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SUBJECTIVITY VS. SUBJECTIVISM IN SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The paper presents a synthesis of pre-university school teacher's opinions and impressions regarding subjective errors they made during educational activities with evaluative purpose.

There are also presented the teacher's personal reflections, gathered in some reflection diaries, and organized using the most frequent vitiation errors of school evaluation process.

The paper represents a warning signal against subjectivity and subjectivism in school evaluation, but also suggests some avoidance/ diminution solutions for them.

During the investigation participated a number of 110 primary, gymnasium and high school teachers from Timiș and Caraș-Severin County.

Subjective assessment is based heavily on intuition teacher, on the subjective perception, or slightly deformed benefits to that which it assesses the uncertainty of achieving objective assessment. In this case a perspective on subjective assessment and errors they produce are the basics of this article. Errors of assessment depending on the specifics of school discipline or the perception of the teacher. Whatever the reasons, errors in assessment must be recognized and avoided wherever possible.

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1. Introduction

In order to be able to present the „sensible" aspects of school evaluation regarding subjectivity and subjectivism, it is necessary to give an outline for analyzed terms, beginning with objective evaluation, continuing with its reverse, subjective evaluation and ending with subjectivism.

Objective evaluation is „objective not in the sense that it is exterior and independent in relation with its assessor, but in the sense that the assessor's influences don't distort the facts on which the evaluation is made" (Voiculescu, 2001, p. 43).

Objective evaluation is structured on the basis of some scientific measuring and estimating techniques of the work, performance and competence of those who are evaluated. This evaluating mode combines most of the times various traditional and modern methods of school evaluation, complex evaluative instruments and strategies in order to make a precise comparison between the performance of the person who is evaluated and previously established standards.

Analyzing the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in evaluation, Marc Romainville (2011) says:

• „Evaluation objectivity is necessary: the interest of the assessor is to know exactly what they evaluate, in order to establish clearly the way they will conduct their evaluation; the latter shall be the one conferring them "real" value;

• Evaluation objectivity is desired: in practice, we note that evaluations of the same reality lead to different decisions with important consequences personally and socially.

• Evaluation objectivity is impossible: in spite of common syllabus, learning objectives vary according to teacher; assessed performances are different, as they depend on teachers' notion of the expected result, the necessary steps to be made, the measured capacity; observation conditions (time allotted, form of examination, correction method) are different; evaluators' requirements are different; the importance/ significance of evaluation varies according to context. All the elements tend towards blocking evaluation's any attempt at objectivity;

• Evaluation objectivity is rejected: because it would need an exhaustive approach of objectives, criteria and indicators. Social consequences are inacceptable because such an evaluation would result in extreme standardization".

On the other hand, *subjective evaluation* is the one highly based on teacher's intuition, on subjective perception, on the impression of the moment or easily deformed by the work of the person who is evaluated, on the uncertainty of accomplishing an objective appreciation etc.

There are many situations in which teachers reach to subjective influences in the process of evaluation. Subjective influence (subjectivity) in educational evaluation presume a positive evaluation most of the times, based on a close relation between evaluator and evaluated person, followed by positive motivations, encouragements, praises etc.

Subjectivity can have a positive and constructive side through its motivational effects it has over the evaluated persons, affective aspects it develops in teacher evaluator-evaluated person relation and constructive attitudes it creates.

There is two kinds of *subjective influences* that can be identified in the assessment process (Voiculescu, 2013, p. 116):

a) „A positive influence, constructive that is a consequence of the subjective involved of both the teacher and the student, led by motivations and positive attitudes, by which the capacity of the subjects to notice what is significant;

b) A negative influence, a distorting one, which produces deviations, an influence that can occur unintentionally – having its origin either in the level o competence of the evaluator, or intentionally – having the origin in the educational objectives of the assessment as a mean of favouring / disfavouring some students (with implications, of courses, in the field of morality)"

Contrariwise, a negative influence (*subjectivism*) generates errors, effects, vices and disruptive factors in evaluation, deforms the context in which the evaluation is made, and also any other work of the evaluated person. This type of influences are most of the times unintentionally, spontaneous and come either from teacher's lack of experience, or from the desire for punishment and motivation of those who are evaluated.

Starting from the seven subjective errors in school evaluation enumerated below, the paper presents teacher's opinions from pre-universitary education regarding the incidence they are falling under the influence of this errors.

Teachers were addressed through some training courses in Timiş and Caraş-Severin County regarding evaluation in educational system. One of the tasks they were required to accomplish was the completion of a structured diary. The evaluating request was: „Write a structured essay with the following theme – *Subjective errors we made during evaluation process*. In this essay you will present the errors that you consider you have made in evaluation or the ones that made you feel unfairly. You are expected to present briefly some of the evaluating situations and generated errors and you will suggest alternatives for remedial and avoidance of caused errors".

Errors made during evaluation (Ungureanu, 2001, p. 248-253):

1. *Logical error*: based on formal-logical criteria and subjectively assumed by the teacher; the evaluator takes into consideration, involuntarily or voluntarily, a series of subjective appreciations, correlations or value comparisons of one work with another one;

2. *Individual strategic error*: implies the susceptibility of some evaluators to give only low ratings and grades; it is considered that this measure will motivate in their education the evaluated persons;

3. *Generosity error*: the tendency of some teachers to give good and very good grades, regardless of merit; the teacher's desire to cover up some personal shortages; constructing a defensive situation in conflicts with third parties involved in evaluation; the need of one formal rehabilitation;

4. *Dispersion error*: the evaluator's preference for extreme grades;

5. *Central tendency error*: the focus of granted grades only in the median zone of the grading scale (e.g. between "6" and "8");

6. *Normal distribution error*: preserving, most of the time unconsciously, the same way of evaluation, year after year, regardless of the context;

7. *Proximity error*: it is made in the case of some fluctuating performances – the one taken into consideration is the last sequence of the evaluated person's performance (his last response).

2. Methodology

Qualitative statistical processing of the diaries completed by the 110 teachers of different specializations reveals the incidence of occurring errors in school evaluation and also some subtle limits between subjectivity and subjectivism, when we talk about evaluating student's results.

The lot of subjects was formed by titular teachers (110 teachers) from pre-university educational level, specialists in the following disciplines: Biology – 4 teachers; Confections – 1 teacher; Psychology –

6 teachers; Economics – 3 teachers; Electrical Engineering – 2 teachers; Energetics – 1 teacher; Physics – 5 teachers; Chemistry – 4 teachers; Musical Pedagogy – 2 teachers;

Art Pedagogy – 2 teachers; Mathematics – 10 teachers; Mechanics – 2 teachers; Geography – 2 teachers; Modern Foreign Languages – 5 teachers; Religion – 7 teachers; History – 7 teachers; Physical Education – 4 teachers; Pedagogy – 6 teachers; Primary School – 10 teachers; Romanian Language and Literature – 12 teachers; English Language and Literature – 7 teachers; German Language – 2 teachers; French Language – 3 teachers; Technological Education – 2 teachers; Informatics – 1 teacher.

The **objectives** that we set off during the investigation were:

✓ Determining the reasons/ causes that can lead to subjective errors in evaluation from the teacher's point of view.

✓ Investigating the variation with which are produced some errors in school evaluation.

✓ Determining the extent to which teachers know subjective errors in school evaluation.

✓ Framing some ways to reduce/ decrease subjective errors in school evaluation.

3. Results

In the following we present a briefly image of the most important answers received from teachers regarding reasons/ causes that can lead them to produce subjective errors in school evaluation.

3.1. Logical error

- „it is a hard to avoid error, simply you can't help yourself in producing it";

- „it is sometimes produced in the case of Olympic students at a certain discipline, students who are appreciated without any merit at another disciplines";

- „evaluation is made at large intervals of time and it is realized under the incidence of some beliefs such as "good student" or "mediocre student" etc."

- „setting the medium level of the class as a point of reference in evaluation distorts the docimological conception and leads to subjectivity";

- „this error gives teachers a certain security in evaluating students";

- „often involves an evaluation guided after secondary objectives, described by the teacher, such as: the student's way of presenting himself, his behaviour, conscientiousness etc".

3.2. Individual strategic error

- „it is produced most of the times during school evaluations from the beginning of the semester, in order to motivate students";

- „it is considered that a bad grade is a starting point for a school progress".

3.3. Generosity error

- „it is often made in order to avoid further pressures from parents and school administration";

- „can be seen more often during evaluating activities/ lessons at those classes of students where the teacher is also their class-master (knowing better the students and knowing their personal problems, he can be influenced in evaluating them more gentle and generous)";

- „it is generally granted for students in order to assure their entry at other superior schools (high-school, faculty) with the best results";

- „it is sometimes granted for an entire school in order to keep its prestige and the one of its <actors>";

- „determined by some teacher's desire to cover up their personal shortages";

- „it is preferred to give a "passing score" for students, even though the answer is not totally adequate to the subject";

- „I am producing it because of my self-indulgent way to be";

- „helps the teacher to cover up his mistakes and the student's school failure";

- „in general students who have a favourable attitude for school, education and learning, are evaluated with very good grades".

3. 4. Dispersion error

- „gives a certain convenience to teachers because they appreciate and evaluate only the very good and very bad students".

3.5. *Central tendency error*:

- „it is used for teacher's comfortableness".

3.6. Normal distribution error

- „it is a comfortable way in keeping the same written and oral evaluation methods (classical/ traditional) year after year, no matter the profile, specialization and class where you carry out the evaluation."

3.7. Proximity error

- „it can also be produced because of the poor language of items, questions or evaluating tasks".

Beside the above mentioned errors, teachers said they also produce:

- „errors of miscalculating the score/ grade (this can't be put under the incidence of subjectivity and subjectivism)";

- „errors in setting items and make each one valuable in appreciating the paper";

- „errors regarding the difficulty degree of applied tests, most of the times put under the incidence of classroom atmosphere".

In the following we present a centralization of the obtained data. In Figure 1 it can be seen the rhythmicity / incidence for every type of error produced by teachers. We can easily see that *Generosity error* occupies the first place (34 teachers are producing it), followed by *Logical error* (21 teachers) and *Proximity error* (19 teachers).
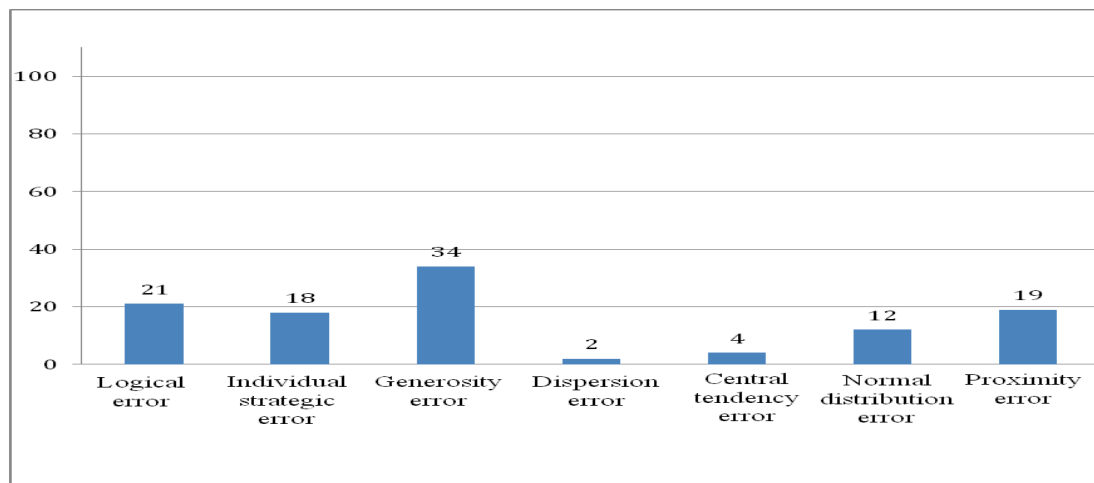
Figure 1. The incidence/ rhythmicity of producing the seven errors in school evaluation

Regarding the specialization of teachers who produce these errors, they are mostly from Social and Human Sciences and also Primary School teachers.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, even though we can say that after all the discussions held with teachers and also from processing their structured diary, they know in theory evaluation errors, but they are producing them under the supreme excuse: „It's human to make mistakes".

Possible ways of remediation/ diminution subjective evaluative errors, enumerated by most of the teachers are:

- recognition and awareness of their presence in the moment when they are produced;

- taking training courses in the theory and practice of school evaluation field;

- avoiding these errors is influenced by each teacher's openness regarding this aspect;

- asking the subjects to build themselves the criteria after which they will be evaluated;

- adopting docimological tests;

- multiple forms and techniques, combined from classical and complementary/ alternative methods of school evaluation;

- anonymity of written test papers;

- verification/ appreciation/ evaluation made by many teachers, especially of written test papers;

- using clear and specific grading scales;

- a higher weight should be given to formative and acknowledged evaluation;

- any evaluation should start from the highest level of curriculum and according to this to develop tests, working tasks, items, grading scales etc. (in this way it is ensured an objective ranking of students);

- focus shifting from evaluation based on knowledge, to evaluation based on attitudes, capacities, skills, abilities or on their sum, on competences;

- asking students from an evaluating situation to evaluate themselves or to evaluate each other paper (inter-evaluation);

- operational informing of students regarding gaps/ regress or progress;

- there can't and shouldn't exist a total objectivity in evaluation – this is not desired neither from a pedagogical point of view, nor from a psychological one;

- adequate results communicating regarding school evaluation process for students and also for their families.

Besides the above mentioned facts and those sustained by our investigated teachers, specialty literature, the pedagogic one, offers a lot of other ways/ possibilities for diminution or reducing errors produced in reality.

From this study it can be seen teacher's inclination for a very generous and gentle way in evaluating students and for giving scores/ grades/ ratings higher than their work and performance. This *Generosity error* is specific to a wide range of teaching specializations.

On the other way, school assessment generating social effects and echoes based on ethical dimension of the process. „The ethical dimension of school evaluation adds a social dimension, as the grade is often the subject of genuine negotiation between the evaluator and the evaluated individual. For students, school performance is dependent on context, but also on their ability to decode the expectations of each teacher so that they can properly adjust their conduct to these expectations. In terms of the examiner, the perception that they have on success/ school performance is heavily dependent on social context, on their own social and educational history" (Safta, 2016, p. 51).

The problems for one authentic assessment need connections between tests and real life. „Important problems take time to solve and often require using resources, consulting other people, pupils and integrating basic skills with creativity and high-level thinking". (Kirst, 1991, pp. 21-23; Wolf, et al., 1991, pp. 31-74; Woolfolk, 1998, p. 548)

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