

A “friendly” assessment for a “good” school

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Riassunto: *La valutazione costituisce il tema dominante e la questione strategica per eccellenza dell'attuale fase della scuola italiana, a livello sia degli apprendimenti degli studenti sia del sistema scolastico. Un'attenzione certamente significativa ma che necessita di una adeguata riflessione, soprattutto in ragione del fatto che “per lo studente l'accanimento valutativo non è certo immaginario”. A partire da tale considerazione, il contributo intende porre in evidenza la necessità di pervenire ad una valutazione “amichevole” come condizione e, ad un tempo, espressione di una “buona” scuola, cioè di una scuola che ha a cuore il benessere dello studente che la frequenta. Le argomentazioni muovono dall'analisi della funzione e delle caratteristiche attribuite alla valutazione nelle “Indicazioni Nazionali”, per poi richiamare alcuni elementi che possono metterne “in pericolo” la sua natura di “accompagnamento dei processi di apprendimento e di stimolo al miglioramento continuo” e, infine, giungono a proporre una rinnovata valutazione scolastica all'insegna della “corresponsabilità” degli attori coinvolti (docenti, genitori, alunni).*

Abstract: *Assessment is a major topic and strategic issue in the current phase of the Italian debate regarding school, especially in terms of its relation with learning and the quality of the school system. This attention is certainly significant but it requires proper reflection, especially since “for the pupil, aggressive evaluation is not a figment of the imagination”. Starting from this consideration, this paper aims to highlight the need to arrive at “friendly” assessment as a condition and, at the same time, expression of a “good” school, i.e. a school that is mindful of its pupils' success. The arguments start from the analysis of the function and characteristics attributed to evaluation/assessment in the Italian “Indicazioni nazionali per il curriculum della scuola d'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione” (“National guidelines for the curriculum: kindergarten and first educational cycle”) and then address some of the elements that can “endanger” the its aim to “accompany learning processes and stimulate continuous improvement”. Finally, it proposes a renewed school evaluation/assessment which envisages the “shared responsibility” of those involved (teachers, parents, pupils).*

Keywords: *assessment/evaluation, school quality, educational (co-)responsibility.*

As each school year draws to a close, teachers, pupils and families celebrate the rite of assessment with the dispatch of the school report. From

then onwards, this report card, along with notebooks and diaries, becomes an official part of the stories of the individuals concerned and of the history of school itself: for individuals, it is put in a safe place so that it can be used in family stories, for the school, it is a faithful reflection of the transformations that have occurred. Moreover, “with few exceptions, there is no school without grades. They can be frequent, regular, interim or final, but they are a constant, one of the foundations of education. Teachers give grades, pupils expect them and so do their parents” (Dutto, 2013, 173).

In the debate, school evaluation/assessment (relating both to the pupil and to the school) it is at risk of being tied to ideological conditioning, tangled up in formal and legal aspects, judged (or not) modern if there are forms of virtual school-family communication. In the “real” school, the situation is complex: on the one hand, teachers do not have time for proper communication and documentation of the processes and outcomes of the evaluation; on the other, pupils and families are unable to find appropriate ways of communication and useful mutual understanding between the parties involved (teachers, parents, pupils ...).

The challenge - for all actors - seems therefore to be the move from a “hostile” view of evaluation to a “friendly” perspective, so as to facilitate its understanding and recognize its importance for development and orientation, starting from the “National Guidelines for the curriculum in kindergarten and the first cycle of education” (henceforth “Guidelines”), which describes assessment in interesting ways, suggesting various ways in which it can be made more friendly: “friendly” assessment for a “good” school.

Assessment in the “National Guidelines”

It is evident that the teaching profession is at the heart of change, as the “National Guidelines for the curriculum in kindergarten and the first cycle of education” make clear: “the responsibility for assessing and care of the documentation, and the choice of those instruments within the framework of the criteria approved by school councils, is the teacher’s duty” (Ministry of Education, 2012). This is even more necessary and pressing in view of certifying ability, on the grounds that “only after regular observation, documentation and assessment of skills is their certification possible” (Ministry of Education, 2012). The “Guidelines” highlight that the teacher must “ensure that pupils and families are given timely and transparent infor-

mation on the criteria and results of assessments made at different points of the school curriculum, consistently promoting participation and the co-responsibility of education, each according to their roles and functions” (Ministry of Education, 2012). And all this bearing in mind that, as far as documentation is concerned - in the school as in any other educational field - that “evaluation is an analysis for those who perform it, but it must be a summary for those who receive it”, and regarding the school report, “the way in which it is carried out may considerably increase or decrease its educational value”(Montalbetti, 2011).

According to the “Guidelines”, “assessment precedes, accompanies and follows the curriculum. It sets out the actions to be taken, regulates those in progress, and fosters the critical assessment of those carried out at the end. It performs a major educational function accompanying the learning process and stimulating continuous improvement”. In addition, it is explicitly stated that “the combined promotion of self-assessment and evaluation is the decisive precondition for the improvement of schools and the education system because it combines the rigor of the assessment procedure with reflections made by the teachers involved with the same class, in the same subject area, in the same school or working in a network with teachers from other schools” (Ministry of Education, 2012). In view of this, INVALSI must measure learning outcomes, “promoting, also, a culture of evaluation that discourages forms of training aimed exclusively at passing the tests” (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Several authors agree that this is the real problem of evaluation in the Italian school in the twenty-first century. Castoldi has highlighted that the increasing domination of assessment in national and international debates on schooling reveals “the weakness of the historical culture of evaluation in our country, in particular as regards the world of education. It is a theme often seen as taboo and riddles with technicalities, which triggers forms of rejection or defensive mechanisms that make it impossible to enter into the merits of the problems and gain an in-depth appreciation of their various facets” (Castoldi, 2012).

Even more worrying is the lack of any culture of critical evaluation, envisaged by Giovannini as an “attitude that leads to the development of awareness, clarifies and recognizes the different aspects and criteria involved in evaluation, namely the fact of recognizing its historically situated nature which is subject to constraints imposed by a range of different spheres (socio-economic, cultural, psychological and linguistic), its inter-

connection with other cultural fields (primarily the culture of the school and the teaching profession), and tracing its outline as the result of a reasoned decision” (Giovannini, 2012). From this stance, it is desirable - even urgent and strategic - to integrate the “(re-)writing” of standards and rules in such a way that fragmentation or conflict can be avoided. The debate surrounding evaluation and its documentation is at risk, therefore, of having all life sucked out of it unless there comparison is made between a new generation of solutions which require clear ideas at their base and an explicit strategy “on various fronts: for grades, with their well-known limitations of non-comparability and low credibility, yet also for the ease with which they are communicated, and, in a similar vein, for State diplomas, which despite having lost their function of providing an accurate and specific assessment of knowledge and skills and being stuck with the status of being a legally-recognized qualification, still retain a role as a rite of passage” (Dutto, 2013, 174).

This is also confirmed by the conclusions regarding the issue of evaluation/assessment in the Third IARD Survey on Italian teachers, although the authors consider it provisional: “one problem seems to be that there is a lack of rigor being applied in assessment by a not insignificant number of teachers, and this could be contributing to the lowering of Italian pupils’ academic achievement. The second conclusion is that the assessment practices do not, however, seem able to account for differences in learning between branches of education and between geographical areas, as has sometimes been suggested in the public debate” (Barone, 2010).

However, it should be noted that “reporting on evaluation” does not in itself solve the problem of evaluating: any type of assessment creates problems of management, analysis, dissemination. Evaluations should not be taken lightly, and the analysis carried out on the evaluation does not give rise to a bare truth, no matter how strict the assessment procedures and perfected the analytical tools. No rating (in and of itself) is perfect!

In this context, it is hard to think of appropriate solutions except by focusing on the procedural nature of evaluation, outlining what Macario calls “some essential steps that consist in defining the size of objects or training to be evaluated (identification of objectives and assessment criteria), the correct and consistent collection of information in relation to them (detection or verification), in their interpretation (formulation of judgment), the communication of the assessment (the other teachers of the class, the pupil, the family, the world outside the school) and when decisions that

opens new perspectives to training” (Macario, 2012). In this perspective, to shift the focus from formal to substantive ensures that inter-school evaluation assumes significance, it can consequently become a resource and not a limitation in the school-pupil-family relationship, reinforcing the professionalism of the teacher as evaluator.

The “substantial” lies in an assessment of whose features - outlined by Castoldi - include significance, authenticity, processes, accountability, advancement, recursion, dynamism and all-inclusiveness, in particular to “recognize and develop the metacognitive value underlying the evaluation process, as an opportunity to raise one’s awareness of learning and of one’s own limitations and potential” (Castoldi, 2012, 174).

Evaluation “at risk”?

To paraphrase a well-known expression, nowadays, we can say that evaluation is “at risk”, especially in terms of how assessment is experienced and perceived by pupils, and then by their families, “tested almost daily, assessed via institutional procedures at the end of each term, evaluated at the end of the school year, examined at the end of primary, middle and high school, systematically subjected to national and occasionally international tests, for the pupil, aggressive evaluation is not a figment of the imagination” (Dutto, 2013, 174).

Assessment seems “endangered” even among teachers. The documentation of the evaluation process is dominated by a defensive logic, with teaching staff keeping track of everything in order to protect themselves from attacks on their work, the reflection of a school concerned with the fragility of its own assessment. The introduction of new technology does not seem to have bridged the gap between family and school, one wonders if in fact innovation does not conceal a setback and a simplification of relationships between parents, teachers and children/pupils. From messaging that instantly “alerts” parents to the absence of their child at school to the electronic recording of grades for class- or homework, it appears to increase the risk of de-personalization within school-family communication. The same political-cultural debate tends to set in ideological opposition marks and grades, evaluation and measurement, quality and quantity. To this can be added the misuse of evaluation practices and grading systems by teachers, as several authors have demonstrated; and there is “no real habit of maintaining an organized documentary base for the processes implement-

ed in educational institutions, if not for purely administrative purposes” (Castoldi, 2012, 57).

Assessment is, above all, “at risk” in the public debate about the school, which often influences families in their demands to the school and teachers. The rhetoric harks back to the (presumed) objectivity of grades which makes for greater clarity at the communicative level, and guaranteed protection from the challenge posed by the use of the media.

The widespread perception, confirmed by school dropout rates, low achievement at secondary schools, by the numbers of NEETs – young people who are neither in education or employment – is that evaluation does not help pupils make relevant educational choices, to acquire the skills necessary for living in a complex society, to direct their learning towards the workplace. The “Guidelines” describe the goals and benchmarks for the end of primary education which require a “different” form of assessment, one that cannot be offered merely by grades in the school report or by filling in forms certifying skills: “by the end of primary school, through learning developed in school, personal study, and educational experiences within the family and community, the pupil can independently and responsibly begin to address age-appropriate real-life situations, fully reflecting and expressing their own personality” (Ministry of Education, 2012). In the light of this statement, it is not illogical to ask whether the description for assessment at kindergarten might be extended to the entire school system, with the necessary adjustments in terms of academic achievement: “evaluation activities in kindergarten have an educational function which recognizes, accompanies, describes and documents the pupil’s development, avoiding pigeon-holing and judging children’s performance because it is oriented towards exploration and encourages the development of their full potential” (Ministry of Education, 2012).

However, it is necessary to highlight that “threats” to school assessment/evaluation also come from other situations, regarding the current state of the Italian school. The first fact is the objective difficulty for the teacher and the pupil to have a “time” and “place” to synthesize and make complete and effective sense of all the different assessments. The second aspect is the understandable difficulty in making sense of the constant demands to comply with regulations, and the expansion of what is required of teachers and the school in terms of assessment, without adequate support and funding. The third element relates to educational difficulties and the relationship between teachers and pupils in increasingly large classes and with very different needs, in addition to situations in which the pupil refuses to accept the teacher’s assess-

ment of his/her performance, a reflection of the family’s hostility towards the school, whereby parents believe their child is always right. Finally, it must be mentioned that a great deal of criticism has been leveled at the way in which evaluation is used – its underlying logic, its methods, the assessment tools adopted, as well as improper use of scales and measurement. (Domenici, 2003).

It is no mistake to say that there is a worrying climate of suspicion surrounding evaluation, or rather, the way in which evaluation is conducted today both in and of school. Many studies have denounced the absence of an over-arching plan, the sidelining of the teaching profession, the disempowerment of those involved, in an environment that yearly sees one emergency situation followed by another. With so many assessments being made, with so many different tools, assessment itself begins to lack meaning, direction, perspective: everyone makes his or her “own” assessment, out of a distrust of - if not actual opposition towards – anybody else’s one. Over and above passing judgment on such matters, the point seems to be that we need to propose forms of assessment that can, as far as possible, be new and different - in one word, “friendly” - for all those to whom it is addressed, namely pupils and their families .

In recent years, the issue of evaluation/assessment has become a priority in the everyday running of school life and in the debate among researchers in education. As a result, there is now a burgeoning literature – including the pedagogical – as well as significant wealth of experience in schools (Galliani, 2015). The prospect of “co-responsibility in assessment” may be the appropriate approach - as part of the so-called “new” or “authentic” assessment - for a sustainable assessment focused on improving pupils’ learning and the quality of school.

A “(co)responsible” assessment

Authentic assessment, as opposed to more traditional forms, proposes a new vision of the role of individuals as part of the evaluation process. In particular, we refer to the proposal made by Castoldi which highlights three key relationships: between teachers, between teachers and families, between teachers and pupils (Castoldi, 2013). The emphasis on shared responsibility is not meant to diminish the role of the teacher, and does not see evaluation as a kind of negotiation between teachers, pupils and family, but is rather intended to highlight the need for the teacher to assume

a central role in a system of relations between the actors of the evaluation. Because “it is essential to ascribe meaning to information, comparing it with benchmarks and interpreting it in relation to the overall picture” (Montalbetti, 2011, 19); equally important is the “promotion of personal and professional for pupils and teachers” (Giannandrea, 2011, 109).

Sharing responsibility with colleagues can make assessment “friendly”, because it avoids the overlap between self and subjectivity. As a training methodology for evaluative competence, collegiality can overcome the school’s defensive attitude towards the outside world and promote a climate in which teachers can share the reasons for their “response”, for which they assume full responsibility. Here the design, implementation, control, documentation and communication of evaluation processes are neither formal requirements nor legal and formal concerns for the teacher, but intrinsic aspects of school evaluation, for which the professional community as a whole must take responsibility.

The sharing of responsibility between teacher and family, without confusing these roles, can make assessment “friendly”, because it helps to overcome the issue of “power”. What is a matter of common responsibility is not so much the product (agreement/ disagreement on grades/ marks), but rather the process of assessment an indicator, which identifies - honestly and clearly - the direction to take in authentic learning experience in order to foster individual growth. For the teacher, this aspect is realized through increased awareness of how to report the assessment process; for the family, it promotes a vision of the product (mark or grade) as information regarding their child’s learning process, which includes understanding what it represents and, as a result, can trigger a conscious response (rather than retaliation).

The sharing of responsibility between teacher and pupil may be becoming “friendly” because assessment “places it” in a real educational perspective, allowing it to be recognized as a means through which pupils can appropriate the results; this in turn lays the foundations for its use as a tool for continuous improvement – in terms of identity, autonomy, responsibility, citizenship, awareness and creativity. From primary school onwards, the child should not fear assessment or be afraid of the teacher’s marks/grades; his or her experience of assessment should be experienced as an ordinary moment in the learning process, indeed welcomed since without it, it is difficult to learn well. At secondary level, it is essential for the teacher to encourage pupils to take responsibility for their own learning; yet this is possible only if the teacher has created the right conditions, including be-

ing clear about aims and objectives, the features of the assessment process and the methods used. In the absence of these conditions, assessment is perceived as a threat, one which pupils will try to avoid in any possible way.

While it is acknowledged that the considerations made above are likely to be left high and dry as a result of lack of time, resources and will, such a “recovery” – in the distinction of roles and functions – of a co-responsible vision of assessment involving teachers, parents and pupils would allow the (re-) discovery of the true meaning of “evaluation”, i.e. “giving value”, which the whole school community – as a whole – is called upon to take responsibility.

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