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School assessment from the perspective of safety and impact on the emotional and social sphere of an early school age child

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Summary

School assessment is one of the most significant elements of contemporary educational systems. It is especially important at the initial stage, as the first school impressions form child's awareness of being controlled (monitored) both at school and in life generally. Moreover, it influences further educational successes. Providing a child with psychic safety as well as eliminating possible fears and stressful situations, which are connected with adapting to a new environment, e.g. a new school, should make superior criteria, taken into account while choosing an assessment model and then evaluating pupils at school.

The article presents the results of a pilot study carried out among students, teachers and their parents using the interview technique concerning the comparison of the grade assessment system and the descriptive assessment system in the context of the school model of school assessment, safe and having the greatest positive impact on the emotional and social sphere of an early school age child.

Key words: grading and descriptive school assessment, children's sense of security

Introduction

School Assessment is the act of determining and evaluating learning results and communicating those results to the student¹. This evaluation consists in assigning the above-mentioned results, by way of a decision, to a position on a previously constructed scale of evaluations. Thus, in another approach, an evaluation is a statement of a evaluative nature, which is an expression of a positive or negative opinion about an object, state of affairs or an event.²

This statement may take the form of a grade or opinion expressed in writing or orally, as well as through external signs of the teacher's behaviour (facial expressions or gestures)³.

Valuing educational activity at the level of early childhood education plays an extremely important role, because school impressions and experiences from the first stage of education shape the child's awareness of being subject to assessment mechanisms both at school and in life. Assessment systems applied to students in grades I- III, determine the successful and effective adaptation of a child to the new environment, which the school undoubtedly is.

Assessment and the process of its construction also affect the psyche of the students, shaping the attitude and motivation to learn, creating in their awareness the image of the school and the teacher, and actively influence the further educational development of each child.

An incorrect evaluation system or a poorly performed procedure for evaluating educational achievements and progress may contribute to school failures, cause a child's reluctance to learn and imply a set of negative tensions and nervous reactions, manifested by fear of school and fear of participation in the school community.

That is why it is so important that the assessment system provides students with a sense of security so that this undoubtedly the most stressful and at the same time controversial element of the education system does not imply any negative effects in the school or class reality.

Additionally, the issue of school safety is a key and central concern. As a result of many reforms aimed at improving the education system, schools have been burdened with guidelines in the field of school safety and prevention in this area⁴.

¹ *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, red. T. Pilch, tom III, Warszawa 2003, s. 733.

² W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2017, s. 281.

³ W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2017, s. 282.

⁴ M. Choroszczyńska, M. Dotka, I. Konopka, E. Zwierzyńska, *Ocenianie w klasach I-III*, Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji Warszawa 2015, <http://www.bc.ore.edu.pl/Content/751/Ocenianie-w-klasach-I-III.pdf>.

The assessment made by the school education reform in 1999.

At the stage of early education there is a debate about the assessment system, which are subject to the students for several years. Pursuant to the Act Amending the Education System Act of July 25, 1998 and the Regulation on the principles of assessing, classifying and promoting students, conducting examinations and tests in public schools, issued by the Minister of National Education on April 19, 1999, the grading system was unified, which in relation to integrated teaching was adopted in the form of a descriptive assessment. In the Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of September 7, 2004 on the conditions and methods of assessing, classifying and promoting students as well as conducting tests and examinations in public schools, there is also an item regarding the assessment procedure: "In grades I-III of primary school mid-year and yearly grades in educational activities are descriptive grades"⁵. The assessment system based on evaluating the educational activity of students with the help of a verbal construction and taking the form of a verbal description has replaced the traditional, digitally expressed school grade. However, since the education reform was carried out, there have been many doubts and reservations, as well as negative opinions related to the change from grade to descriptive grade.

One of the basic tasks of elementary education is therefore to create appropriate conditions and circumstances for children for a successful educational start, which is undoubtedly a very complex concept. Its most important assumption is an attempt to develop a positive attitude in the child towards school, the teacher and the teaching process itself, and to eliminate the emerging fears and fears of what is new and unknown⁶. The fact that each child requires an individual approach, also in the teaching process, is reflected in the legal documents regulating education in Poland. In the core curriculum for general education for primary schools we read: "The school and individual teachers undertake activities aimed at individualized support for the development of each student, according to his needs and possibilities"⁷.

Without a doubt, in such circumstances it is particularly important to ensure the child a sense of psychological comfort and safety in the school environment.

The element that causes the most anxiety and stressful situations is the school control and assessment procedure. This is because it affects the psyche of the child and implies a system

⁵ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu z dnia 7 września 2004 roku w sprawie warunków i sposobów oceniania, klasyfikowania i promowania uczniów i słuchaczy oraz przeprowadzania sprawdzianów i egzaminów w szkołach publicznych*, Dz. U, 2004, nr 199, poz. 2046.

⁶ I. Kopaczyńska, *Ocenianie szkolne wspierające rozwój ucznia*, Kraków 2004, s. 45.

⁷ *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla szkół podstawowych*, Dz.U. 2016, poz. 895, Załącznik nr 2, s. 10.

of differentiated emotional reactions that shape student's attitude in relation to school, the teacher and the learning process.

Methodological assumptions

In addition to the substantive and functional assumptions underlying the genesis and introducing descriptive assessment to schools, it is also worth considering the comparison of both alternative assessment systems (grading and descriptive ones) to determine which of these conceptions performs this task to a greater extent. In order to prepare the relevant research, pilot studies were carried out in one randomly selected school in Łódź. A fragment of the research covering one school is presented below.

In order to compare both models of school assessment, in 2018 a research procedure was carried out with the participation of N= 51 students (28 girls and 23 boys) of two 4th grades of primary school, their parents N= 37 people and N= 4 teachers (N=2 female teachers early childhood education, N=1 female tutor and N=1 male tutor) making assessments in their everyday educational practice.

When justifying the selection of a group of students, it should be noted that class IV students have already encountered two separate assessment systems in their educational practice so far. In the past period of education, at the level of I-III, these students used a descriptive system on a daily basis, and at the IV, they participate in a grading model of evaluating their educational achievements.

Thanks to the reflections and experiences of fourth-graders, as well as the observation results to which the aforementioned group was subjected, it is possible to determine the impact of the assessment system on the youngest students and to consider which of the assessment models should be present at the level of early school education.

A similar reason is the basis for choosing the group of parents of the students who, like their children, had the opportunity to learn about both models of evaluating educational activity. The total of N= 37 parents (N=25 female and N=12 male) answered the researcher's questions.

The position and the views of parents, who confronted two alternative models of assessment are a valuable source of information and enable comparison of both these systems from the point of view of safety they provide to children

Finally, the third tested group were teachers. The aim of examining educators was to find out their views on the assessment process and their individual reflections as a result of comparing the different models used to carry out this procedure.

A diagnostic survey method with an interview technique was used. The researchers conducted, with the consent of the parents, short interviews with all the children present on the day of the study, their teachers from the level of early childhood education, current educators and parents during the school meeting.

The following research questions were discussed:

1. How do the respondents assess the use of grading and descriptive assessment models in terms of the child's emotional reaction?
2. What are the functions of grading and descriptive assessment in the opinion of respondents?
3. What advantages and disadvantages do the respondents see in the use of school descriptive and grading assessment from the perspective of safety and impact on the emotional and social sphere of the child?

Results

In the light of the research carried out in the sphere of the child's emotional reactions to the obtained assessment, the descriptive assessment is definitely more favourable. This is especially evident when the student receives a negative grade.

In the grading model of assessment in such circumstances, more than 50% of students have negative emotional reactions. This is confirmed both by the parents of the surveyed students and the students themselves. The system of negative emotional reactions in the surveyed children is characterized by sadness, crying, depression and discouragement from learning a given subject. Students are relatively often accompanied by a feeling of being inferior to their colleagues, as well as a loss of faith in their own abilities, which result in a significant reduction in the level of motivation and commitment in the process of acquiring knowledge and new skills. Different results are obtained from the analysis of the impact of descriptive assessment on the child's psyche, based on identical criteria. Here, as many as 90% of students treat the negative descriptive assessment as a clue that facilitates the correction of mistakes and the elimination of possible difficulties. In this way, even in the face of a "failure" during the test or the school test, the child develops a behaviour system known as "positive" emotional reactions.

In the minds of students, negative descriptive assessment is not used to expose errors or deficits in the knowledge they have acquired or the skills they have mastered, it does not tend to label them as "weaker" or "less gifted" students than others in terms of educational effectiveness. Its main task is only to signal to the child himself any imperfections that should

be corrected at the right moment in order to ensure further, successful and error-free school education.

Another undoubted weakness of the grading system is the selective function that the degree performs in school reality. In this way, the school and class environment is divided into "better" and "worse" students.

Students classified as "weaker" or assigned the status of "inferior" are isolated by their peers, have low self-esteem, lack self-confidence and remain on the margins of the school community. Often, teachers and the closest environment treat them in a way that does not allow them to perceive the potential of their real abilities and possibilities.

In this way, the proper development of school activity is inhibited, students condemned by their peers and the closest environment to educational failure are not able to fully develop their abilities, effectively improve their skills, and encounter difficulties in the process of acquiring new knowledge.

Descriptive assessment eliminates the risk of negative intra-school or intra-class divisions and thus allows avoiding factors and circumstances dangerous for students.

In contrast to the digital grade, the descriptive assessment fulfills an informative and diagnostic function, thanks to which it provides not only information about possible difficulties that may apply to each student in the process of acquiring knowledge, but also allows for quick intervention in order to eliminate potential irregularities and ensure error-free education the child at successive levels of the education system.

There are other negative phenomena in the student community related to the selective function of grading evaluation - jealousy and competition for grades.

Nearly half of the surveyed fourth-graders stated that in the classroom or school, there is envy about grades between students. This jealousy is often a factor that disrupts interactions within the peer group.

The grade becomes the main criterion on the basis of which individual students choose a group of friends and discriminate against their peers. Children are perceived mainly through the prism of the results they achieve in learning, and to a lesser extent by the character traits and dispositions they display and the personality predispositions that characterize them.

Another phenomenon present in the grading model of evaluation of educational activity, which may imply the existence of unfavourable relations in the school environment, is competition for grades. Of course, it is necessary to point out the interpretational dichotomism of the concept of competition. On the one hand, the competition of students for

grades may take a positive form, motivating to work and learning and contributing to the increase in the effectiveness of the teaching process.

On the other hand, in the school reality, such a competition appears much more often in a negative form, which gives this concept a pejorative meaning. Very often in students who constantly compete with each other for grades, changes can be seen in the mental and emotional sphere, manifested by hostility, hatred, as well as aggression, manifested towards their friends and colleagues.

Nearly 90% of parents admitted that their children often, and sometimes even every day, compete for grades. Their opinions were confirmed by over 80% of the surveyed students.

The desire to win, at all costs, the best possible grade is not conducive to an atmosphere of friendship and often leads to tensions and antagonisms in the classroom.

The teachers participating in the research procedure confirmed the existence of the above-mentioned phenomena and admitted that very often the pressure of the family and the environment leads a desperate student who wants to obtain the best possible grade, to behave far from any school morality and leads to interpersonal disturbances in relations with peers.

Contrary to the 'traditional' evaluation, descriptive one managed to limit the negatively interpreted student competition. This was confirmed by the opinion of 80% of the surveyed educators. This is because students receive from the teacher an individual description of the course of their learning and the progress made. The assessment provided by this form does not allow for a measurable comparison of the achievements of individual students, thus preventing and eliminating the above-mentioned negative and dangerous phenomena for the student's environment. It is undoubtedly a factor that, bearing in mind the child's safety and psychological comfort, allows to perceive the descriptive assessment system in a more positive perspective.

In addition, grading assessment is often used by teachers as a punishment or an element of order and discipline in the classroom. By threatening with a bad grade as a punishment for disobedience, the lack of compliance with the norms and patterns of behaviour constructed by teacher can not only make the child reluctant to learn, but also cause anxiety and fear of going to school. As many as 78% of students participating in the research procedure admitted the existence of the mentioned principle.

Contrary to the opinion of teachers, such a punishment certainly does not motivate children to further work or study. On the contrary, students feel intimidated, the effectiveness

of the learning process decreases, they learn to avoid bad grades and not gain skills and experience.

Finally, the aforementioned circumstances may lead to a disturbance of the teacher-student relationship, which will transform into a superior-subordinate one and a student treated in the subject category will become the teacher's subordinate, not a partner.

In reference to the procedure of formulating grading assessment, nearly 60% of students believe that teachers assess unfairly, because they are unable to notice students' progress and commitment, which are replaced by stereotypes and schematic, superficial evaluation of their educational effort. In this way, there is a risk of lowering self-esteem, self-confidence, and lowering the level of motivation and commitment to further learning, which can affect any child.

The students also admitted that bad notes received from the teacher in grading form may, contrary to the description, effectively discourage from learning a given subject (this opinion was confirmed by nearly 80% of fourth-graders).

Considering the results of the research procedure carried out, one can notice quite a clear advantage of descriptive assessment over the traditional grade one. Of course, the descriptive system is not without drawbacks. Both among students and their parents, as well as in the group of surveyed educators, it aroused a number of objections and controversies. For most students, the grading model is still an interesting alternative to verbal description, as it is a factor confirming full-fledged existence at a higher stage of higher education than in grades I-III.

The surveyed parents admitted that from the point of view of safety and influence on the emotional and social sphere of the child, the descriptive assessment system is definitely more favourable than the traditional one, especially at the stage of primary education. However, in their opinion, it does not meet a number of substantive assumptions on the basis of which it was introduced into the education system. Among the main weaknesses of the descriptive assessment, the parents mentioned the too general, schematic information system devoid of individualism, which was to provide parents with a verbal description of the school activities of their charges.

Teachers have also reported a number of controversies related to the descriptive system. The interviewed educators pointed to undoubted weaknesses including the lack of clear criteria on the basis of which the description would be constructed and the technical difficulties associated with conducting individual observation of each student, which is a condition for constructing a correct, objective assessment and providing parents with a lot of important

information in a descriptive assessment (too many students in the class and too short time during classes classroom).

As can be seen clearly, none of the compared models of evaluation remains free from flaws and weaknesses. Assuming the sense of security, a successful adaptation to school conditions and the correct social and psychological development of a child as a criterion, it seems more justified to have the description as an assessment obligatory in grades I-III.

Conclusions

When analysing the descriptive evaluation system, it is worth taking advantage of the possible improvement of its functioning. In order to meet its goals and considering the broadly understood safety in school reality, it is necessary to consider: how to ensure the transition from the descriptive level of educational achievement to the world of grading assessment, so that students had no feelings of insecurity? This problem, as S. Sulisz emphasizes, cannot be confined to the categories of a dispute: is it supposed to be a descriptive assessment or whether different scales should be used?⁸ However, it should be remembered that the descriptive assessment of the student's achievement should reflect the level of development of a given child. As emphasized by I. Pulak and K. Szewczuk "it is an element of formative assessment, in which not only the parent, but most of all the student, receives information about what knowledge and skills they have already mastered, and what they still have to work on. This form of feedback is not a summary of the learning process, but serves to support it in order to encourage students to make an independent educational effort"⁹.

Therefore, the discussion on the assessment system that should apply to early childhood education remains open and still valid. In response to the question about the most appropriate form of evaluation, both students, teachers and parents presented their own concepts of evaluation models for the educational activity of a child. The most interesting solution suggested by the participants of the research was to combine the advantages of both alternative models, which would result in a combination of grading and descriptive assessment. This would create a system applicable at the stage of integrated education, meeting the expectations of students, parents and teachers and ensuring the child's correct, safe psycho-social development and conditioning the successful course of further educational career of each student. As Grażyna Rudkowska notes, "even younger children are already

⁸ S. Sulisz, *Wychowanie fizyczne w kształceniu zintegrowanym*, WSiP, Warszawa 2002, s. 107.

⁹ I. Pulak, K. Szewczuk, *Możliwości budowania spersonalizowanej przestrzeni edukacyjnej dla wspierania rozwoju dzieci w wieku wczesnoszkolnym*, „Studia Paedagogica Ignatiana”, nr 20/3, 2017 s. 91.

beginning to formulate value judgments about themselves and others, which are not only assimilated from the environment, but also created autonomously as a result of social comparisons”¹⁰.

It is also worth using the experience of other countries. An interesting proposal was presented by A. Turek who described the formative assessment method in early childhood education, commonly used in the English educational system. The author points out that this method is a convenient tool for communication between the teacher and the parents of the student, it allows them to be informed about their progress and possible problems.¹¹. Thus, it can develop a communication scheme that will create a sense of security in children.

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¹⁰ G. Rudkowska *Samooceny a oceny rówieśników dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym*, „Psychologia rozwojowa”, tom 10, nr 2, 2005, s.71.

¹¹ A. Turek, *Ocena kształtująca w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, „Języki obce w szkole. Czasopismo dla nauczycieli”, nr 4/2011, s. 30-33.

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