DESCRIPTIVE JUDGMENT IN ITALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL EVALUATION

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Abstract

The pandemic situation has made it clear the limit of evaluation through decimal vote. It draws a measuring and classificatory logic. To overcome these limits, the Ministerial Order 172/2020 has introduced new procedure of students' assessment: descriptive judgment. It replaces the decimal mark with an assessment through "learning level" that allow to monitor the evolutionary process of the student (Castoldi, 2021). Furthermore, the fundamental characteristics of descriptive judgment are: transparency and clarity. Therefore, it is necessary to involve pupils in the assessment process and provide them with continuous feedback on the progress made.
The descriptive judgment also has negative aspects: it creates a gap between the disciplinary judgment and the judgment expressed based on the competence certification model. It does not pay attention to the peculiarities of the different disciplines: a single criterion is used for the evaluation without consider the differences between the various subject areas. Finally, the Ministerial Order introduced this change only in primary school and consequently a fracture is created with the lower secondary school.
Despite the negative aspects, descriptive judgment represents a way that goes beyond simple performance but allows you to focus on the learning process from the perspective of lifelong learning.

Keywords: Evaluation, competence, descriptive judgment, learning process, primary school.

1. Introduction

The social, cultural, and regulatory changes that have occurred over time have also brought with them changes in the evaluation systems within school institutions.

What does it mean to evaluate? Beeby states that "evaluation consists in the systematic collection and interpretation of data and leads, as an integral part of the process, to a value judgment aimed at action" (Beeby, 1997, pp. 68-78). Assessing, therefore, means expressing a value judgment that orients to action and change compared to an initial situation. As Dewey stated, "any conduct that is not blindly impulsive, or a mechanical routine, seems to involve assessments" (Dewey, 1939, p. 2). Evaluation is, therefore, a process proper to individuals and that involves changes on several levels, namely personal, relational, and social. In the school context, "evaluation is a complex phenomenon that is not reduced to a single moment but accompanies the entire educational process and is a substantial part of it" (Falcinelli, 2014, pp. 69-80). From this, we understand that evaluation involves the idea of process: it is appropriate, in fact, to talk about evaluation process. The latter requires conscious choices and careful planning that defines objectives and criteria always in relation to the specific context in which it must fall. In addition, it is necessary to consider that the evaluation process has consequences in the student's education.

These consequences are both in terms of resource reorganization and as an unpredictable response in the student's motivation: he may feel encouraged or discouraged by the judgment received and this may involve a change in the modalities of both relating to the teacher and approaching new activities and verifications. School evaluation cannot be reduced to a simple measurement of the achievement of results: it is not a comparison between what the teachers design and what the students achieve. Scriven was the first author to propose a distinction between the concept of summation and formative evaluation. The first has a control function, the second, on the other hand, responds to a logic of development. These two logics are, in turn, the basis of two main approaches to educational evaluation, namely the quantitative-experimental model and the qualitative-hermeneutic model. These two models, as well as the two logics on which they are based, are not in opposition to each other but must both be used in a complementarity perspective. Already in 1955 Visalberghi in his work Measurement and evaluation in the educational process proposes a distinction between the two concepts affirming the need for their

coexistence: measurement (quantitative moment) and evaluation (qualitative moment) must be considered as two moments in the same process that ends with the attribution of a value judgment. When we talk about evaluation, reference is made to two closely interdependent and interlinked stages of the audit: measurement and evaluation proper (Vertecchi, 1993). The first step favours a quantitative approach and consists in obtaining data according to criteria of certainty; then, we proceed to the interpretation and qualitative description of the data established according to the criteria made explicit (Notti, 2010). The evaluation also begins to consider the process and not only the product: this implies the impossibility of an exclusive reference to measurement and description, and an opening to the negotiation of meanings. The focus changes: from the measurement of the final product through the assessment of the students' learning (assessment of learning), to the monitoring in progress and, therefore, to the assessment for learning (assessment for learning). The data collected are aimed at informing both students and teachers to stimulate reflections on the processes activated (living processes) (Galliani, 2019; Stiggins, 2002). The purpose of the evaluation is not only to assess learners' learning, but also to regulate the teaching activity. This is because the evaluation allows teachers both to identify the difficulties of the students and to receive useful feedback to understand the modalities and timing of a possible improvement to be made to the educational project.

The evaluation becomes a moment that also questions the work of the teacher as well as a time when you know. Specifically, the formative evaluation does not limit itself to verifying the performance of the students (a fundamental moment of the teaching-learning process), but also looks at the process in a broader way. It does not only refer to the final goal but also to the path taken to reach that result. An evaluation activity can be considered formative if the student performance is interpreted and used by teachers and students to make decisions on the next steps in the educational path to be more effective than the decisions that would be taken in the absence of a formative evaluation (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

2. Discussion

Over the years, in Italy, the evaluation systems used in school contexts have created many debates, especially in primary school, we have witnessed periodic alternations, in reference to the various reforms, between grades and judgments. Until the mid-70s, the evaluation of the students' profit and behavior had a mainly terminal role and served to ascertain whether the students had adapted to the training itinerary, where the protagonist was the teacher who transmitted the knowledge in a passive way. "The evaluative moment was limited to judging the path taken and penalized those who were not in tune with it" (Bonazza, 2020, p. 41). The evaluation of the students was communicated in the report cards with a grade in tenths, without giving details on the matter. The school system was rigid and gave importance to the final product achieved. A break with the "traditional school" occurred with the approval of Law 517/77, which shifted attention to the learning process it considered: the motivation, participation, and cognitive styles of learners. This reform introduced the quarterly cards, where the evaluation was expressed through descriptive adjectives (excellent, distinct, good...). In addition, teachers had to formulate a personalized description of the profit of each student in the different disciplines, without however using analytical "grids" with indicators that established common parameters to better explain the variables considered. From 1992 to 1996, a five-level system expressed by the first five letters of the alphabet (A, B, C, D and E) was introduced to express the assessment of learning, each of which would describe what constitute the knowledge, skills and competences acquired. Subsequently, the Moratti reform of 2003 provided for the abolition of letters and made it known that the evaluation of pupils' learning in the individual disciplines had to be expressed in tenths in relation to the objectives, descriptors and indicators set by the specific disciplinary groups articulated according to general criteria in disciplinary evaluation grids. Subsequently, with the Gelmini reform of 2008, the evaluation of learning in primary school was periodic and annual and the certification of the skills acquired was carried out through the attribution of grades expressed in tenths accompanied by an analytical judgment on the level of global maturation reached by the student. With the current Law n. 107/2015 of the "Good School", the grades in tenths are confirmed and it is emphasized that "the evaluation has essentially educational purposes [...] it has as its object the learning process, the learning outcomes, the behavior and the overall academic performance of the pupils" (p. 4). Today, the pandemic experience makes evident the limits of evaluation through the decimal grade that recalls a measuring and classifying evaluative logic through which to manage the expression of the intermediate and final evaluative judgment. This logic, in fact, is based on a wrong concept, since "there is the juxtaposition between the judgment attributed to the single performance and the level of learning globally achieved by the student" (Castoldi, 2021, pp.101-102), therefore it does not aim to make the student aware of the quality criteria of the educational activity to guide his subsequent efforts.

For this reason, the Ministerial Ordinance of 4 December 2020 N. 172, established that the previous primary school evaluation system, based on the numerical grade expressed in tenths, has been superseded by a new system that, according to the legislation, ensures greater "transparency and clarity" (Castoldi, 2021) for a global assessment of the student's learning process and in the expression of a value judgment and in the explication of the paths. The innovations introduced by the law concern the periodic and final evaluation in primary school which is expressed with descriptive judgments based on four levels of learning (advanced, intermediate, basic, in the process of first acquisition) (Guidelines, 2020, p.4), reported in the evaluation document, through which "the evaluation of students is increasingly transparent and consistent with the learning path of each one" (p. 2). These judgments allow to analyze the level of learning of the students no longer referred to the individual disciplines, but to the learning objectives that each discipline has included in the annual design, in line with what is included in the institute curriculum and in line with the National Indications, as regards the disciplinary objectives and the goals for the development of Skills. The perspective is that of assessment for learning, which is not considered a simple "measurement" of learning but has a fundamental training function since the information collected is also used to adapt teaching to the concrete educational needs of pupils and their learning styles, modifying the activities according to what has been observed and starting from what can be valued (Guidelines, 2020, p. 1). This new approach to evaluation not only highlights the judgment given to the students but allows to act to promote and improve learning through a constant interaction with the student through evaluative feedback useful for improving and modifying the didactic project. The teachers in the annual design indicate the individual learning objectives and through periodic and final evaluation, determine the level of acquisition for each student. Then, the teachers choose among the objectives those that best represent the manifestations of learning that can be examined for each discipline. Subsequently, the levels, defined based of the four dimensions that allow learning (the autonomy of the pupil, the type of situation, the resources mobilized, continuity), allow to elaborate a well-articulated descriptive judgment, highlighting the results obtained and the areas for improvement. This judgment is reported in the Evaluation Document, (Guidelines, 2020, p. 6). where the results of the training course, detected *in itinere*, of each student are present, through the detailed description of the behaviors and manifestations of learning. The aim is to enhance the students' learning, highlighting their strengths with actions of gratification and enhancement and those on which to intervene with the recovery to achieve the acquisition of the established objectives and enhance the learning that each student has developed considering their own characteristics and its uniqueness.

The descriptive judgment is not limited to the simple summation of the results obtained on individual evaluation activities but reflects the complexity of the learning process consisting of many useful elements to detect the level of acquisition by the student that is achieved with the use of various tools in relation to the objectives and learning situations.

3. Conclusions

In educational contexts and academia, the issuance of the "Guidelines for the formulation of descriptive judgments in the periodic and final evaluation in primary school" (MIUR Ordinance no. 172 of 4 December 2020) started a debate aimed to understand their impact on the pedagogical and docimological level, but also their applicability (Perla, 2021; Puricelli, 2021). In fact, with this article we followed the goal of reflecting on some elements related to educational evaluation, starting from a presentation of the theoretical and regulatory framework of reference. Now, we intend to focus on the critical aspects and on the interesting aspects of educational evaluation through the formulation of descriptive judgment, as well as offering improvement suggestions for its application. This reflection is based on a consideration: the school responds to educational and training purposes. Consequently, evaluation, an essential moment of the training process, must necessarily respond to a formative function, although it is less considered than the summative and certification functions (Grion & Restiglian, 2019). In this sense, teachers should design evaluation processes that are effective and supportive for learning, definitively overcoming the consequences of the era of testing and the measurement myth in favor of "formative evaluation" (Trinchero, 2018).

Based on these considerations, the critical and interesting points of educational evaluation through descriptive judgments emerge. Regarding interesting points, numerous research from the late 1990s emphasize the link between a system based on the grades attribution and the motivation in learning. The motivation in learning is strongly undermined by the mechanisms that use competitive criteria, based on the position of an individual respect to the performance of others. Therefore, descriptive judgment could avoid this drift and stimulate pupils' interest and curiosity towards learning contents (Earl, 2003). Again, descriptive judgment offers a rich and varied image to educational evaluation. We must consider that qualitative expressions allow us to formulate judgments on the base of the necessary and essential

differences between the learning realized by the various pupils. Therefore, if the static image of the number does not represent the heterogeneity of the learning profiles, the descriptive judgment also opens to the recognition of the relationship between different learning profiles and the use of different evaluation tools. In fact, the Guidelines list different types of tools, all <<equal value for the purpose of elaborating descriptive judgment (for example individual interviews; observation; [...] verification tests; authentic tasks)>> (MIUR Ordinance No. 172 of 4 December 2020, p. 9).

While the issue of the Guidelines represents a novelty to welcome with some enthusiasm, some critical issues must not be overlooked. According to the viewpoint of teachers and school leaders, but also thinking of parents involved in communicating the results of their children, the first critical element is the timing of the issue of the law. It was issued late in the school year when the annual plans of each teacher were already outlined. Consequently, an internal contradiction emerges in the document, where we read that the evaluation must be "consistent with the educational offer of educational institutions" (p.2). A second critical element is that in the Guidelines we read that the evaluation must be <<[...] consistent with the National Guidelines for the nursery school curriculum and the first cycle of education of 2012>> (p. 2), while they are aimed exclusively at primary school. A third level of criticality concerns the proposal to use the term "objective", preferring it to the term "competence". The risk of using the term "objective" is that it is erroneously referred to the perspective of didactic planning of the 1970s, when the objective was the unit of measurement of didactic action (Tammaro, 2011). Otherwise, the Guidelines refer to the unit of measurement to understand the learning achieved by the pupils. Therefore, we are referring to didactic planning and no longer to programming. A final critical element relates to the ambiguity of the role of pupils in the evaluation processes. In fact, if the literature offers a lot of evidence in scientific support of the need to involve them in the evaluation processes, because only in this way is evaluation formative, the practice of self-evaluation is still ambiguous (Nicol, 2020). It must be considered that the feedback that the pupil receives on the level of performance achieved is part of the formative evaluation. But external feedback, offered by teachers, classmates or other participants in the educational process is not enough. the self-feedback that the pupil gives to himself is necessary. In this context, pupils' participation and full awareness of the goals to be achieved and the criteria is fundamental. Thus, the assessment results become useful and effective resources to improve learning. So, the need for those who must be evaluated to participate in the construction of the criteria and in the definition of goals and levels.

Based on the critical elements of the ministerial order, the following can be points for improvement the use of the descriptive judgment: prefer a synthetic evaluation of the overall level of learning achieved by the student, avoiding excessive fragmentation and analysis of the evaluation elements; focus explicitly and consciously on a vision of learning as the development of skills, avoiding referring only to the mastery of knowledge and skills; have an evaluative perspective based on learning levels; use an unambiguous evaluative lexicon; focus on the particularities of the various disciplines, avoiding univocal solutions; use an evaluation approach of disciplinary learning that can also be extended to secondary school, avoiding accentuating the cultural divide between the two levels of education (Castoldi, 2021).

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