

Assessment and School Success in Basic Education: Perspectives of Pupils

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Abstract

Assessment and school success is a theme that has, increasingly, deserved the attention of politicians, teachers, and parents. Assessment is an element that depicts the whole process of learning and the way it is practiced, is determinant for children success. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand how pupils that have “school success” and those that do not have it perceive assessment. The text presents some results of a case study, carried out in a school organization, located in the North of Portugal, which goal was to understand the perspective of learning assessment, near pupils that have school success (never repeated) and those that do not (have repeat once or more). Data was collected by semi-structured interviews, near 18 pupils (9 pupils with school success and 9 without school success). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and foster analyzed using content analysis.

The results show some convergences, and simultaneously, some divergences between the two groups of pupils. All pupils agree that their interest and motivation for each subject, depends on the content and the relationship that they establish with the teacher; they feel supported by the teacher to achieve good results, through diverse activities in the classroom. However, the pupils with less school success, recognize that teachers are able to identify their difficulties in order to help them overcome their difficulties, but they consider the strategies approached do not motivate them; they consider studying is important, but feel uninterested; they attend school because they are obliged; they consider that assessment is a punishment, but it is necessary.

Keywords: Assessment, School Success, Pupils.

Introduction

The subject of assessment and school success is very much debated, by politicians, teachers, students and parents, being reduced to, frequently, the debate of summative nature and certified dimension. Literature review highlights that assessment has the objective of promoting educational success, in a way that it constitutes a mechanism for assessing the quality of learning, including teachers, projects, curriculums, programs, materials, education, or politics, in order to have a sustained improvement of all devices, in particular, those related to pupils' learning. According to Perrenoud (1999) school success is, today, in general, associated to the pupils' performance: the ones that satisfy the norms of school excellence and progress in their courses are those who obtain success. As teaching professionals, it is recognized that it is easier to “tag” a student as good or bad, rather than looking for multiple complex factors that can justify their performance. However, what are the criteria that depend on school success? The quality of their teachers? The teaching quality they provide? The learning method and assessment techniques? The pupils' characteristics? Their social and economic surroundings? The expectations that each pupil has in relation to their own future?

The problematic of this case study, rose from these questions, is to know the perspectives of basic education pupils about school success, like an organized set of knowledge, attitudes, experiences and learning processes, and consequently, the sense that they attribute to the learning assessment.

1. Learning Assessment

The concept of assessment has suffered various changes throughout time. That evolution is related, amongst others, with historical and social contexts, the purposes that are intended to achieve, as well as the philosophical convictions of those that have developed and achieved it. Stufflebeam (1980, p. 48) defines assessment as a “process that limits, obtains and provides useful information which allows possible decisions to be judged.”

According to Hadji, (1994, p 31), assessment is “the act in which a value judgment is formulated,” whereby; valorized judgment accompanies the process, by the selection that is made to what is assessed. Figari (1996, p. 52) introduces the concept of “referentialisation” to define assessment, admitting that assessment will always be a process that “consists of assimilating a context and in constructing, basing it with data, a body of references related to an object (or a situation), in which diagnosis can be establish”. Pinto and Santos (2006, p. 37) define assessment as a “process of social and political construction, that involves a collaboration between various partners, that takes reality as socially constructed and dynamic, which admits divergence, which deals with unpredictable results and in which its action also generates its own reality”.

In summary, assessment is a process of observation and interpretation of schooling effects, which aims to guide the necessary decisions for an adequate functioning of the school, whereby, the task of teaching is very wide and complex, and its function is to facilitate learning and assessment as a guide for the action. We emphasize, with Alves and Machado (2008) that the act of assessment should be integrated in the teaching-learning process, having a trainer character and perform different functions. For Alves and Sá (2014, p. 531) “modality and more traditional assessment functions have been amplified as a way to formative assessment with the function of accompanying the entire teaching-learning process and contribute to a continuous learning improvement”. In a formative conception of assessment, errors stop being seen as a flaw, becoming accepted as a learning path indicator and “feedback is important [...] it regulates and controls learning processes, as for improving motivation and self-esteem” (Fernandes, 2006, p. 31). Brookhart (2008, p. 2) also refers that feedback is an essential element of formative assessment, as it provides information, to both pupils and teachers. It should be clear, point out future action clues, encourage students to reanalyze their answer, without including the error correction, and identify what has been well done.

Formative assessment assumes systematic and methodical follow-up of pupils (Perrenoud 1999) and results in the creation of environments that provide deeper learning. It is important to define learning goals clearly, prepare classes with tasks that communicate these goals to the students, help pupils formulate new objectives for themselves and action plans that drive to the completion of these objectives. Consequently, learning can be improved as students share defying learning goals, adopt self-assessment and assessment strategies that develop procedure and error detection and a high self-efficiency to deal with more challenging tasks in a classroom (Hattiel & Timberley, 2007, p. 103).

2. Methodological Options

To understand how pupils that have more and the ones that have less “school success” perceive assessment, a qualitative approach was chosen, which has allowed us to, essentially, find real context explanations, in describing and interpreting reality in a case study, giving privilege to the summoned actors’ interpretation. According to Santos Guerra (2003, pp. 89-90) we wanted to evaluate how the same problem can be seen, “interpreted and valorized in different manners,” asking questions “related to what happens at school”.

2.1. Issue and Objectives

How students perceive school success, as an organized set of knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and learning processes, and consequently, the sense that they attribute to learning assessment is the issue of the case study.

In this sense, we formulated the following objectives:

- characterizing how students that have more or those that have less school success conceive their studies, the importance they give and the main difficulties they feel;
- know the perspective these students have about assessment;
- understand some of the causes that are in the origin of school success.

2.2. Context characterization and participants

The study was carried out in a school organization, located in the North of Portugal, in which its educational territory covers three (3) pre-school education establishments, five (5) 1st Cycle and one (1) 2nd and 3rd Cycles of Basic Education, the school group’s headquarters.

In the school year of 2014-2015, the school population was constituted of: 121 children (six groups) in pre-school education; 285 pupils (15 classes) in the first cycle; 175 pupils (8 classes) in the 2nd cycle; 262 pupils (12 classes) in the 3rd cycle and 34 pupils in vocational courses (2 classes), a total of 877.

Teaching is secured by 89 teachers, from which 99% belong to the board, with a significant professional experience (100% teach in the school for 10 or more years), helped by 38 professionals (non-teachers) that have 10 or more years of service. In this study, participated 18 pupils (9 that never repeated and 9 that have repeated once or more in their school course), characterized in table 1.

Table 1: Interviewed characteristics

E	Age	Sex	School Year	Number of Repetitions / Year
A1	16	F	8 th grade	2 /7 th grade
A2	13	F	8 th grade	No repetitions
A3	15	F	9 th grade	No repetitions
A4	15	F	9 th grade	No repetitions
A5	16	M	9 th grade	1 /9 th grade
A6	14	M	8 th grade	No repetitions
A7	16	M	9 th grade	2 / th grade and 1/9 th grade
A8	15	M	9 th grade	1/5 th grade
A9	15	F	9 th grade	No repetitions
A10	14	F	9 th grade	1/3 th grade
A11	16	M	9 th grade	2/7 th and 9 th grade
A12	14	F	8 th grade	1/7 th grade
A13	13	F	7 th grade	No repetitions
A14	14	M	8 th grade	No repetitions
A15	13	F	8 th grade	No repetitions
A16	14	M	7 th grade	2/7 th grade
A17	16	M	7 th grade	3/7 th grade
A18	13	F	7 th grade	No repetitions

2.3 Data Collection Method and Techniques

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. These, after all ethical norms being observed, were recorded, transcribed and foster submitted to content analysis or theme analysis, which consists in “sorting constituent elements of a set by differentiation, and subsequently, regrouping according to genre (analogy)” (Bardin, 2008, p. 145).

Followed by the integral reading of the interviews, by then categorizing and subcategorizing, and the construction of diverse tables to simplify the collected data, organizing the most significant registered units, in order to facilitate the analysis of text corpus and the description passage to interpretation, through inference. In table 2, categories and subcategories are presented. In the organization of interview corpus, the following rules were followed: completeness, representativeness, homogeneity, and relevance.

Table2: Categoriesandsubcategories

Categories	Subcategories
1. Success/Failure	1.1. Success Perspectives 1.2 Study and success 1.3 Study valorization for the future
2. Assessment Functions	2.1. Assessment of knowledge 2.2. Assessment of attitudes

3. Study Results

The study results are presented related to the success and assessment perspectives.

3.1 Success / Failure Category

For all the interviewed pupils, having school success means having a good school performance. Having good grade is passing grades and being a “good student.”

However, some students have high expectations and their success depends on whether they like the subject “like everything else, there are subjects that I like and others that I don’t” (A9); their attention in the classroom “being attentive in the class and not giving up on the objective that I propose to achieve” (A8); their interest and study “success depends on the interest that we have in the class, if we are attentive and if we study” (A4); taking up doubts in the classroom, in support classes, with colleagues or even with the parents is, also, fundamental to understand the content “I clarify doubts with the teacher, if not in the support class” (A1), “even if I don’t understand the subject, I always study and take up doubts with my colleagues, with teachers or my parents” (A2); “I put up my hand and ask the teacher” (A7).

In terms of study importance, the interviewees consider it very important to have school success. Apart from that, only two students (although with conviction) say they like to study “I like it, but sometimes there are better things to do” (A8); two affirmed that they don’t like to study “I don’t like to study, but I know that it is necessary to achieve what I propose to myself in the beginning of each year” (A6); seven students said it depends on the subject; and seven consider that they don’t like to study, but “I have to study to pass the year” (A5) “I have to study, [...], because there are things in the classroom that we don’t understand, and when we study we can absorb it better” (A15).

When questioned about study valorization for the future, students consider that study is important “for a later day to have a good future” (A7), “a good job, a better life” and also “it helps us in day to day situations” (A13), so “my willing to know more is to look for complementary information, to what I learn in the classroom” (A6).

Study works, in this way, as an aid to learning to have good grades, to have a good performance, to have a good feedback from the teacher, in synthesis, to have school and life success.

Well, since “teaching implies, always, assessing” (Boddino, 2008, p. 80), teachers should worry about the feedback given to students, as it should contain a clear, objective and focused on task message (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) in a sense to promote the interesting in improving their knowledge, performance and school success. Feedback contributes to lift motivation and self-esteem.

3.2. Assessment Functions Category

In regards to assessment, the interviewed students demonstrate their feelings of duality: assessments used to learn and to be punished. They consider that teachers assess everything, valorizing every dimension of their work, in other words, assessment is “used by teachers to assess our performance” (A4) and “to assess knowledge (A5), behavior, “our attention in class” (A4), concentration, work capacity, participation, effort, assiduity, homework completion, our diary organization and the presentation of the necessary materials, in other words, “to identify [...] the student with their capacities” (A8). Some students feel unmotivated as “in the beginning of the school year, teachers hand out documents saying the behavior criteria” (A13) and, even though their behavior is reflected on the classification “the posture in the classroom, this then reflects on the grades” (E9), they consider that teacher gives more emphasis to bad behavior than to good.

On the other hands, all of the interviewees consider that what teacher valorizes the most are the tests. Some students consider that tests can be a reducing instrument, because “in languages, I would like to be evaluated orally, we are assessed in writing, and in other subjects too” (A2) and could be substituted to “individual or group projects, I would be able to do better” (A17). Tests can sanction the project and be punishable “I can’t study for tests.” Tests come up, as a privileged instrument for assessment, a statement that is confirmed by Barreira and Pinto (2006, p. 59), to which, “although studies show that teachers use diverse instruments, what can be seen is that the instruments with the biggest weight in evaluations continue to be tests.”

Conclusion

Results show some convergences and, simultaneously, very divergences between the two groups of students. All students agree that their motivation in each subject depends on the content and the relationship they establish with the teacher. All feel supported by the teachers to have good grades, through diverse activities in the classroom, in the support group for all subjects, homework, and exercises. However, students with less school success recognize that the approach strategies of the content do not motivate them. They consider studying important, but feel unmotivated; they only attend school because they are obliged and consider that the assessment process is a punishment, but that it is necessary.

Apart from the malfunctioning their level of motivation and self-concept, a lot of students reveal grave inadequacy in terms of the study methods they use, either for the objective to be reached or in terms of how many resources need to be mobilizing. These are aspects that school should intervene as promptly as possible, to the magnitude that persistent failure has negative effects on the student's personal development and in their later school performance.

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