



Some factors impacting the teachers' assessment practices

Influências sobre as práticas de avaliação do professor

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Abstract

The assessment and the role it should be assumed by the summative and formative component are often a reason for discussion. It is therefore important to understand how the teacher assessment practices are characterized and what influences them. That is, identify aspects taken into account when planning assessment; the (dis)continuities between assessment and learning; the divergences/consonances between assessment planned and implemented. The conclusions reached point to a strong influence of peers, to the assessment criteria of the school and to the students' characteristics, in a scenario where the test is the dominant element in assessment.

Keywords: summative assessment, formative assessment, assessment practices, teacher.

Resumo

A avaliação e o papel que nesta deve assumir a vertente sumativa e formativa, são frequentemente fonte de discussão. Importa pois compreender como se caracterizam as práticas de avaliação do professor e que influências são identificáveis. Isto é, perceber que aspetos são tidos em conta ao ponderar elementos de avaliação; que (des)continuidades são identificáveis entre avaliação-aprendizagem; que divergências/consonâncias ocorrem entre a avaliação planeada e a efetivamente implementada. As conclusões alcançadas apontam para uma forte influência dos colegas, dos critérios de avaliação da escola e das características dos alunos, num cenário onde o teste é o elemento dominante da avaliação. *Palavras chave:* avaliação sumativa, avaliação formativa, práticas de avaliação, professor.

Introduction

Assessment is considered to be a key element of the teaching and learning process, often being divided into two types: formative and summative (Harris, Irving & Peterson, 2008). With different characteristics and different intentions these two forms of assessment coexist (supposedly) in the classroom. In the last years different official documents regulated the assessment in the Portuguese schools. In these documents it is possible to find differences regarding the importance that is assigned to each of these types of assessment. As Santos (2014) points out, it is possible to identify a progressive devaluation of formative assessment and a growing appreciation of summative assessment and of the implementation of tests and exams. And if the assessment that occurs in classrooms is marked by legislative directives, it is also marked by the teacher's

choices. It is up to the teachers, as a group, to set the criteria that will be applied to assess the students in their schools and the weight that different components and forms of assessment will assume. In this context of increasing relevance of summative assessment, it is therefore important to better understand how teacher assessment practices are characterized and what influences on these practices are identifiable. More specifically, this study intends to understand what aspects are taken into account by the teacher when pondering the assessment elements; what (dis)continuities are identifiable between assessment and learning; what divergences/convergences occur between the assessment planned by the teacher and the one actually implemented.

Assessment

Shepard (2006) characterizes summative assessment as the assessment that takes place at the end of the teaching process, with the intention of classifying the student or giving him a certification. Semana and Santos (2008) consider this type of assessment associated with accountability, certification and selection, but they also mention its exterior character to the process of teaching and learning, highlighting the fact that it is based on the students' products. The intention to improve the process of teaching and learning is referred by these three authors as the main focus of formative assessment. Besides that, Shepard (2006) points to the fact that this type of assessment arises during the process of teaching and Semana and Santos (2008) refer the emphasis that it places on the processes and activity of the students.

So, the main difference between summative and formative assessment relates to the moment when it occurs (after or during the teaching process) and to the intention behind it (for information purposes or to improve the process of teaching and learning) (Harris, Irving, & Peterson, 2008). However, some studies begin to suggest that consider these two types of assessment as two disjoint forms may not be the best approach, because assessment often serves multiple purposes (Hargreaves, 2005).

In what concerns the assessment conceptions held by teachers, the research conducted by Brown (2002, 2004, 2006, 2007) suggests four different purposes: to improve the process of teaching and learning; to hold the students responsible for their learning; to hold the

schools and the teachers responsible for their students learning; is useless and something to reject because it is invalid, irrelevant and negatively affects teachers, students, curriculum and teaching.

Analyzing these conceptions, Harris, Irving and Peterson (2008) point out the last three as the ones often associated with summative assessment practices. The second conception is based on the premise that the assignment of classifications makes the students responsible for their learning in a personal way. Summative assessment is used to determine the student's knowledge and abilities, and the resulting information is then passed on, for example, to parents. The third conception is based on the idea that assessment should be used to publicly demonstrate teacher's and school's effectiveness. This is often a conception associated with the valuation of exams, which then allow the comparison of results to a more comprehensive level and beyond the boundaries of the school. The latter conception reflects the idea of assessment as illegitimate in the teaching and learning process, often associated with the belief that it takes time and attention away from the teaching and learning process, being perceived by the students as negative or unfair, or as something not reliable.

According to Brown (2002, 2004, 2006, 2007) most teachers tend to conceptualize the assessment as a way to hold the students responsible for their learning, disagreeing that this is seen as a way to turn them or the schools responsible for the students learning. The assessment as something useless or irrelevant is also an idea that does not collect the agreement of many teachers.

Watt (2005) considers that in what concerns to mathematics, assessment has traditionally been seen in a perspective of measurement. The test is the central element in a teaching process that tends to focus on procedures that the student is supposed to learn and reproduce later.

The assessment in Portuguese official documents

Portuguese official documents refer to assessment as a regulatory process of teaching, aiming to improve its quality (Despacho Normativo 24A/2012). The assessment is pointed as a process of gauging the level of achievement of the curricular goals and should be used jointly by teachers and students to overcome learning difficulties. It is also mentioned that the assessment should be diversified and frequent in order to contribute to a greater awareness on the part of the students regarding their level of learning. Despite these references to the adequacy of the teaching process to the specificities of the students, the idea of measuring the level of achievement suggests a valuation of summative assessment rather than formative assessment. According to Santos (2014), who analyzed the official documents published between 2011 and 2014 about assessment, references to formative assessment were gradually eliminated. Thus, according to the aforementioned author, we proceeded from the formative assessment as the main modality of assessment (Despacho Normativo 1/2005, point 19), to directives that begin to devalue the

formative assessment (Decreto-Lei 94/2011 and Despacho Normativo 24/2012), and later to directives that completely ignore the formative assessment (Despacho Normativo 13/2014).

Methodology

In methodological terms, this is a qualitative study based on a case study of a teacher, Margaret, and her work with a 7th grade class considered problematic by the school. This was a class consisting exclusively of students with a history of failure and problems of a disciplinary nature.

Data were collected by observing a set of classes and conducting interviews with the participating teacher and the head of department. Data analysis was then performed taking into account the elements collected.

The teacher and the assessment

Margaret assumes herself as not being a traditional teacher. According to her, trying different things and some innovative approaches is something she cannot resist to. And she describes some projects where she has already been involved with her students and where the technology or the use of materials or the exploration of situations related to the reality of the students were central aspects. She points out, however, that, in what concerns assessment, she has to assume a more traditional position to avoid problems:

Teacher: In relation to assessment I try to be a little more traditional. It is a delicate area where changes always originate many reactions, both from teachers and from parents. People tend to be overly concerned about formalisms and rigorous assessment. It's always that concern to document everything because it cannot be unfair. I have already realized that it is hopeless, there is no point in discussing this. And so my assessment is based on the two tests per period.

And she refers to an occasion in the past where she intended to assess students using a set of instruments that did not include the test. The colleagues strongly discouraged her from assuming this option, arguing that she would not be able to make an objective assessment of all the students without a test, and that she would be preventing the parents from having information about their children's progress:

Teacher: A few years ago, I was teaching a small class that was mine for three years and at that time I tried... It was the second year I had that class, they were only 14 and I already knew them very well. In class I could see perfectly who knew what we were studying and who did not. There was nothing new a test could tell me. But when I told my colleagues that I was not going to ask my students to take any tests, hey! It seems the end of the world was coming!... Because parents could not keep up with their children. They would not know what they knew or not... And if someone asks for a reevaluation I would not be able to justify my evaluation... besides that it would be very difficult for me to be fair... And this and that... I ended up asking my students to take one test.

And the teacher criticizes the colleagues' ideas about assessment. According to her, nowadays Excel is the magic solution. And people think that if they just put some numbers in Excel, every problems are solved and the assessment process will be very clear and objective for all:

Teacher: Nowadays Excel is the hit! If you do the assessment using Excel everything is fine, if you do not then everything is wrong. You're not properly taking into account all the elements, you are not being fair to everyone and so on and so on. There are some people who even want the use of Excel to be mandatory... and then to make the results available to everyone. I have always opposed to this and so far I have managed to prevent such a thing from being approved. (Laughs) There are some colleagues who don't feel confident about using a computer and who are afraid of not being able to do it. And this colleagues support me. People seem unable to see that there is no way of eliminating the subjectivity from the assessment process. I use Excel, okay, but I'm the one who puts the numbers into Excel. I mean, when I correct a test and there is some error, how much should I discount? 0.5? 1? The subjectivity comes from here. Of course I can set criteria, but I cannot predict everything. And even predicting, what I get is that it will be the same for everyone, does not necessarily mean that it is fair. Because when I discount 1 to my students for a given error, there is another teacher who discounts 2 to his students. People think differently. There is no way to avoid this.

Margaret considers that this concern with assessment in basic education is excessive. When the scale is from 1 to 5, in her opinion you do not need so many grids and so many calculations to give a grade. And she reaffirms that in most cases there is no need for tests, since every teacher knows in each class, and without consulting any register, who are the good students, who are the excellent ones, who are the weak, etc.:

Teacher: Nowadays I think people are crazy about grades. The kids are still in kindergarten and everyone is already talking about grades. Please! And notice, the grades are from 1 to 5, that is, basically we are talking about a qualitative evaluation of the type: very insufficient, insufficient, sufficient, good, very good. So, don't you think I know in each class who are the good students and who is not getting there? All teachers know. No need to consult any grid! In the high school is different. The scale is already from 0 to 20. It already requires a greater differentiation. The grades also have another impact on the future of the students. Now, in basic school? Do not give me that. The head of department corroborates this relevance of objectivity, advanced by Margaret regarding her colleagues. And he emphasizes the importance of having clear assessment criteria for all. He adds that it was agreed between the teachers of Mathematics and approved by the pedagogical committee of the school that in this discipline in the final assessment

would be given a weight of 70% to the tests, 10% to the behavior and attitudes, 10% to commitment in the work and the interest for the discipline, and 10% to work done on the classroom.

The teacher and the assessment practices

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher expressed that she intended to base the assessment on the results of two tests per period. In addition, she would take into account the work done by the students, but with a considerably lower weight, as approved by the school. After the first test, the teacher began to rethink her options. The characteristics of the class and the fact that only two students have achieved a positive result on the test, and still a weak result (50%), are the reasons advanced:

Teacher: The results from the test were bad... very bad. (...) That means I'm going to have to think about changing something here. These students have no interest in the school. For them to have a positive or a negative result is the same. Moving on to the next level or staying in this one for another school year is the same. (...) I do not know what to do, but I have to do something.

And the first change occurs in Margaret's classes. Every day there are several students absent. And the lack of attendance is a problem that affects all the students from this class. This means that in each class there are some students who have not been in the previous class and who therefore have difficulty in following what is being done. In addition, students have no interest in school, do not like mathematics, and have gaps in elementary knowledge. The most common result is some kind of inappropriate behavior in the classroom. In these circumstances, the teacher decided to individualize the teaching. The classes became differentiated for each student. The base of the work were tasks developed by the teacher and distributed to the students. Each student received the task that corresponds to his learning point. If he had missed more classes, he would get a more elementary task; if he had been present, he would receive a more advanced task. Explanations of content for the whole class ceased to exist. The work proposals began with a presentation of the essential mathematical concepts and from there the students worked with the help of the support received from the teacher.

This change facilitated the management of the class by the teacher, but also promoted some (albeit small) interest of the students in the class work. When they realized that not everyone was doing the same, the students were interested in knowing what each one was doing. The tasks were the same for everyone, the difference was the moment when they did it. The students realized this and some began to show a sense of proud for being ahead of their colleagues. However, in the second test only one student, who had previously reached a positive result, achieved a satisfactory result. The other

student who also had a positive result on the previous test, this time decided not to take the test because, according to him, "he did not feel like doing test".

In these circumstances, the teacher felt that it was necessary to change the assessment as well. And trying to take advantage of the novelty of the way how they were working in class, she considered focusing the assessment also on the tasks:

Teacher: The results were bad, once again. And... These students are just waiting to finish compulsory school to be able to leave school. Nothing here interests them. So, in fact they don't care about the grades. But I need to get them to learn something. And... Well, I thought that instead of doing tests, I could assess their work based on the tasks... I do not know, maybe the results would be better and some would get a little more involved. Some want to move ahead in the tasks, to be the ones who are ahead. They try to do the tasks but don't bother to do them well. If I evaluated the tasks... maybe...

But the teacher knows that the assessment criteria approved in the school do not only impose the tests, but also determine that they have a considerable weight in the students' final evaluation. Any change requires the approval of the pedagogical committee. And that requires the department's support. Margaret thinks this will not be easy. To turn the situation even more complex, this is a change in the middle of the school year. In her own words:

Teacher: To tell you the truth, I have no desire to get involved in this. I know there are going to be a lot of people against it. But what do I do? I keep asking them to do tests until the end of the school year... with a whole class giving in the test without even trying to do it? (...) Is there no pedagogical reason here to change the criteria? I know they will tell me that it is not pedagogical to change the assessment criteria in the middle of the year... but this is a special situation... this students are not like the others. The problem is that it is not easy to explain this to those who do not know the class. And a lot of people will say that it is not fair to treat students differently depending on the class they are in. (...) But the most important thing is not that students learn something?

Considering this as the best option, she decides to submit the issue to the department's discussion. The subject raises some discussion, but contrary to Margaret's expectations, the consensus was not difficult to achieve and the change in the assessment criteria for this class was approved. In fact, the discussion was more on how to proceed and whether it was necessary to ask for the pedagogical committee approval. The class and its characteristics were well known throughout the educational community, so several teachers agreed that in such a situation the teacher has the legitimacy to change the criteria. It was Margaret's insistence that the criteria should be duly approved that generated discussion. The discussion ended with the department's decision that in this case the approval of the pedagogical committee was not necessary.

The head of department outlines some of the reasons that led to the adoption of this amendment. As he points out, the real reason is reduced to one: the extraordinary case of this class. Nevertheless, he enumerates aspects such as the students' school history marked by successive failure, disciplinary issues, and lack of interest in school and learning. He also refers to the fact that these students come from complex and fragile family structures where there is no real family support given to the students. He nonetheless emphasizes the relevance of assessment for students in general, highlighting the role that should be assigned to the tests:

Head of department: This is a very particular case.

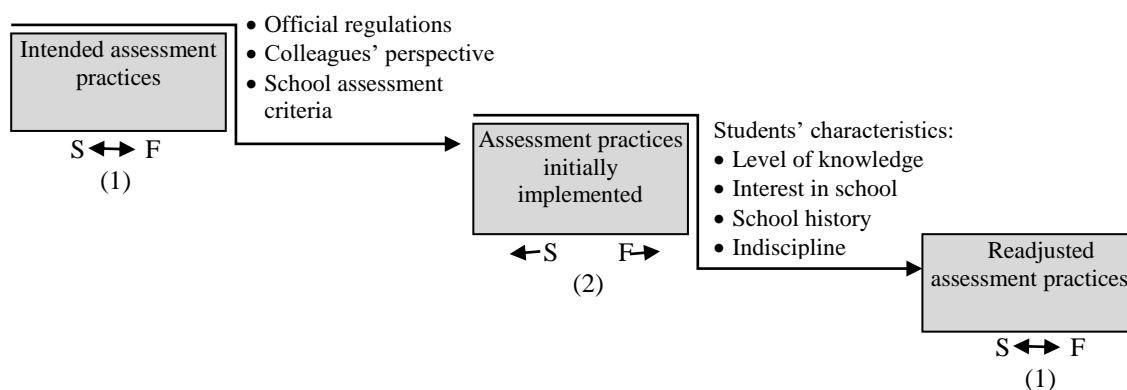
And this is the reason for this differential treatment too. This is not something that can be generalized to all the students. You need to realize the importance of testing. Students need to become used to providing evidence of their knowledge. This is important. (...) It helps students to be aware of what they know and can do. (...) And later the students will have to take exams... exams that will become more and more demanding as they progress in school. The tests are a way to go preparing them for these tests, too. Is not it?

The teacher informs the students that the assessment will be made based on their class work. Students do not make any comments, but when the term approaches the final part, they begin to question the teacher about the date of the test. The teacher replies that the assessment will be based on the tasks, but the question about the test becomes recurrent.

Margaret is surprised by the students' reaction. She concludes that they feel the need for some feedback on their work and she decides to make a small change. As she thinks a test does not make any sense for these students, she decides to release weekly results of their assessment:

Teacher: At some point the students started talking about taking a test and wondering for the date. (...) But what is the purpose of doing a test? That would be an entire class doing nothing. No. (...) They want some kind of assessment... I cannot figure this out.. I think it's more the habit of doing tests at school. But all right, I'll give them a grade. I can do that from their work on the tasks.

Then she starts grading the tasks made by the students in each class they were present. This assessment takes into account the quantity and quality of the work carried out. At the end of each week an updated version of the appreciation of the work that is being done by the students is posted in the room. By simultaneously seeking to stimulate interest in learning and attendance, a visual form of registration is adopted. Thus, in front of the name of each student is placed a sequence of symbols. These will be green if the work done was considered positive, yellow if it was almost positive, red if it was not positive but some work was done, white if no work was done. The length of the symbol row also allows for a perception of student attendance.



(1) Summative and formative assessment integrated – continuity between assessment and teaching-learning
 (2) Dissociated summative and formative assessment – discontinuity between assessment and teaching-learning
 Figure 1. Synthesis of influential factors on teacher assessment practices

Conclusion

Summative assessment presupposes a break between assessment moments and those of teaching and learning. The teacher involved in this study does not review herself in this perspective. The options that she considers most appropriate are based on an integration between assessment and teaching and learning. The assessment is thus seen as an intuitive and more informal appreciation that the teacher is making of the evolution of students' knowledge. Previous experiences have made her aware that her colleagues do not share her vision on assessment. The test is the element of excellence adopted for assessment in the Mathematics discipline and the teacher follows this decision of the department, planning an assessment centered on the performance of tests. The particular characteristics of her students lead her to rethink her options. The consequence is a process of changing the assessment methodology that gets the teacher closer to her initial intentions, moving away from the implementation of a model based on the rupture between evaluation and the teaching and learning process, to adopt a model that integrates these two dimensions in a more continuous and articulated way (see Figure 1).

The main conclusions reached point to a strong impact on the teacher's options related to assessment of the characteristics of the students (level of knowledge, interest in the discipline and the school, school history/failure, indiscipline), from the perspective of colleagues/school, of official determinations, and the department determinations (assessment criteria). Throughout the study, it is possible to identify a trend to approximate the processes of assessment and learning, avoiding a clear rupture between the two. Something that corresponds to the initial intentions of the teacher and that is not implemented immediately due to peer pressure and the approved assessment criteria. There are some divergences between the assessment initially planned and the one implemented due to the characteristics of the students, but also of an apparent need on the part of the students to carry out a more formal assessment, which leads to the existence of a

certain type of grading process and for its dissemination to the class.

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