which is even more serious, the intensity of feelings and acute internalisation of negative effects may lead to neuro-vegetative manifestations (shaking, face blushing, paleness, sweating, nausea, fainting, dry mouth) or to psycho-behavioural disorders – emotional states such as fear (“I did not want to go to those classes anymore because I was afraid), disgust, contempt, depression, low self-esteem, frustration (“Why is my colleague’s grade different is her answer is the same?”), anger and a feeling of hopelessness (“I’m giving up – I learn all day long and it’s still not enough. I don’t care anymore.”) and extreme behaviours such as aggression (“I grew to believe she was my worst enemy.”), school dropout or suicide.

Some students, when faced with such situations, they experience them, adapt themselves and can overcome them, through affective, motivational and volitional mobilisation. Others choose to fight this war they feel the teacher has waged against them and choose to retaliate using the same weapons. Their responses to all this war theatre have, most of the times, a metaphorical colouring, the students achieving in this way, a verbal vent-out of all their frustrations and anxiety accumulated in time. This can be achieved through various means:

- *nicknames* assigned to their teachers. One of the most interesting responses of students are nicknames, which often express humour, but at the same time, they reflect students' need to offend their teachers. Here are some of the most expressive ones: Roly-Poly, Little Square, Matrix, Shark, Squirrel, Goat, Paedophile, Manly Woman, Stupid Fatboy.

- *irony* - "I wouldn't have understood it without your explanations", "our teacher is a walking encyclopaedia, but we don't understand anything he says"; "he speaks to nobody like the television set"; "he doesn't understand what he teaches himself";

- *sarcasm* - "our teacher has grown as fat as China"; "he's as stupid as night", "she didn't look at herself in the mirror before she left home";

- *verbal violence* - "How did you dare give me this grade?", "if you don't change my grade, you won't leave this room alive!"; "If I had a gun, I would shoot all teachers in this school!"

- *deviant, antisocial behaviours* (farces, videotaping and public shaming on social media, violence in class and during breaks).

7. Conclusion

From a pedagogical point of view, to evaluate means to measure (a quantitative operation of measuring school performance, to appraise (a qualitative operation of elaborating a value judgement on the result of measurement) and to decide (the operation of attaching a label according to the results of the previous two operations).

From a psychological point of view, however, things are a bit different, since to evaluate means primarily to find oneself in a situation which allows it. I refer here to a certain position of power, force, precedence that the evaluator has over the evaluated person. The manifestations of this power, more or less overtly or symbolically expressed, more or less visible sometimes come in the shape of abusive, tough shapes, being painfully felt by the evaluation subjects. EVALUATION AS WAR is a less debated reality, but no less important and worth addressing, which needs to be avoided in the context of the contemporary Romanian education, nowadays facing the challenges of contemporary society. Party to this war, once waged, is both teacher and student, each having their own weaponry, but out of this war there will be no winner, both parties stand to lose!

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