

ASPECTS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SUBJECTIVE FACTORS IN SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

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***Abstract:** The study approaches the problem of the interference of subjective factors in school assessment and recommends a change of the classic attitude that qualifies the subjective intervention as a negative one, which leads to lack of objectivity and incorrectness and therefore should be eliminated. The study supports the assumption that a strictly objective, impersonal, indifferent and completely neutral assessment, that is an non subjective evaluation is not only impossible, but also hardly significant, less relevant and finally, less objective than an assessment that explicitly involves the subjectivity, the values, the attitudes including or especially the personal approach of the evaluator and of the evaluated person. Emerging this hypothesis the study operates with the distinction between two aspects of the subjective influences in the assessment act: a positive one which must be encouraged, called “subjectivity” and a negative one which should be limited called “subjectivism”.*

Key words: school assessment, subjective factors, subjectivity, subjectivism.

Most specialists agree that one of the important issues of the school assessment is generated by the intervention of the subjective factors, factors that emerge either from the teacher’s action, or from student’s action, or, sometimes, from the influences of the social and pedagogic context of the assessment. It is often considered, explicitly or implicitly that the intervention of the subjective factors is negative, as it distorts the assessment and can lead to a non objective and unfair assessment. Therefore it is considered that the solution to the problem is to eliminate or at least diminish the intervention of the subjective factors. However, is this the best solution? And moreover, is it a possible solution?

Of course, the problem of the subjective influences on the school assessment cannot be denied. If we consider that the school assessment is, most frequently, a “face to face” assessment, during which, both the evaluator and the evaluated person know each other, and the assessment relationship has the value of an interpersonal relationship with psychosocial implications, then it becomes even more obvious that the subjective contribution becomes substantial. In this case, the problem is not of minimizing or exaggerating the contribution of the subjective factor, but of analysing in what range, in what direction and in what way the subject or the subjects involved in the assessment can influence the accuracy of the assessment. Because at a closer analysis one can ascertain that the intervention of the subjective factor is not only the „necessary evil” of the assessment but also the human condition without which the assessment loses its meaning, its value of inter human relationship that involves attitudes and axiological systems.

1. Values and limits of the subjective intervention in the assessment

Regarding the sense of the subjective intervention in educational assessment, we support the hypothesis that *a strictly objective, impersonal, indifferent and absolutely neutral assessment, which is an assessment without a subject is not only impossible, but also less significant less relevant and finally less objective than an assessment that explicitly involves the subjectivity, the values, the attitudes, including or especially the personal approach of the evaluator and of the evaluated one.* We believe that this hypothesis can cover the whole field of assessment, but definitely it is or must be applicable to educational assessment. This is backed by an elementary reason: that the school assessment is an inseparable piece of the educational process, and *education means, above all, interaction between subjectivities*, it means transfer and assimilation of experience which engages completely the personalities involved, teachers and students.

Therefore, considering that the issue is not to eliminate the intervention of the subjective factor, but to control its intervention, we believe that some questions would be necessary, for the purpose of elucidation:

- *In what limits the intervention of the subjective factor, be it related to the teacher, to the student and to another influent person can divagate, plus or minus, from what is defined as a fair assessment?*
- *In what degree the influence of the subjective factor can be distributed between the two main „agents”: the teacher and the student?*
- *In what degree the influence of the subjective factor works in the direction of non-objectivity? Or, from the opposite side of view: In what degree the objectivity is diminished by the subjective contribution of the persons involved in the assessment exercise?*

It is not hard to notice that all these questions lead to a very delicate and also very up-to-date zone, that of the debates in the socio-human field. It is the zone of the objective-subjective relationships in establishing the social processes, and the new approaches in this field substantially modify the old perspective regarding the dissociation and the objective versus objective relationship. However, some pertinent answers can be given to the questions above.

1. First of all, it is obvious that, as powerful as it were, intentionally or unintentionally, the intervention of the subjective factor can not excel some limits of deviation from the correct level of the assessment, even if this level is the „common sense” level. A performance whose real level is that of a seven grade can not be graded neither with ten nor with four, even if the evaluator’s intention is to over assess or under assess a student. The exceptions, if there are some, cannot but uphold the rule, because in this case the subjectivism becomes obvious, and the discussions on it should be directed elsewhere. Yet, if we give up the presumption of intention, it becomes certain that *the deviations (errors) of a subjective origin can not exceed – and do not exceed in reality – some limits.* These limits are the ones that must be taken into consideration when we establish the intervention zone, through special evaluation methods and techniques, for diminishing the subjective contribution and the distortion of the assessment. Any excess in substituting the personality of the evaluator and of the evaluated student through impersonal and strictly objective techniques – to the possible extent – may lead to at least two negative consequences: diminishing the degree of significance for the assessment, by reducing it to a

measurement of “physical” features; eliminates from the assessment the complex qualitative aspects that can’t be observed but by examination, through a direct relationship between the evaluator and the evaluated one, between teacher and student.

2. The basis of the second question is found in a circumstance noticed by many teachers, but also by students: that frequently the subjectivism of the teacher is being emphasized, and the fact that, in school assessment, *the student, too, has a contribution in one way or another to the subjective conditioning of the assessment* is being ignored. The student’s approach on the assessment, his personal criteria, his attitudes are at least as influent as the teacher’s. Moreover, the experiences of using the auto evaluation techniques or of students’ evaluation by the students underlined the manifestation of some subjective assessment effects which are similar to those noticed to the teachers (halo effect, contrast, logical error, personal equation etc.). The most important subjective factor is, without doubt, *the student’s attitude to the school assessment system*. That is why acknowledging the attitude of the students and taking it into consideration for the improvement of the assessment act is one of the most important conditions for the general improvement of the school assessment system.

3. The third question to which we will try to recommend an answer refers to the extent in which intervention of the subjective factor works in the direction of non objectivity, and alters the objective, impersonal nature of the assessment. This question opens, in fact, the discussion on the existential status of the subject, of the subjectivity in the process of knowledge and action, with implications that exceed the strict frame of the assessment, involving the epistemological issues of the subject-object duality in the socio-human field. Still, maintaining the discussion in the field of school assessment, we consider that the problem approached here has two significant aspects:

- a) One of them refers to the subjective influence and the objective nature of the assessment and can be rephrased as follows: *Is the subjective influence an influence that definitely undermines the objective nature of the assessment?* And it can be answered in terms of how much, how, and in what circumstances this influence is exercised.
- b) The other aspect refers to the relationship between the *objective/subjective nature* of the assessment on one side and the *accuracy* of the assessment on the other side. This aspect of the problem can be expressed in two ways: *Is a strictly objective assessment necessarily fair? Does the subjective intervention definitely work in the direction of incorrectness of the assessment?* Of course, a pertinent answer would assume, as a preliminary condition, a well defined concept of correctness in assessment. At this level of the analysis we believe that the most plausible hypothesis is that *a strict relationship between the objective-correct, subjective-incorrect pairs of attributes can’t be drawn* and that, probably, the correctness of the assessment is ensured by an optimal combination of the subjective and the objective.

2. Subjectivity and subjectivism or between relevance and error

Going on with the analysis regarding the action of the subjective factors in the act of the assessment regarding the nature and the direction of these factors on the results of the assessment, we consider that the best approach is to distinguish, from the beginning

between two kinds of subjective influences that can be identified in the act of the assessment:

- a) *a positive influence*, constructive, that is a consequence of the subjective involvement 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, to give a meaning to the objective data is valued;
- b) *a negative influence*, a distorting one, which produces deviations with an error meaning, of deviation from the objective nature of the assessment, an influence that can occur *unintentionally* – having its origin either in the level of competence of the evaluator, or in the subjective effects that „naturally” accompany the assessment act –or *intentionally* – having its origin either in the educational objectives of the assessment (the use of the grade a carrot and stick approach), or in the use of the assessment as a mean of favoring/disfavoring some students (with implications, of course, in the field of morality and legality).

Working in this direction we will name the positive influence of the subjective factors (teachers, parents etc.) by the term *subjectivity*, and the negative influence by the term of *subjectivism*. We consider that this distinction creates a better frame for a pertinent analysis of the contribution of the subjective factor to the assessment, and consequently can offer adequate solutions to the control of the subjective influence in the act of the assessment.

1. In this context, **the subjectivity** of the teacher or of the student operates as a subjective influence that not only must not be rejected but represents a condition, often decisive for a significant assessment, with a pedagogic relevance, and, finally, fair. This constructive contribution of the subjective factor is possible and can be exploited on three levels:

- a) *Through its cognitive components*, that is through the capacity of the subject to understand, explain, interpret, and anticipate, to observe the essence in the multitude of the concrete facts. In this aspect, the influence of the subject is not, in its essence, a distorted one, but one that both as possibility and as reality correctly reflects and builds the real, imposing to the behaviour the attribute of *reason*. In this level, the favourable influence of the subjective factor embodies the shape of *competence*, as a decisive condition for the quality of the assessment.
- b) *Through its affective-motivational components*, that is through the subjective, energizing and directional engagement, which gives the assessment the significance of internal resort, behaviour factor, making the assessment an efficient mean of guiding and self guiding the behaviour. On this level, the influence of the subjective factor contributes to the *humanizing of the assessment*, to the assuming, especially by the students, in terms of motifs, interests, yearnings, of the criteria and norms of the assessment, ensuring that *convergence of the cognitive with the non cognitive*, which is essential for the level of performance reached or accessible to the students. From this point of view, an assessment is incomplete if it limits itself to the evaluation of the obvious performances, without taking into consideration *the motivational and emotional background* that generates them, since the performance is never a direct and exclusive consequence of the capacity, but, mostly – sometimes to a great extent – the consequence of the “motivational vectors”.

c) *Through the relational-attitudinal components*, which means through the placing the assessment in the context of the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, of *the attitudes* that both the teachers and the students have and manifest in the process of the assessment. The subjective contribution at the attitude level gives the assessment value, axiological significance it puts it the sphere of the real psychosocial interactions that are always guided, implicitly or explicitly by values, norms and principles. On this level, the influence of the subjective factor contributes to the *socialization of the assessment*, it places the assessment in the context of the status and role relationships, involving *the dynamic of the expectations* (of the students from the teacher, of the teacher from the teacher), and of the *psycho-social influences*. In this context, an assessment is incomplete if it doesn't take into consideration the attitudes and if it doesn't generate attitudes, ment to prepare a student for *the integration into a society in which the assessments are a part of the social mechanism*.

2. **The subjectivism**, which we define as a *negative manifestation of the subjective influences*, present without doubt a much higher interest than the positive side of the action of the subjective factor in the act of the assessment. Otherwise, the majority of the studies related to the influence of the subjective factor on the assessment underline exactly this type of influence, most of the techniques of control of the subjective factor being lead in this direction. We will not insist here neither on the classical subjective effects of the assessment nor on the modalities of restricting their effects. We will try however to analyse the negative influences of the subjective factor from the perspective of the causes that make the action of the subjective factor – which is or should be, in its essence, a positive, constructive one – work in a negative direction, on the route of error or incorrectness. In this context we consider that the best approach is to distinguish between two types of negative influences: *intentionally and unintentionally*, these types of influences being otherwise significant for the types of effects generated by the subjective distortions: *errors or incorrectness*.

a. **The unintentional subjective influences and the effects** are the most frequent, and the studies on assessment approach them almost exclusively. It is natural to be so, as the majority of the teachers do not intend on purpose to assess unfair or to alter the results of the assessment. Commonly, the subjective assessment errors have their origin in the complexity of this activity, in the lower or higher degree of uncertainty that accompany any appreciation of human qualities. Particularly, the subjective distortions of the assessment can be grouped according to specific causes, out of which the most important are:

- the insufficiency of the basic information that are the background of the assessment;
- inadequate methods and techniques of evaluation reported to the object of the assessment (what is being assessed) and to the objectives of the assessment (for what purpose it is being evaluated);
- some peculiarities of the direct relationship between teacher and students, with its emotional-attitudinal components;
- indirect influences of the psychosocial context in which the assessment is being done (the statute of the student's family, some pressure indirectly practiced by the didactic collective, by the management of the school or by the families of the students);

- the influences of the pedagogic context of the assessment (the general level of the class of students and its structure, elements of school policy in terms of assessment, for instance reaching some promovability, the stimulation of the success or the decrease of the school failure etc.).

The effects of the unintentional manifestation of the subjective in the assessment are the imperfections or the errors of evaluation, they have a cognitive and not a moral significance, being, in a way a part of the normality of the assessment act. The existence of these errors is also a motif for which the improvement of the assessment must be a constancy of the educational process. In this context each of the causes enunciated request specific way and means of improvement for the assessment act, which are mostly handy for the teacher. The direction for diminishing or the elimination of this kind of errors is that of *control* and *self control* of the subjective influences, through a better knowledge and use of the assessment methods and techniques.

b. In what *the intentional intervention of the subjective influences* is concerned, it has a complex causality, including social-moral implications. In the context in which the teacher intentionally modifies (increases or diminishes) the results of the assessment, two typical circumstances can be identified:

- one is that when *the assessment and especially the grading are used as carrot and stick means with pedagogic function*, for the guidance of the learning behaviour of the students, situation in which the assessments of the teacher may deviate in one direction or another (plus, or, rarely, minus) from the real level of preparation of the student;
- the other one is that when the distortion of the assessment is intentional for the favoring (or disfavoring) some students, upon extra pedagogical criteria, having social-moral connotations, which are associated to the moral conduct of the teacher.

Regarding the first case, it does not rising any special issues. Most of the times, the teachers give higher or lower grades in order to value the pedagogic function of the assessment, but this way of use of the grade is made during the educational process, as intermediary assessments, that are brought to reality by the final grades (that end a period of study or a school discipline). There is still left for analyse what are the frame limits of these deviations.

Of course, the second case is much more complicated. On one hand, it is harder to notice, and on the other hand it is even harder to prove. Intentional over or under assessment, with a value of favoring/disfavoring some students do not usually occur very obvious, as they are camouflaged by using sometime excessively rigorous criteria, methods and objective techniques, on the background of a hard to question „fairness”. Even if they are less frequent and can not be considered typical for the teachers, these subjective interventions exist and can have very important consequences. We must underline that these influences don't always pursue direct benefits for those who make them. They can occur in the context of condolence relationship (preferential) between teachers and parents or between teachers (for instance the reciprocity of the support when teachers are in the examination committees, a sort of „guild solidarity”).

The intentional distortion of the assessment can also be made by the students, through peculiar students' techniques: the prevision of the examination data, the ability of the

students to guess the „style” of the teacher, and to adapt themselves to it, including the cheating (with the various „techniques”) more or less tolerated by the teachers.

3. Manifestations of subjective factors influences in the assessment

The analysis done so far has shown not only that the action of the subjective factors of assessment is manifested through a variety of effects, but also that the subjective factors appear by the contribution of all parties involved in the act of assessment. This means that the obsolete misconception which states the teacher is the sole subjective influence in the assessment act needs to be overcome. The subjective influence must be searched also at the level of the student, the family and any other persons involved in the assessment act. Thus there is a need of identification of the various ways through out which the subjective factors emerge and manifest themselves.

The most suitable course of action in analysing the ways the subjective factors of school assessments seems to be the one that starts from the causes which make these factors to be, in the given circumstances, a deforming effect, that lead to errors in evaluation. In a certain degree, the causes which generate the alteration of grading are related with the subjective nature of the evaluation process, which involves the personalities of the assessor and assessed, depending on a series of conditions and certain circumstances. The conclusion is that the sources of errors are gravitating around the subjects involved in the assessment act (teachers and students), but these are also related to the targets and the content that evaluation depends on, of the methods and the techniques used in the assessment.

1. In the respect of the *teacher*, the factors that alter the grading are those which generally appear in the evaluation process and are related to the subjective nature of the process. The acknowledgment and the control upon these factors are useful for the realization of a correct evaluation, as objective as possible.

In this direction, the docimologic studies are useful, also those from the field of the *human assessment and performance evaluation*. The *psychosocial aspects* of the assessment relationship, as interpersonal relation, can be also valuable for a better understanding of the phenomena that accompany the evaluation process, including those phenomena that generates evaluation errors.

Most of the time, the evaluation errors do not hold responsible only the teacher, as individual or as „assessor”, but the teacher as social person, as member of a social group (the teachers group), as vector or representative of interests and bearer of certain responsibilities. Without the knowledge of the psychosocial climate, of the inter human relationships, of the cognitive processes within these manifest themselves (and which often generates) the errors in evaluation, are not possible, nor the their correct understanding or their effective control.

2. Another group of errors in grading *are on the student's behalf*, not in reference with the level of the quality of the preparation, but aiming treats and capacities which influence the degree of which the *student can demonstrate the level and the quality of this preparation*. The students can be more or less emotive, can have a higher or lower verbal influence, o different speed in writing, different intellectual paces, particularities which can influence the performance *during the examination* and thus the grade with which he is appreciated. If in the case of written paper these aspects are difficult to reveal (which often

explains many cases of ineffective selection through written exams), in the didactical process there is the possibility of diminishing of negative effects of these personality characteristics or psychomotor abilities which have no significant influence in the results of the leaning process.

3. The third group of error sources in grading is closely related with *the content and targets of the assessment process*. Some disciplines or parts of their content are difficult to be submitted to an objective assessment, rigorously and differentiated. The grading criteria are established and applied easier for concrete performance, noticeable, which imply the reproduction of some notions, the usage of some habits and algorithms. The difficulties appear when the pedagogical objectives and thus the grading criteria aim for complex capacities, potential, which dot explicitly manifest in the behaviour, which imply the processing and the interpreting of the information, the creativity and the critical analysis. The docimologic studies has shown that, for example, that the assessments are more exact for mathematics, physics, chemistry, grammar and more relative, less rigorous for literature, philosophy , arts.

The improvement in evaluation cannot and shouldn't be schematised or lack its subjective content of the assessment act. In the end, the school assessment is an inter-human relationship with multiple affective and moral connotations, an act of intercommunication and inter-knowledge which engages both teacher's personality and student's, the official norms and regulations, the informal representations and appreciations, the attitudes and mentalities.

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