Human Agency in the Classroom from the Vantage Point of Worst Pedagogical Assessment Practices: Social and Moral Considerations

Victorita Trif*

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, 90 Panduri Avenue, Bucharest, 050657, Romania

Abstract

This paper will discuss the worst pedagogical practices of assessment from the multilevel perspectives, focusing on human agency in the classroom as the result of the relationship between assessment issues and the classroom management. The purposes of the narrative research by interviewing are the following questions: what are the misconceptions regarding the Romanian assessment? Do these errors create a new human agency in the classroom? How can one avoid the worst pedagogical practices of assessment? The data collected infer that on the side of the students there are conflicts and tensions between the assessed and the assessor.

Keywords: educational practices, assessment, human agency, educational psychology, qualitative analysis, wording, interview;

1. Introduction

It is no doubt that theories concerning assessment illustrate a multilevel system: the relationships between learning and assessment, assignment and communications issues, the assessment approaches according to educational psychology, the link between curriculum and assessment, creative assessment, classroom management and assessment strategies, and so on. Any theory is sustained by basic studies and argues its involvement in the educational process.
As a result of this stratification background we propose a reflexive paper taking into account the greatest part of the basic perspectives from the literature in the field, however focusing on the relationship between assessment and classroom management and its consequences on building in the classroom a human agency.

2. Method

Our qualitative approach is based on K. Punch (2009) and R. Gomm (2008) considerations about instruments design. The research methodology consists in a descriptive way to identify the worst pedagogical practices of assessment and its irresponsible results on developing into the classroom a human agency from the vantage point of social and moral considerations. The target population (46 students from the University of Bucharest) was interviewed by a tool prepared two months before the application given the effectiveness of the interview. The purpose of this meeting planned to take place between the interviewed and the researcher was to collect data about personal experiences of the students concerning assessment in the classroom. This collection of data in a narrative method was interpreted according to the research questions (objectives): to identify the misconceptions about the Romanian assessment; to describe the contributions of these errors in building a new human agency in the classrooms; to suggest ways to avoid the worst pedagogical practices of assessment.

3. Results

The meta-language elements applied to the collected answers could be synthesized as follows:

a) “It is I the one affected by the assessment”. From observational learning, the explanations are focused on the students' person affected by worse pedagogical practices of assessment.

b) As a teacher or future teacher, I shall face a series of dilemmas from an evaluative point of view: will I promote within the assessment practice democratisation or devaluation, uniformity or diversity of assessment tests, technology or validity, efficiency or professional autonomy? In fact teachers do not care about the moral uncertainty promoted that explains the creation of the new moral agency into the classrooms because of the social motives, social relationships and socio-cultural contexts.

c) The great part of the interview analysis concludes that the classroom as a community is disrupted by the worst assessment practices: 'I was evaluated in a dogmatic fashion' (traditional assessment tests were employed). The teacher was not able to assess my practical, knowledge-applying, reality investigation skills, my social competences, my initiative, motivation, perseverance so that he or she should achieve an assessment neighbouring real life. Moreover, interpreting these findings V. Trif (2011) considers (pp.36) that the “I” – “teacher” opposition establishes a clear cut border between the one performing the assessment and the assessed, the distinction proving the permanent tensions between the two roles of educational assessment: the etymological significance of assessment concentrated in the Latin “ad sidere” – assessment is a common activity conducted by the teacher with the pupil -, typical for all specific studies, is absent from the collected texts, the global image shaping up a conflict whose magnitude exceeded the apparent tension between the assessed and the assessor that we have been used to in the speciality literature. Three solutions are imperative in this case:

1) Adopting, at a national level, key policies meant to open new guiding lines convergent with the inseparability of the assessment curriculum. For instance, P. Broadfoot (2007) introduces a new word with a remarkable suggestive force, “cursessment” (pp.8), which subscribes to this educational policy.
2) The achievement of a communication-stimulating assessment ('assessment for communication') which would increase both actors’ involvement in the assessment. Observation: the analysed discourses suggest that all the evaluated subjects are unhappy and that the communication potential within the evaluation is absent.

3) The media might hold a key role in changing cultural stereotypes and misconceptions regarding the Romanian evaluative approaches. R. Slavin (2009) indicates that the teacher uses media communication techniques to foster supportive interaction in the classroom.

4) If we relate the content of these interviews to the studies on assessment which dedicated themselves to the most important assessment effects or errors, we can state that the halo effect (the teacher’s conviction based on the general impression which he or she has about a student may lead to his or her over assessment or under assessment) and the mild effect (the students are appreciated depending on how well they are known by the teacher: the well-known students are more leniently assessed, unlike the less-known students), the logical error (the performance criteria are replaced by less significant elements – the paper format, the drafting manner, the original presentation) are the most popular flaws noticed in the discourse analysis, beyond the fact that regardless the constant individual error – which is only natural - or the role effect or the examiner’s individual equation (the teacher displays a personal manner of approaching the examination) are manifested new Romanian effects without connections to those existing in the world wild literature. In fact the high number of interviews (46) provides strength to the conclusions formulated here in the way that the assessment practices in Romania need to be changed.

5) Making a comparative analysis of the conclusions drawn from our research and the problems formulated within a famous study carried out within the other cultural areas we notice an alarming trend regarding a new approach of assessment which would provide consistency to technical decisions.

We suggest that the assessment tyranny, in the way of exacerbating the punitive component and penalizing results within a coercive educational system, should be replaced by innovative assessment practices. Considering that the assessment notion is irretrievably connected to the curriculum and to the Romanian educational practices, as they result from the analysis of the interviews above, are used traditional pedagogical practices, we demand rethinking the lesson as V. Trif indicate [2] from a multiform perspective; it is necessary to offer a set of professional instruments selected in relation to the scientific grounds behind the operation of a lesson (these harmoniously fit learning theories and training models) and authentic didactic approaches possible to be adopted by the faculty.

4. Discussion

In order to analyze these findings we discuss:

- These assessment practices suggest a new human agency in the classroom that could be explored in terms of social cognitive approaches to learning: attention, retention, production, motivation.
- Having negative models of social learning, students are ethically contaminated. We discuss here about one unique form of human agency - the moral one. Two problems are important:
  - a) the way in which students will incorporate the teachers' behaviour might be the first step to modeling the moral development;
  - b) the danger of the compromise or moral hazard: the indirect results of this new community promoting a culture of dishonesty into the classrooms.
- This moral agency inevitably suggests the impact of the worst pedagogical practices of assessment in the students' lives: every person can adopt ethics frauds. Moral mechanisms request from the part of the teacher a moral agent to adopt professional commitment and responsibility as a model and mentor in the students' lives.
5. Conclusions

- Taking into account both social and moral agencies we demonstrate that the unethical practices of assessment transform the classrooms community explicitly and implicitly because they offer an 'environment' in which students transform their experiences. These results sustains Santrock's (2008) view: “Observational learning is learning that involves acquiring skills, strategies, and beliefs by observing others” (pp. 244).

Among the elements of educational policies necessary to avoid the worst practices we advance some guidelines as a corollary of the research performed by us at the University of Bucharest as follows:

a) correlating assessment methods to the importance granted by the pupil or student to the assessed type of acquisition;

b) switching the focus from the assessment predominantly centered on summative purposes to an assessment subordinated to formative and diagnostic purposes;

c) the clear formulation of the assessment objectives, their communication to and even assessing their negotiation with the pupils or students;

d) the use of evaluative practices and approaches should rather be focused on assisting the pupil or student in learning than frightening them;

e) there is a preference for the assessment methods, sources and instruments to be employed in a friendly and comprehensible manner;

f) laying the stress on what the pupil or student has acquired, not on what he or she does not know;

g) engaging the pupils or students in activities which would allow them to practice and perfect the self-assessment ability;

h) ensuring means of forming teachers in the field of assessment, targeting the elimination of cultural stereotypes and misconceptions related to assessment and the decrease of their resistance in front of the innovative practices and the assessment authenticity.

References


