

THE EXPRESSION OF LEARNING ORIENTED ASSESSMENT CULTURE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. *This article presents the results of a thematic analysis conducted after informal interviews with 10 teachers and a head teacher of one secondary school in the city of Vilnius about their classroom assessment practices. Part of a larger critical ethnographic research exploring the change of school culture when introducing assessment innovation, this analysis reveals common classroom assessment practices, teachers' beliefs about the role of assessment, and the anxiety the school community shares around standardized testing and examinations. Literature suggests that both formative and summative assessment practices have great potential for improving students' learning. Teachers are encouraged to integrate assessment into their teaching in order to identify where their pupils are in their learning and the steps they need to take for improvement and progress (Gardner, Hayward, Harlen & Stobart, 2008). However convincing the arguments in favour of change are, the external school evaluation data shows that the real change in the way teachers assess students' progress is very slow and hardly noticed. The concept of learning oriented assessment culture (Birenbaum, 2014) could provide more understanding about the nature of good classroom assessment and necessary conditions that help to sustain school efforts in improving assessment practices.*

Keywords: *assessment culture, testing culture, formative assessment, test anxiety.*

Introduction

This article makes visible the issues that the teachers at one school face in relation to assessment. Teachers shared their ideas during informal interviews with the researcher as part of the schools' initiative to introduce the *System of Assessing Child's Individual Progress* (the SACIP) and to improve overall assessment practices.

The introduction of SACIP has become a real concern for the school after the Ministry of Education and Science in Lithuania issued a recommendation for schools to develop and implement the SACIP in order to support a holistic approach to child development and improve student motivation and learning outcomes. The ministry has provided very general principles for SACIP, that each school was supposed to adapt to their needs and contexts and to develop schools'

SACIP based on the agreements of the school community. As a result, schools in Lithuania started developing the SACIP without a clear orientation of a desired outcome, often missing the important phase of convincing teachers and the community about the benefits of change, and paying little attention to the vast body of research in this field and other related literature.

Under these circumstances, the school administration has responded to the researchers' proposal sent through the Vilnius municipality Education office to all secondary schools in the city inviting them to work jointly on the improvement of assessment practices. The readiness and high motivation of this school to implement change demonstrated in the introductory meetings with administration was a crucial factor for the researcher when selecting a school to carry out the doctoral research.

In the first meetings with administration it was agreed that our joint work would be guided by the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach while developing and implementing school's SACIP as we all share the belief in the capacity of the community to participate actively in all aspects of the research process that is meant to improve their daily practices (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). PAR in this case is regarded as a means of systemic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation (Adelman, 2006).

The very first step of PAR is a *Reconnaissance phase* that is essential in order to explore with others the kinds of felt concerns experienced by people and groups involved in and affected by a practice. The researcher's aim during this PAR phase was to collect evidence of how assessment is practiced in the school, to identify the reasons behind teachers' assessment choices and to encourage participants to ask critical questions about whether their practices, and perhaps the consequences of their practices, are educational or whether they are irrational, unreasonable or unsustainable (Kemmis et al., 2014).

For this reason, 11 informal interviews were conducted with volunteer teachers and a head teacher that provided a broad understanding of current assessment practices in school, teachers' shared concerns related to assessment, the dilemmas that teachers face when assessing students' work, and their anxieties about standardized testing and examinations.

Literature Review

Any discussion about improving students' learning and learning outcomes requires reconsidering common assessment practices. Assessment provides necessary data to monitor students' progress and to plan teaching. However, it is formative assessment that informs teachers about student learning at a point when

timely adjustments to teaching can be made (Black & Wiliam, 1998; DeLuca & Volante, 2016; Swaffield, 2011; Wiliam, 2011). Summative assessment, on the other hand, is guided by accountability demands and is performed at the end of instructional period, thus, it has little capacity to directly influence student learning. The historic account presented by L. Shepard of how assessment theory developed throughout the last century and how it affected the way teachers practice assessment in the classrooms up to now explains why classroom assessment has been associated with the scientific measurement approach that, “is exemplified by standardized tests and teacher-made emulations of those tests” (Shepard, 2000). It is not that summative assessment is bad in itself; what’s bad is the fact that it dominates teachers’, students’, parents’, head-teachers’ minds, prescribes some teaching, learning, and assessment practices, and stops teachers from exploring new ways of assessing students’ progress.

An alternative view on assessment that has a potential to stimulate reflective classroom practices and to develop the dialogic relation between teaching and assessment is often referred to as formative assessment. A number of researchers have acknowledged the benefits of formative assessment for students, their motivation, academic achievement, and overall learning gains.

P. Black and D. Wiliam’s (1998) influential review of 250 studies on classroom strategies revealed that the effect size of formative assessment varies between 0,4 to 0,7, which is larger than the effects produced by any other educational intervention. When describing the learning gains of formative assessment interventions the researchers compared its effect to the country’s (e.g. the USA) jump from approximately 20th position to that of top five countries in the international comparative study in mathematics. They also arrived at another important observation that formative assessment helps disadvantaged students’ more than others and in this way it helps to reduce the achievement gap among different student groups. In their analysis, P. Black and D. Wiliam were exploring the assessment practices commonly used by the teachers and described them as “a poverty of practice”. They were concerned that for teachers giving marks and grading students was more important than recognizing their learning needs, they also noticed that students were often compared to each other and this increased competition among them. Moreover, teachers’ beliefs that some students had a low potential for learning was upsetting as such a view has a direct implication on how teaching and assessment is implemented.

Apart from these observations they also identified certain strategies that showed positive effects on students’ learning, including asking questions to check how well students understood the material, wait time to let students think and produce more sophisticated and comprehensive answers, providing feedback to students about the qualities of their work with advice on what they can do to

improve, and to provide time for student to self-assess in order to increase their commitment to learning.

Another noteworthy study conducted by J. Hattie (2012), supports Black and Wiliam's thoughts about effective classroom strategies. He compiled a long list of effect sizes related to student outcomes, the top three of over 250 effect sizes are the prerequisites of successfully implemented formative assessment, and they are - collective teacher efficacy, self-reported grades, and teacher estimates of achievement. Other classroom practices that are normally attributed to formative assessment, like evaluation and reflection, scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, setting standards for self-judgement, record keeping, clear goal intentions, questioning, peer tutoring and many more proved to be effective and appeared on Hattie's list of effect sizes.

Unfortunately, it is correct to say that despite these conclusions and arguments in favor of formative assessment, the challenges described in Black and Wiliam's publication more than 20 years ago remain unchanged, especially in those educational systems where governments have put little effort in developing systemic and research based policies to improve student learning. In Lithuania, as indicated by the *External school evaluation reports*, teachers' practices to assess students' progress and application of formative assessment in the classrooms have been evaluated very low (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2019).

Nevertheless, in some countries the attempts to improve classroom assessment have started; some attempts being more successful than others. They do provide important data for thoughtful reflection on what measures help to sustain changes in assessment practice. One common conclusion that both the researchers and the practitioners point to is the importance of changing attitudes of the education community about the role of assessment. That it is not only about judging students but a way to support and improve students' learning.

M. Birenbaum (2014) suggested exploring the concept of culture to better understand how change in attitudes that later translates into daily teaching and assessment practices takes place in schools. She identified two opposing cultures present in schools, grading oriented testing culture (TC) and learning oriented assessment culture (AC). In TC, teaching and assessment are considered as distinct activities, the assessment fulfils the accountability demands and therefore is characterized by the power relations between the assessor and the assessed, standardized forms and procedures, and ignorance of the students' individual needs and capacities.

When it comes to AC, it is conceptualized as the complex system where classroom learning and teacher professional learning systems interact and evolve to create new knowledge. Teaching and assessment is in dialogic relation in order

to support learning and empower the learner. The individualized approach is preferred and individual learner's needs are respected.

This joint concept of assessment and culture offers a new perspective on the analysis of school improvement. Without any doubt, the cultural change will challenge the assumptions, beliefs, behaviors, practices and what C. Levi-Strauss calls the unwritten rules that school community obeys unconsciously without understanding them (Morgan & Just, 2000). Schools that have courage to work on this should be aware in advance that this is not a quick and easy undertaking.

Method

As described in the literature, PAR offers a framework for transformative school practices. Embedded into the systemic inquiry approach, PAR invites the researchers to create better knowledge to theorize and inform practice. By taking *action turn* seriously, the researchers recognize the connections between experience, human participation, and the generation of new knowledge (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Not surprisingly the school's attempt to introduce the SACIP as assessment innovation had been planned in line with the five PAR steps: reconnaissance, planning, observing, enacting and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014). The first *reconnaissance* step was crucial as it helped to identify the assessment related areas of felt concern experienced by the school community. Since the initiative was planned to begin in March 2020, coinciding with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PAR beginning date was moved to June when the first introductory researcher and teachers' meeting took place in order to get to know each other and share preliminary views on assessment. At the end of the meeting, the researcher invited volunteers to share individually their assessment beliefs and talk about classroom assessment practices through an online communication platform. Out of 28 participants, 11 teachers left their contact information in the researcher's notebook. Shortly after this meeting, the informal interviews were conducted. The length of each varied from 30 minutes to one hour. The teachers who gave interviews were all women, two teachers were generalists teaching primary level students, one teacher was teaching ceramics as an extra curriculum subject, one teacher was a social pedagogue responsible for helping underachieving students, among those 11 was also the school's head teacher, the rest were subject teachers teaching grades 5 through 12. The purpose of these interviews was to get to know people better, to establish rapport with teachers and to work out what was happening in the teachers' shared setting, it was also an attempt to form the initial group of co-participants – a public sphere (Kemmis et al., 2014).

The research object, the school culture, determined the selection of the methodology of the overall study. The ethnographic approach in combination

with the PAR strategy made up the research framework, therefore the methods to collect and analyse data were typical of ethnographies – participant observation and ethnographic interviews. All ethnographic studies usually start from the participant observation in order to learn how people act in certain situations; the deeper interviews follow later when the relation between the researcher and participants is established. Due to the pandemic, the researcher had no possibility to start from participant observation, instead she made a decision to talk with teachers about their practices in the manner of a casual and friendly conversation that normally occurs between the researcher and the observed during the participant observation. Ethnographers can collect most of their data through casual conversations each time gradually introducing new ethnographic questions (Spradley, 1979).

All conversations were recorded; in total almost 8 hours of teacher talk were transcribed by the researcher in order to prepare the data for further analysis. The first step of analysis was coding and it involved assigning symbolic meaning to data units compiled during the study so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The second step was grouping those codes into smaller number of pattern codes, more meaningful units of analysis that cover large amount of data. Pattern codes made a list of topics that represent the areas of felt concern to the school community, which in the next step were systemically organized into a set of challenges that the school community is going to address through PAR.

Results

The analysis of conversations with teachers yielded a number of themes that define teachers' classroom practices, their perceptions about assessment, and their roles, commitments and relations with others. Some of these themes are presented below. The presented themes are illustrated with the quotes from teachers' talk and discussed in relation to the scientific literature. The following themes were identified:

Sustaining/maintaining strong commitment to teachers' professional standards. Teachers' talk reveals how demanding they are of themselves; they assume that it is their duty to ensure students have learned what was expected. Sometimes teachers were overly critical about themselves “...*if I failed to ensure that they [students] had learned, I had no right to request ...no right to demand from them to behave as I expected*”. They had doubts about their decisions, reflected on their practices, recognized their failures, and were looking for explanations, one teacher said “...*I was analysing their answers...and then I could*

see if that was my teaching mistake or my wrong decision, or are there any other reason, like illness, why a child's performance was poor." Teachers' ability to reflect echoes J. Dewey's (1910, p.6) thoughts about the role of reflective thought "Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitute a reflective mind" that is truly educative.

Teachers did not calculate their teaching hours, that has become obvious during the pandemic, when they had to overcome a challenge to start using technologies for teaching and spent hours on preparation and communication with the students and their parents, *"I know it's time consuming but it is my responsibility to provide feedback to students and parents, I spend about two hours for each class to comment on every student's progress on a test...and parents were surprised to see that, some even wrote good words back to me"*. Teachers told stories about how they were writing personal messages about what they did well and what needs to be improved in their work during the pandemic, for some teachers who teach over 200 students it took hours every week. Primary teachers told me how they were checking their students understanding in every math and language lesson and daily analyzed their results in order to plan their teaching for the next day's lesson. All this experience could be inspiring for other teachers who feel tired and exhausted in order to motivate their colleagues and to build a school based professional learning community where both success and failure stories are reflected in order to improve practice (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Negotiating equity in assessment. The fact that almost every teacher was talking about the importance of being fair and assessing students' results objectively showed that the questions of equity really matter to them. In the school, they have students who have a range of learning needs and cognitive capacities, and their speed of learning and motivation differs. Unfortunately, not all families tended to follow school advice and consult specialists who diagnose their children learning needs. The diagnosis would entitle them to extra support of psychologists, social pedagogues, speech therapists, etc. while for teachers it would allow more freedom to individualize the curriculum and assessment requirements. Otherwise, teachers have little freedom to ignore the national standards and achievement requirements, and sometimes they feel desperate about parents' decision, putting pressure on children and desire to help these students. They ask rhetorical questions like *"what am I supposed to do if I see he is working hard but the results do not reach the standards, I cannot write good marks it would be unfair in relation to other students and unprofessional, but on the other hand giving all the time only low marks demotivates students"*.

In the literature, the issue of fairness or equity in assessment is approached from different perspectives, namely measurement theory and sociocultural theory. The chosen approach may lead to the reproduction of certain cultural practices

and discrimination (Gipps & Stobart, 2014). Teachers' talk revealed that the measurement approach puts pressure on them while the contradiction between the students' effort and the academic performance remains unsolved. In learning oriented culture, teachers need to find balance between those two; however, both, when overestimated, may work against the equity the teachers may be trying to achieve for their students (Wiliam, Brookhart, Guskey, & McTighe, 2020).

Applying assessment practices intuitively. The analysis of classroom practices showed that some elements of formative assessment had been used intuitively by teachers. When asked, if they were familiar with the formative assessment strategies, they could hardly mention any, but the descriptions of their lessons showed they had been using some, although sometimes the process had lacked the consistency and purpose. For example, the majority of teachers said, they had been using student self-assessment, but it was not clear how they incorporated students' self-assessment into the overall assessment framework. They could not provide comprehensive answers and the impression remained that the process in itself was the aim.

Several teachers spoke about how they were activating learners as instructional resources for one another (Wiliam, 2011), *"I ask students to read each other's work and think of what they liked most in classmates' work and what would they change to improve the work"*.

Teachers were encouraging students' self-directed learning, and tried *"to ensure the regularity and consistency of student learning, learning should take place not only before the test"*.

One of the main principles of formative assessment is to make sure the students have learned and only then, to move on to the next topic. Teachers who were talking about their practices seemed to follow this principle *"I am not starting the new unit until the majority in the class has demonstrated the sufficient understanding of the previous units, even if we are behind schedule"*.

In this context, it is important to draw our attention to the teachers' assessment literacy (Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003; DeLuca, La Pointe-Mc Evan, & Luhanga, 2015) that has room for improvement.

Experiencing anxiety about external assessment. Teachers' talk about examinations or standardized tests seem to be upsetting to teachers. They expressed how insecure they were feeling about school ratings that are based on the results of standardized tests. They felt it was unfair to compare the results of students who have different learning needs, and to judge teachers' work based on that data. The research school is located on the outskirts of the city, many students from neighbouring villages are brought by bus, a number of students receive free lunches, the overall social, economic and cultural context is relatively low if compared with other city areas. The comparison of schools based on the external

testing results has a negative effect on students learning, increases competition, and teachers expressed concern about students' psychological condition and increased test anxiety before high stakes examinations. For the teachers, it causes a sense of guilt, or they feel shame as seen from teachers' talk *"It's a small village [some call this city area a village as it used to be separate from the city some time ago], everyone knows everyone and it is so humiliating when people start talking, especially if you work so hard"*.

It is not surprising why some teachers' start "teaching to the test" (Popham, 2001, Dionne & Milley, 2009), which narrows the curriculum and takes away a chance for students to receive a holistic education. It also has to do with the issues of ethics in assessment and teaching, when teachers give more time and attention to the students who choose to take the exam, other students receive fewer opportunities for learning.

To sum up, it is hardly possible that examinations and standardized tests would cease to exist soon, because education is an extremely rigid system and any change of such nature would take years or even decades. However, for the teachers working in these conditions, the advice would be do not forget what is the ultimate goal of education, and to plan clear steps how to move towards this goal. Better familiarization with the test requirements, the analysis of students' performance on these tests, professional talk with other teachers about the results, and planning further teaching would be a practical utilization of test results.

Conclusion

This article presents one fragment of the larger ethnographic research carried out in conjunction with the PAR implemented by the school community in order to introduce the assessment innovation in schools. This analysis presents teachers perceptions about assessment and their daily assessment practices told by the teachers during online conversations with the researcher. It reveals some challenges that school faces in relation to assessment and raises certain questions about the origins of certain classroom practices. Frequent testing, narrowing curriculum, teaching to the test, labelling students based on their cognitive abilities, providing more help before examinations to the high achievers rather than the low achievers, focusing on grading rather than learning, tolerating unethical assessment practices are some examples of how school responds to the external pressure to succeed in examinations and testing. If analysed from the perspective of critical theory, it reveals how oppressive the examinations and grading might be, how they reproduce certain cultural patterns in schools, and how they contradict the nationally declared educational goals. It also highlights the importance of rethinking assessment policies on the national level, like the role of standardized testing, the use of testing results, the form and scope of

examinations, the enrolment to the university, etc. in order to ensure the alignment of curriculum goals, teaching methods and assessment practices.

On the other hand, the study revealed how innovative some teachers are in their daily work and how compassionate and dedicated they are to their students, especially to the disadvantaged and special needs students. It is an important factor but not sufficient, however. In order to become better professionals, who are ready to reflect on the added value of certain assessment policies and practices, they need to improve the overall understanding about the different roles of assessment and to develop their assessment literacy that would enrich their repertoire of assessment methods to be introduced in the classrooms. The school based professional learning community of teachers who regularly discuss and reflect on their classroom practices is a key factor that would contribute to the development of learning oriented assessment culture.

Though the habits that are typical of the testing culture are very common among teachers, parents and decisions makers on the national and local levels, the successful practices generated in schools might be ahead of the system and foster the bottom up approach to the overall transformations of the education systems to better meet students learning needs. The ample research on assessment provides convincing arguments for the power of “assessment to become the glue that holds pieces of learning process together” (Graue, 1993). This particular research aims to contribute to the vast body of research on school improvement by introducing cultural dimensions to sustain assessment changes in schools.

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